Modern environmental activists unified behind calls for a change in how humans understood their relationships with nature. Yet they approached their concerns through a variety of historical lenses. Countering arguments that suggest environmentalism had its deepest roots in outdoor leisure, the countercultural back-to-the-land movement turned to a markedly American practice of pastoral mythmaking that held rural life and labor as counter to the urban-industrial condition. Counterculturalists relied specifically on notions of simple work in rural collective endeavors as the means to producing a healthy body and environment. Yet the individuals who went back-to-the-land often failed to remedy conflicts that arose as they attempted to abandon American consumer practices and take up a “primitive” and down-to-earth pastoral existence. Contact with rural nature time and again translated to physical maladies, impoverishment, and community clashes in many rural countercultural communes. As the back-to-the-land encounter faded, the greater movement’s ethos did not disappear. Counterculturalists used the consumption of nature through rural labor as a fundamental idea in a growing cooperative food movement. The back-to-the-land belief in the connection between healthy bodies, environments, and a collective identity helped to expand a new form of consumer environmentalism.

Cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1787

The open land of the US has become a vast lodestone for droves of young people, who sense within themselves today a renaissance in the value of simplicity and earthly virtues.

—William Hedgepeth, 1971

DURING THE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S a zealous countercultural back-to-the-land movement emerged in North America. As environmental concerns captured the interests of more and more Americans, the counterculturalists who ventured back to the land identified with traditional environmental activists and their concurrent efforts to preserve and protect the natural world. In reality, their turn to pastoral mythos and practices revealed the complicated nature of postwar environmental thought. Those who voluntarily went back to the land created a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, where living a self-reliant rural existence might have as much of an influence on the naturally attuned individual as the sole environmental activist could on preserving and protecting nature.

While environmental activists held common ground in rethinking human interactions with the natural world, the growing American environmental consciousness approached those concerns through a variety of historical lenses. The back-to-the-land movement turned to a distinctly American process of pastoral mythmaking that held the simple and virtuous rural farmer as the antithesis to the metropolitan-industrial order. For back-to-the-landers, a deep-rooted pastoral ideal, often recast in popular forms, legitimized the conception of rural life as contrary to the modern urban existence. Importantly, austere labor within countercultural communes became a tool to cleanse the body of the physical and mental woes found in the economic and cultural routines of a city livelihood.

The back-to-the-land movement’s turn to pastoral encounters with nature mirrored an enduring belief in bucolic environments as uncorrupted by the human hand and therefore capable of healing the physical and mental maladies caused by congestion, pollution, and the stresses of everyday urban life. While many environmentalists sought to protect pristine rural landscapes for consumption through leisure practices, the concept of virtuous rural work shaped a countercultural environmental movement. Yet, in practice, the individuals who went back to the land

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struggled to rectify tensions that emerged between the prevailing culture they sought to leave behind and the practical values of their labor in making a healthy life for the individual and the community. Intimate and “primitive” interactions with rural nature too often translated into disease, poverty, and structural conflict in many rural countercultural communes.

Despite a lack of real organization or clear archival record, scholars have analyzed the 1960s and 1970s era rural communal and collective encounter as cultural phenomenon. Yet it remains at the periphery of recent historiography as a distinct environmental movement. In particular, despite the clear importance concepts of nature, body, health, and pastoral labor played in motivating and structuring the physical and social arrangements of back-to-the-land settlements, historians of rural spaces and the North American environment have yet to examine the back-to-the-land encounter as a part of the greater environmental consciousness that emerged in the post-World War II years.

Historians have investigated the entangled cultural, economic, and ecological factors that motivated Americans to form or join environmental groups. Nonetheless they have given less consideration to the complicated cultural markers that informed the organizational structure and ideology of a diverse environmental movement. By focusing on how environmentalists used deeply embedded historical reference points in creating a response to environmental change, historians can better understand the trajectories of environmental movements after World War II. The appearance of the back-to-the-land encounter offers an opportunity to explore how a young and predominately white cross-section of American society rethought widely held ideas about nature and work in an effort to create alternatives to mass consumerism in North America.

Although counterculturalists established and joined rural communes and collective farms for many reasons, most saw going back to the land as a method to utilize their own productive capacity to procure the healthy physical and psychological benefits of nature. For communards, the wellbeing of the human body was contingent upon an intimate consumption of healthy natural environments. Deep-seated American yeoman ideology, indigenous cultural imagery, and the North American rural utopian legacy emerged as significant reference points, as countercultural communards modeled their communities on idyllic pastoral
life and “primitive” rural labor. Yet, growing physical, economic, and environmental hardship within back-to-the-land settlements undermined collective notions of health, nature, and work formed by participants of the movement. Their failure to deal with the difficult realities of rural life and the arduous nature of communal labor facilitated structural breakdown in most countercultural communal ventures.

As the back-to-the-land movement waned, counterculturalists recast the consumption of nature through rural labor to fit within an expanding cooperative food movement. Using the economic and promotional tools provided by a powerful modern consumer culture, rather than forsake the system altogether, counterculturalists used the simple and virtuous back-to-the-land ideal to fit within a growing cooperative natural foods culture. Back-to-the-land notions of collective work and healthy spaces helped to advance a movement in need of stable membership and collective identity. Rather than grow out of the communal urge, consumer environmentalism found similar ideological grounding in the consumption of wholesome products cultivated by virtuous rural work. In turn, a pervasive back-to-the-land ideal helped propel the budding environmental consumer movement that simultaneously promoted good work in sustainable and organic agricultural ventures, while continuing to offer a consumer’s alternative to supermarket America.5

In the years after World War II, rural communes and collective farms emerged across North America as alternatives to metropolitan life. Between 1960 and 1965 several rural living experiments, including the Colony in California, Cedar Grove in New Mexico, Drop City in Colorado, and Mohegan Colony in New York, offered inspiration for the countercultural back-to-the-land boom that surfaced during the years that followed. Between 1965 and 1970 Twin Oaks in Virginia, the Farm in Tennessee, Wheeler’s Ranch in California, and New Buffalo in New Mexico emerged alongside hundreds of others. These rural settlements offered like-minded countercultural escapists an opportunity to experiment with nature, religion, sexuality, and collective living in rural and often isolated spaces. No true census exists, but written and visual evidence suggests that, much like the larger countercultural movement during the period, white, middle-class Americans made up the majority of those who went back to the land. While most were under the age of
thirty, back-to-the-land settlements generally opened their doors to any person who accepted the ideological framework of their community.6

Rarely the founders of countercultural rural settlements, most back-to-the-landers discovered the movement through the enormous publicity it received from both underground and popular media. Mainstream newspapers and periodicals, including Look, Newsweek, and the New York Times, and countercultural publications, including Good Times in San Francisco, Astral Projection in Albuquerque, and East Village Other in New York City, offered everything from short blurbs to article-length pieces on the roots and founding ideals of back-to-the-land settlements. Moreover, back-to-the-land travel journals, including William Hedgepeth’s The Alternative and Robert Houriet’s Getting Back Together, reinforced the communal lifestyle as a new way to leave behind mainstream American culture and embrace a simple pastoral existence.7

Most back-to-the-landers came of age during the period of rapid suburbanization in America. While no formulated philosophy emerged for the movement, many of them explained that a uniform consumer and “technocratic” society had disconnected or “divorced” them from the natural world. A contemporary observer explained, “it’s as if they walked out onto a city street one day and realized not only that they were lost but that they were culturally unassimilated in a nation of endless congestion and incredibly corroded approaches to life.” The Americans who joined and “crashed” in rural communes or established collective farming ventures frequently described their natural and pastoral urge as emancipation from the homogenous patterns of work, living, and consumption found in an urban and suburban life. They suggested that consumer culture, the growing conflict in Vietnam, and omnipresent Cold War tensions had negatively influenced their adolescent and teenage years.8

This thinking is reflected in the thoughts and writings of individuals. For example, Pam Hanna of Morningstar in California later recalled that when her husband questioned whether he “really wanted to sell [his] soul just to earn money,” the family made the decision to join a rural countercultural settlement. Another former back-to-the-lander recalled, “the commune (ecovillage) was a way to share [an] appreciation of nature and offer a lifestyle and ethic more in harmony with nature.” Such sentiment was echoed throughout the movement. A Maine com-
munard remembered seeing rural nature as a “pure place, a place that was fresh, green, wholesome, and beautiful, [a landscape] unsullied by the dirtiness of civilization.” A poem in *Leaves of Twin Oaks*, written by a resident of the community, reiterated that yearning for a pastoral setting. Entitled “Left Behind,” the poem called for an exchange of “sweltering far roads for gravel and dirt; Carefully weeded lawns for dandelions, wild; Gone is the smog’s burning hurt; Here are misty fog mornings so mild, here is good rich soil in which my hands toil, here is my heart’s story free from its past worry.” The opportunity to experience nature unadulterated, suggested the author, released her from the anxieties of a uniform culture symbolized by endless paved roads and well-groomed lawns.9

Like contemporary environmentalists, back-to-the-landers held fast to the belief that North America’s rural spaces existed as the last uncorrupted haven. Yet, rather than simply protect perceived pristine landscapes, they hoped to colonize rural areas: to work and live with nature. The discourses that came out of these settlements suggest that most rural communards believed that living a low impact, simple, pastoral existence was the countervailing experience to the mass consumer lifestyle. Hedgepeth explained that many new rural settlers believed, “man ha[d] become alienated from his natural habitat.” In an editorial in the *Green Revolution*, Heathcote member Roger Wilks wondered whether or not “[city] people who, because of their life style are essentially divorced from the land and from direct production of even a small part of their own food, really understand ecology?” Through his experience, Wilks had “held in my hands and looked at soil full of the myriad organisms that make it fertile and gloried at the wonder of being part of such a complex thing as spaceship Earth.” Perceived as an inherent alternative to pervasive patterns of work and consumption, back-to-the-landers reacted by seeking out new natural experiences in the one place where they believed they could most easily find them: rural America.10

The countercultural impulse to forsake the city for life in the countryside was hardly a novel idea. As the historian David Shi has written, “since the colonial days, Americans have greatly admired, variously defined, and occasionally practiced some version of a simple life.” So-called “anti-urbanism” created a legacy for the 1960s era back-to-the-land movement. Thus, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s early nineteenth-
century notion that “the advantage of which country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of the cities” acted both as a direct influence on the counterculture and also an expression of the more pervasive Arcadian trope that had long resonated through American thought.11

As Shi also points out, scholars should take the back-to-the-landers as serious in their “quest for a more meaningful life that transcended materialism.” Importantly, communards employed the urban-rural dichotomy in rationalizing the formation of country communes as sites of contact with the natural world. Like the writer Wendell Berry, who has looked to the agricultural “margins” (including the Amish and horse-powered farms) as exemplars of sustainable and naturally conscious small-scale farming, back-to-the-landers found their influences in the complicated iconography of a mythic rural past. As Robert Houriet wrote in Getting Back Together, “at their onset, communes looked as though they were simply repeating the past, returning to the secure, natural comfort of a bygone era, escaping upstream to the clean, clear headwaters of the American pioneer experience.” In fact, the pastoral encounter in back-to-the-land settlements hinged on a hybridization of rural mythos, popular bucolic imagery, and American Indian iconography.12

As the historian Timothy Miller has shown, back-to-the-land notions of postwar metropolitan and mass consumer America as corruptive moral and physical influences undoubtedly reflected the anti-industrial and anti-modern ideals found in nineteenth-century rural utopian experiments, including Oneida and Brook Farm. In A. Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands, and Henry David Thoreau’s Walden Pond, the movement’s founders discovered philosophies that connected health and rural nature. At the same time, back-to-the-land ideas of pastoral labor as liberation from the tribulations of a modern urban livelihood reflected attempts by turn-of-the-century urban boosters to “save the city by redeeming the countryside.” As Richard White has suggested, land programs in the West and Midwest aspired to resettle poor urban immigrants in rural areas as a panacea for the social troubles of the city. Yet, rather than understand the environmental hardships that resettled urban immigrants encountered, the countercultural back-to-the-land movement echoed the pastoral ideas espoused by privileged boosters who
held rural America as salvation from the problems of the growing American city.\textsuperscript{13}

As suggested by countercultural community names such as Oneida II and Walden House, many founders of back-to-the-land communes recognized their nineteenth-century utopian roots. Yet popular iconography and imagery of frontier agrarian and pastoral life during the Cold War years often masked the hardships faced by resettled urban immigrants and other independent farmers during the nineteenth century. Through television, literature, and film, an imagined rural life seeped into the American psyche during the postwar years.

During the Cold War period, bucolic mythos reflected cultural disquietude due to nuclear anxieties. Meaningful in its appeal to broad audiences, popular rural iconography had a particular impact on American youth. Cinema Studies scholar Douglas Brode has suggested that Walt Disney had a great deal of influence on countercultural conceptions of pastoral simplicity. For example, in films including \textit{Summer Magic} and \textit{Swiss Family Robinson}, postwar youth found notions of collective “back to the basics” ideas and modern families “living in harmony with nature.” By 1953 the children’s book \textit{Little House on the Prairie} had sold more than two million copies. Eleanor Agnew, who lived as a member of the Middle Earth commune in Vermont, suggests that American culture’s “glorification of the pastoral, through song, poetry, literature, and myth, fed our growing desire for the land.” As is evident in the moniker “Middle Earth,” the bucolic imagery of J. R. R. Tolkien’s literary works \textit{The Lord of the Rings} and the \textit{The Hobbit}, also influenced their conceptions of rural life.\textsuperscript{14}

Popular representations of the back-to-the-land communes reaffirmed the movement’s ideological turn to a simple pastoral lifestyle. Rick Klein said that the 1969 movie \textit{Easy Rider} (which included a communal scene modeled after New Buffalo) “stoked the flame” in northern New Mexico. The cover of William Hedgepeth and Dennis Stock’s \textit{The Alternative}, included a couple standing in front of a scarecrow crudely mimicking Grant Wood’s famous painting “American Gothic.” In \textit{Harper’s Magazine} a similar image appeared with Bill Wheeler of Wheeler Ranch and his wife Gay standing in front of their barn. The second issue of \textit{Mother Earth News} entitled “How to Get Out of the City and Back-to-the-land” offered an illustrated version of the iconic painting. Back-
to-the-land settlements also adopted names to reflect their pastoral and agrarian ethos. Examples included Beaver Run Farm, Black Bear Ranch, Country Women, Earth Cycle Farm, Magic Forest Farm, Spring Hollow Farm, Table Mountain Ranch, and Rivendale (another reference to *Lord of the Rings*), among others.15

Using popular rural representations and innate Arcadian ideals, the movement reinvented the idealistic self-sufficient Jeffersonian yeoman farmer and “pioneer” figure as a collective endeavor. As it sought to define itself, it exploited rural language, including ideas of freedom, independence, and self-reliance, which harkened back to Frederick Jackson Turner’s agrarian frontier and industrious American farmer. Explained one contemporary observer, “the hippies are *pioneers* not revolutionaries. They are not trying to destroy civilization as we know it. They are trying hard to create an alternative.” A commentator who had visited several back-to-the-land settlements explained, “a major technological problem confronting the communes was how to retrieve knowledge of the almost-forgotten arts of self-sufficiency now dying with older farmers.” At Libre in Colorado, farming, raising goats, and tending other livestock offered Roberta Price Perkins a feeling of “independence,” and at least one onlooker who visited the commune recognized a “do-your-own-thing” attitude amongst its residents. At Heathcote, Robert Wilks suggested that Americans could not “expect a free society until the majority of people are more fully self-sufficient.” For many back-to-the-land settlers, simplicity and self-sufficiency not only represented their new “pioneering” experiments, but also reflected a wholesale rejection of supermarket America.16

At the same time, often ignoring the historical relationships between American agricultural expansion and Indian removal, some back-to-the-landers turned to idealistic conceptions of American Indian cultures as unpolluted by mass consumer culture. In referring to their movement as the “retribalization” of rural America, they married a perceived Indian natural sensitivity with a concept of indigenous cultures as inherently rural. For example, by naming their community after the buffalo, New Buffalo’s residents linked the bison’s significance in sustaining Plains Indians during the nineteenth century to the role of the land in shaping their experience. As the historian Philip Deloria suggests, at least one resident of the commune referred to their eating habits as part of a
Farmer at New Buffalo Commune, New Mexico, ca. 1970.

Courtesy ©Dennis Stock/Magnum Photos.
“Navaho diet” even though their subsistence and agricultural patterns more closely resembled that of Taos Pueblo. Many back-to-the-land settlers and counterculturalists in general, adopted loincloths, headbands, and moccasins in a vain attempt to ape a perceived down-to-earth philosophy amongst the Indians of North America. In the process, they often confused diverse Indian cultures.17

As one measure to recast their relationship with the natural world, some commune members turned to an amalgamation of American Indian rituals in an effort to produce crops, bring on rain, or to reach a new consciousness. For example, at New Buffalo residents consulted neighboring Taos Pueblo for instruction as to how to perform a proper corn dance. Others crudely mimicked traditional Indian rain dances. A rain ceremony at Earthworks resulted in a “whacking old Vermont thunder-shower.” Some communards turned to “traditional” Indian peyote ceremonies. Beyond the drug itself (a form of cactus indigenous to the southwestern United States), ceremonies included a mix of concocted natural scents and wildlife apparitions. For a participant at New Buffalo, the next morning brought the beauty of the sun rising over the mountains. He sobbed and “like the others knelt toward the sun, which burned gigantic crosses across the sky.”18

Importantly, the countercultural use of pastoral myth and American Indian idealism informed a self-proclaimed philosophy of “voluntary primitivism.” Connecting their physical interaction with the land to physical and mental wellbeing, they conceived a salubrious “total environment” to include simple labor in the making of a healthy human body. As Roman Sender, founder of Morningstar, suggested “voluntary primitivism [was] the natural way to ease off.” Appealing to the modern urbanite he queried, “have you ever breathed into your lungs the early dawn air of a garden or a grove? You can feel the oxygen tingling through every cell, your pores seem to breathe in energies so fine, so pure, that they penetrate to the very source of your being.”19

While tractors and other mechanized equipment appeared in some rural settlements, their use frequently created a point of contention between notions of primitivism and communal self-sufficiency. Long-term sustainability became a critical issue for some members of rural communes and collective farms. Yet, most back-to-the-landers desired to work the land unadulterated by modern machinery. Thus they turned
to simple hand tools, including hoes, rakes, thrashers, shovels, buckets, ladles, and axes to carry out communal work. Just as frequently they got down on all fours and used their hands. A photograph of a plainly clothed communard preparing the seedbed with seeds in her pocket and dirt on her hands emerged as the essence of the back-to-the-land experience. Work was vital for creating a healthy body.\textsuperscript{20}

Homesteaders Kent and Ellie, Middle Earth Homestead, Troy, Maine, ca. 1975.

With educational handbooks and do-it-yourself manuals and almanacs as ubiquitous guides, back-to-the-landers set out to know nature through work. As a contemporary observer noted, “earth lore abounds on rural communes. . . . What trees burn best for warmth, how a compost pile is made, how vegetables are canned, when cows first go outdoors in spring, how a maple tree is tapped, when soil is the right texture for planting: all these are practical questions with high priority.” The Whole Earth Catalog, which sold over a million copies in 1971 and the Mother Earth News, which reached three million readers by 1979, of-
ferred new rural settlers tips on planting and harvesting crops, plans for the construction of eco-friendly housing, and advertisements that touted the necessary instruments for a successful back-to-the-land experience. With simple tools and informative manuals, back-to-the-landers set out to find the physical and psychological benefits of the natural world.21

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the back-to-the-land movement surfaced within a larger countercultural urge to search out more natural and organic lifestyles. Natural childbirth, healing herbs, hemp clothing, and organic backyard gardens reflected a burgeoning movement towards an alternative environmental consciousness that sought to conflate the health of the body with that of the nonhuman natural landscape. While the counterculture understood the urge to preserve nature for future generations to enjoy, its members hoped to procure the healthy benefits of nature by consuming natural foods, using chemical-free body products, and through physical encounters with the environment. In using rural work to seek out the salubrious elements of nonhuman nature, the back-to-the-land movement ideal surfaced as the most radical manifestation of the countercultural environmental movement.

Within rural communes and collective farms, the counterculture relied on a host of experiences to reconnect the body and mind with the natural world. New forms of housing, spirituality, natural and chemical drug use, and festival gatherings in wilderness areas often played central roles in the back-to-the-land encounter. Yet, laboring on the land in collective farming, gardening, and small pastoral living endeavors emerged as the most commonly cited practice for a realization of healthfulness for both landscape and the body. Unlike other environmentally conscious Americans who conflated environmental protection with leisure, back-to-the-landers found salvation in working the soil, chopping wood, and clearing roads. A contemporary observer suggested that communal life and labor emerged as an “effort to forge a oneness, a semi-mystical new rapport with air and soil and other souls.” The everyday responsibilities of life in rural spaces not only meant a home and healthy food for the community, but translated to a cross-movement discourse that suggested good, environmentally conscious work as a powerful tool for shaping healthy livelihoods lost to a culture of consumer convenience and overabundance. As former communard Arthur Kopecky
later recalled, “working with nature was indeed integral to my experience.”

A homesteader guts a pig, Middle Earth Homestead, Troy, Maine, ca. 1975.

Back-to-the-land settlements established various natural farming and “organic” small-plot gardening ventures in an effort to cultivate healthy foods for the personal and communal body. With over fifteen acres, New Buffalo’s residents planted corn, tomatoes, barley, soybeans, beans, and squash. A visitor to the commune explained the significance: “a lot of
effort, thought and discussion go into the preparation of food, not only because it’s a common need, like clothes or housing, but also because food can be a direct vital expression of man’s relationship to the whole life cycle.” The first harvest for the Farm in Tennessee included sweet potatoes, cucumbers, and cabbage. Vermont-based Earthworks produced maple syrup from a number of trees on communal land. Many also kept livestock. In addition to its gardens with various fruits and vegetables, the Libre commune maintained livestock for meat and chickens for eggs, and Country Women in California kept a herd of goats for milk.23

Through agricultural projects, back-to-the-landers sought to feel the effects of nature directly on their bodies. Images from New Buffalo and Lorien in New Mexico show men and women carefully working their hands through the soil preparing to plant the seedbed, removing rocks from recently cleared fields, using bucket and ladle to water the community’s planted crops, and cutting wood to use in open-pit and wood-burning stoves. Remarkably, during the warmer months of the year, many communards worked fields and gardens shoeless, shirtless, and often without work gloves. With their feet in the soil and the sun on their back, they described an experience where hands touched the earth, muscles responded to arduous work, and the senses reacted to the positive influences of the natural world. Richard Fairfield, who had traveled the country visiting different countercultural rural communes, attempted to capture a sense of the simple, natural living approach in back-to-the-land communities, “next time you’re outdoors in the country, reach down and take up a handful of earth or grass. Feel it, experience it, touch it to your face; open yourself up to it completely.”24

The stories that emerged from within rural communes and collective farms emphasized that two levels of bodily health were expected from working with nature. First commune inhabitants intimated a notion of psychological release as part of the back-to-the-land experience. Often considered a “natural high,” many back-to-the-landers believed that their pastoral encounters could reverse the human emotional and non-human natural maladies caused by a decadent and polluted city existence. At New Buffalo, a member lived “completely in harmony with the open countryside, comfortable away from all the seedy, urbanized harrangue of his previous existence.” Roman Sender encouraged Ameri-
cans to “listen to your body. It tells you how it likes to live. And mine tells me that to be healthy and happy I must have around me the sun, pure air, growing things, and silence.” Placing air, fire, water, and earth in harmony with the self, god, and love, the community symbol at Morningstar encouraged residents to realign the personal identity with the natural world. A resident of Lower Farm in Placitas, New Mexico, echoed those sentiments by challenging urban society to turn away from homogenous, sterile American culture, to “be receptive to the good earth” and to “tune in to natural vibrations.”

On a second interconnected level, the wellbeing of the body played a central role in how back-to-the-landers interpreted their experience. For a Maine communard it seemed “far healthier to chop wood, haul water, plant seeds, than to sit at a desk all day.” Huw Williams, founder of Freedom Farm, suggested that a more direct relationship with nature
materialized by taking out the supermarket middleman and placing the body in direct contact with soil, wood, and water. His newfound union with nature through labor, he said, offered spiritual rewards in everyday tasks such as sawing wood.26

In an effort to create environmentally virtuous work, back-to-the-landers attempted to place the body in equilibrium with the natural world by measuring everyday life against the cadence of the land. An observer noted the pattern as she followed the day-by-day tasks of a communard in Vermont. Throughout the day’s labor, including transferring tomato seedlings, working in the herb garden, and gathering wood for the dinner fire, the commune seemed to keep “pace with the rhythm of the earth.” Peter Coyote, who lived at Olema in California and Turkey Ridge, Pennsylvania, explained the importance of making work follow the tempo of the earth. As Turkey Ridge came together with men and women sharing house and field duties, it seemed as though “the world was right in its orbit.”27

While individualism could mark the construction of new relationships with nature, collective identity drove agricultural practices in back-to-the-land settlements. Yet many communards often found their communities inadvertently reaffirming common cultural constructions of female versus male work. The desire to relive a presumably traditional yeoman farmer’s lifestyle helped to reify those patterns of thinking. As a visitor to northern New Mexico suggested, “at first, the work was divided traditionally into men’s and women’s. None of the women that first year wanted to be liberated, the nineteenth-century image of aproned, long-skirted womanhood appealed to them.” A woman member who chose to shape bricks found herself ignored by the men and eventually encouraged to return to the kitchen by other women. In an attempt to suggest that women also gendered labor, a visitor to New Buffalo explained that a “hip cowboy,” who sat at the table chopping carrots, was asked to leave the kitchen by the women of New Buffalo.28

The degree to which similar attitudes seeped into other communes remains hard to identify. Yet, many recognized the contradictions between a truly egalitarian back-to-the-land lifestyle and the relationships between men and women. As Peter Coyote recalled of Turkey Ridge, “all of our ‘appreciation’ of the women and their work did not extend to valuing that work as dearly as our own. With hindsight, our division of
labor seems archaic, particularly for a visionary community.” However, as the community evolved, men and women increasingly shared a variety of tasks. For example, as women moved out into the fields, men did more housework. For Coyote, “it was a wrenching awakening, to say the least, and for the first time, the men experienced the never-ending, distracting, and maddening demands of simultaneous children and housework, the fragmenting of every thought and task into small, childruled increments.”

In an effort to gain the healthy benefits of a hands-on interaction with nature, women took the initiative to move beyond any gendered notions of labor. Roberta Price recalled that she and another woman had hauled manure for fertilizer. At Country Women, a former magazine editor from Los Angeles explained that the rural communal lifestyle offered her space where “both green things and I could grow.” She learned organic gardening as a principal part of her natural encounter. Another member described working the land as physically invigorating. “I want to use my muscles and feel my strength grow,” she said. “I rely on myself for my physical needs.”

Not all back-to-the-land settlements were heterosexual establishments. Importantly, lesbian communities complicated the idea of a Mother Earth by, according to historian Catherine Kleiner, gendering “nature as a woman, becoming nature’s lovers (both figuratively and literally) and moving beyond both deep ecology or ecofeminism.” By design, lesbian land communities remained decidedly similar to those found elsewhere. They existed as communal and family endeavors, where nature played a central role in everyday life. Yet through unique collective and personal encounters, lesbian land communes shaped new conceptions of good relationships that connected the physical body with rural nature.

Thus, gay or straight, back-to-the-landers bartered their own energy in the form of rough pastoral work for the collective benefits of the natural world. Yet, by not always anticipating the inherent tension between their pastoral ideals and the financial and physiological burdens of a rural life, they missed part of the equation. Bad weather, meager food, disease, and the reality that “primitive” pastoral work was difficult, plagued the greater back-to-the-land movement. As a result individuals within countercultural communes and collective farms struggled
to resolve the pervasive conflicts between notions of pastoral labor as a healthy retreat from metropolitan America and the unexpected physical and psychological burdens shaped by an unpredictable natural world.

Weather conditions, particularly in cold winter states, counteracted conceptions of the natural world as a last bastion of health. A resident of an Oregon commune recalled voluntarily living in a teepee heated by a woodstove as “really miserable.” Similarly, the LNS-farm in New England “bore witness to old cars that refused to start, frozen water pipes, chimney fires, and running noses, [and] colds that wouldn’t quit.” At a homestead in Maine, a couple “kept a temperature chart just to see what the scope of [their] suffering was.” Another commune member later recalled passing a “cozy-looking house” in the dead of winter thinking how nice it would have been to not have to worry about her financial or physical burdens as a communard.32

For Rainbow Farm residents in Oregon, winter weather had a profound influence on the social make-up of their settlement. As one member explained, “snow closed around the house, driving the people together into the only two warm rooms. Life began to exist around the kitchen table, or in the new blue-lit sauna room.” Winter conditions acted both to bring residents together, so that they could learn more about one another, and also pulled them apart, as close quarters led to a clash of personalities. “Less able to deal with each other in emotional ways,” male members of the commune quarreled most frequently. By the end of the winter season, the Rainbow Farm consisted almost entirely of women.33

Cold weather had a similar influence at Turkey Ridge; with the temperature hovering “between zero and ten degrees, it was punishing to be outside.” Thus, most of the commune’s members spent days and nights indoors. Increased tensions, usually diffused by outdoor work during the warmer months of the year, materialized from stagnation and poverty during bitter winter months. Long-time residents of New Buffalo used similar conditions to encourage non-committed individuals to leave the community. At one point “old-timers deliberately let the woodpile run out—to drive off those too lazy to chop their share.” The result, they hoped, would be less people eating communal food rations and sharing the often-cramped main compound.34

Those who stayed on in back-to-the-land communities through the
cold months of the year often looked forward to the spring, despite the ubiquitous burdens of planting difficulties and meager returns from their agricultural labor. A lack of reliable water sources, springtime frosts, and insect damage to crops burdened several back-to-the-land settlements. Due to a lack of rainfall, LNS-farm resorted to transporting water from nearby streams for their crops. At New Buffalo communards constantly battled Mexican Bean beetles that destroyed their harvest. Not wanting to contaminate their crops with insecticides, they eradicated the insects by smashing them between their fingers.35

During Twin Oaks’s early years, the commune also struggled for a time with low yields and pests (including Japanese beetles and Squash bugs). Yet they often had enough to eat (due in part to their dependence on outside jobs and the success of a burgeoning hammock business). A visitor to the commune during 1970 explained that dinner consisted of corn, spinach, turkey casserole, and milk or Kool-Aid. However, in the face of failed harvests and a lack of steady income many other settlements expecting a return on their labor frequently had lackluster meals. Steve Gaskin recalled that before it found agricultural success, the Farm experienced “rough times.” A visitor at New Buffalo explained that “dinner was meager—rice, lentils, squash and, if you were first in line, a few tortillas.” A slaughtered cow or a deer killed by a communal hunter offered an occasional treat for residents who did not practice vegetarianism.36

Lack of knowledge about sanitation and disease also plagued the movement. A need for clean water, sanitary living quarters, and adequate clothing emerged as major problems in many settlements. The Farm experienced an outbreak of dysentery when residents drank contaminated stream water. Morningstar did not have proper bathrooms or outhouses. Instead, members frequently defecated in the woods surrounding the community. Since neither visitors nor residents regularly buried their feces, concerns that the commune had become a breeding ground for disease alarmed many long-time residents. Among rural settlements in New Mexico, back-to-the-landers contracted a myriad of illnesses. By 1973 at least five residents of New Buffalo had contracted hepatitis. Another communard in Taos County came down with tuberculosis. In back-to-the-land settlements near Albuquerque, health workers reported two cases of the bubonic plague. An article in the Astral
Projection encouraged communards to maintain sanitary conditions as, “the threat of plague is ever present in sylvatic (wooded) areas since the disease, transmitted by infected fleas, is harbored by wild rodents and small animals, including rabbits.”

Environmental hardship complicated structural and social problems that often emerged as back-to-the-land communities dealt with a lack of capital and the rise of social conflict. Those trends emerged from what Stuart Brand had called the “Commune Lie”: the failure of the rural hippie movement to reach the utopian goals set forth by the modern collective living ideal. From their inception, most countercultural communes and collective farming ventures could not preserve a steady, committed population for work or income. During 1967 the average stay for new members at Twin Oaks hovered around three months. While Twin Oaks's turnover slowed between 1970 and 1972, continued arrival of new members and departure of others complicated life in the community. An uncommitted workforce and lack of money compelled members to take jobs outside their settlement. “We expected to live off the land as much as possible,” explained one resident, “but even then we said to each other, 'if worst comes to worst, we can always get jobs.' Worst came to worst in March of 1968 eight short months after the community's inception.” New Buffalo had a similar problem. Two years after its creation, the community could not support its population from its farming ventures. Rick Klein, a founder, recalled that “a flux of visitors” complicated an already difficult agricultural situation. As of 1970, at least one member voiced concern about the scarcity of food and the need to actually reduce the number of people at the commune from fifty to twenty-five. By spring of the same year, New Buffalo's residents relied on food stamps for two-thirds of their provisions.

Of course not all back-to-the-land settlements failed. While rural communes that achieved long-term success relied on the fruits of their labor in farming and gardening ventures, they generally also recognized the importance of other industries in sustaining their communities. By 1981, Twin Oaks found community permanence behind a six-hundred-thousand-dollar hammock business. Categorized as nonprofit by the late 1970s, the Farm produced capital from construction and agricultural crews as well as its book-publishing ventures. A visitor to the community suggested that as a nonprofit, “the Farm is determined to compete for a
good balance of payments with the outside capitalist economy.” For Steve Gaskin and his compatriots, rather than abandon modern American society, maintaining a long-term back-to-the-land existence required establishing equilibrium between profitable external ventures and the collective ideals of the community.\(^{39}\)

Despite the few long-term success stories that emerged from the movement, the back-to-the-land pursuit of the benefits of nature through labor ultimately declined. While some back-to-the-landers emphasized that the “temptations” of a pervasive American culture of convenience pulled communes apart, the movement’s natural consumer ethos acted as part of a growing countercultural environmental consciousness that succeeded through independent cooperative markets. By offering prepackaged, easily consumable all-natural products, food cooperatives and health food stores emerged as an alternative pathway to the physical and psychological benefits of nature, while simultaneously promoting good work through organic and natural farming. Like rural communes and collective farms, they challenged traditional market-consumer relationships by encouraging cooperative ownership, hosting workshops, and offering discussion groups on organic produce, home gardening, and physical and mental health and healing. Work also played a role as many cooperatives required monthly shifts in the store as a caveat of membership. Countercultural cooperative food markets survived not by abandoning the modern American mass consumer society, but by using it to promote alternative forms of consumption that wedded the health of nature with that of the human body.\(^{40}\)

The tremendous underground and mainstream interest in back-to-the-land communes offered fodder for the growing environmental consumer movement. In some cases, back-to-the-land communities ran their own ventures. For example, the California-based Brotherhood of the Sun ran health food stores, a restaurant, and organic farmers’ market (which eventually became a three-million-dollar business). After years of subsistence farming, New Buffalo existed for a time as a small dairy. Whether the product of a commune or not, like the back-to-the-land movement, cooperative food markets trumpeted the consumption of good nature as a means to find personal wellbeing. Yet, rather than emphasize work with nature, the flourishing trade in all-natural goods encouraged good consumerism as a measure to a healthy body and
environment. Laboring in nature did not disappear (many counterculturalists grew gardens with seedlings purchased at local markets), but consumer environmentalism allowed individuals to find the benefits of the back-to-the-land experience at the swipe of a credit card.41

As communes increasingly vanished, hundreds of local independent natural food stores opened across the nation. By 1980 many hip communities demanded environmentally friendly, pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, natural body products, vitamins, herbal supplements, and free-range poultry and meats. Even in name they reflected the bucolic imagery of the back-to-the-land movement. Earth’s Bounty in Woodbury, New Jersey, Down to Earth Produce in Boulder, and La Montanita Co-op in Albuquerque, amongst hundreds of others, catered to the unique dietary and environmentally conscious lifestyle desired by a growing number of natural consumers. As Pam Hanna later suggested, like other health and environmentally conscious Americans she had “learned how to buy grains and beans and avoid packaged food.”42

During 1981 independent health food stores did a collective two billion dollars in business. Preservative-free Tom’s of Maine toothpaste went from a five-thousand-dollar mom-and-pop business in 1970 to grossing more than three million dollars in 1982. Celestial Seasonings herbal teas, whose founder first picked the herbs and stitched the bags by hand, grossed fifteen million dollars by 1981. If one desired to find it, the bodily advantages of rural nature could be found without going back to the land.43

As early as 1971, corporate America recognized that the producers of natural foods and products (and the independent stores that sold them) stood to profit immensely from the boom in natural consumerism. Chain grocery stores, including Ralph’s and Skaggs, offered aisles devoted to health foods and natural products. In 1972 a former General Mills employee created Heartland Natural Cereal, or as Rolling Stone called it, “the first corporate granola.” Following Heartland’s success, Quaker Oats, General Mills, Kellogg’s, amongst others, produced their own granola cereals.44

The most telling evidence of this shift lay with the success of one-time small-scale natural food stores that expanded to meet the demands of an increasingly health-oriented cross-section of the American public. By 1993 Whole Foods Market, established as a small natural food store in
Austin, Texas, thirteen years earlier, became a stock-sharing corporation that boasted twenty locations and title as leading seller of natural foods and hygiene products across the United States. Chain stores including Wild Oats, its sister store Alfalfa’s, and Trader Joe’s soon joined the market as primary competitors to Whole Foods. While environmental concerns stood as core to the mission of these stores, their reputations as spaces with goods healthy for the body increasingly trivialized countercultural environmental consumerism and the relationship between simple work, healthy bodies, and environmental consciousness.45

In contrast, for the back-to-the-landers who fled American cities, simple rural work with healthy natural environments acted as an escape from common American consumption and the average urban existence. Motivated by a legacy of pastoral thought popularized in literature, film, and television, communards believed that only in leaving the city for the countryside could one find wellbeing for both the body and environ-
ment. Yet most found that rural life and labor was difficult and unfor-
giving. Interactions with nature could lead to disease, while facilitating
both poverty and communal conflict. Yet in their collective movement
back to the land, communards offered not merely a radical reconceptu-
alization of postwar life, but an environmental ethos that used work to
consume the bodily benefits of nature while simultaneously seeking to
reduce the human impact on the nonhuman natural environment. By
proclaiming virtuous rural work as central to their consciousness, the
countercultural back-to-the-land urge created a modern environmental
movement unique in ideological roots and practice.

NOTES

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2. On the connections between work, landscape, and nature, see, Steven Stoll, Larding 
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3. For surveys of the movement, see, Hal Rothman, The Greening of A Nation?: 
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American History 90 (Sept. 2003): 525–54. The best sources for the history of the coun-
terculture and communes comes from Beth Bailey and David Farber’s counterculture 
series. For example, Arthur Kopecky, New Buffalo: Journals from a Taos Commune 
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Century America (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Miller, The Hippies and 
American Values (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Lois Palken Rudnick,


11. David Shi, The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 3. Morton and Lucia White show that from the Early Republic to the first decades of the twentieth century, intellectuals often disdained cities while trumpeting country and rural life. Such trends continued well into the


20. For more on farm equipment, see, Fairfield, *Communes USA*, 193; “The Farm Report,” *Lifestyle* 1 (Oct. 1972): 24. Many communes also turned to alternative technologies such as solar heating and low-impact pesticides. For more on those uses, see, Andrew Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*


26. Hanna interview; Agnew interview; Davidson, “Open Land,” 100.

27. Kantor, “Communes for All Reasons,” 64; Coyote, Sleeping Where I Fall, 287–89.


29. Coyote, Sleeping Where I Fall, 288–89.


34. Coyote, Sleeping Where I Fall, 299; Dannemann, “New Buffalo, 10 Years Old,” 5.
37. Miller, 60s Communes, 200; Steve Gaskin, Hey Beatnik! This is the Farm Book (Summertown, Tenn.: Book Publishing Co., 1974); Fairfield, Communes USA, 246; Kopecky, New Buffalo, 107; “Coming to Nuevo Mexico? Read this First,” Albuquerque Astral Projection, June 18, 1970, 13.
42. Hanna interview.
