



## Self-Sufficiency - Is It Possible?

Well, is it? I'm going to start off by saying: probably not! At least, not in the way we'd like to think. The idea of being castaways on a desert island, or living in an area so remote that other people don't come into consideration is, for most, only a dream, perhaps a nightmare, depending how you look at it. Once civilisation is a factor, the rules change. Add society to the mix and self-sufficiency can only ever be a percentage achievement. How high that part of a lifestyle can rise depends on where you live and how far the presiding authorities will allow you to deviate from the expected norm. It is, however, well worth contemplating, as long as you know what you might be up against.

I recall a case a few years back when a family tried to be as self-reliant as they could possibly be. They had a home on a few acres, generated their own power and grew most of their food. Any requirements over and above this were either acquired by trading some of their surplus, or selling it for cash which was needed from time to time. An immediate compromise, you might think - corrupted by money, they were really no different to anyone else. Unfortunately, they had no choice. Although they owned the property, it was still subject to rates and taxes which couldn't be paid for with a tonne of potatoes and a few cases of fruit. Government departments only deal in hard cash; and they do not like to be made redundant by some clever hippy hobby-farmer. Money is one way they retain control over the population, particularly innovative individuals seeking to opt out of the system.

Local, State and Federal laws also ensure no-one can ever break away for long - compulsory voting in elections; obligatory feral-pest baiting programs; whatever else they can think of to create another official form to keep the peasants under their thumb; plus the coup de grâce - the welfare of any children. The couple in question had some and were sure they were doing the right thing by them. They were exceptionally well looked after and were as healthy as any kids. No matter what checks the various government departments chose to institute, the family passed with flying colours; all except one - schooling. Being well-educated themselves, they had been teaching the kids at home, apparently to a standard far above students of a similar age; but despite this, the parents were forced to enrol their children in school. It was a bitter defeat, an inevitable one. To my knowledge, they accepted the compromise and continued with their alternative lifestyle which I imagine is still very rewarding. Good luck to them; but what about the rest of us?

There are many ways of producing the necessities aside from having to pay someone else for them. Power, especially electrical, is usually an expensive utility; but it doesn't have to be. In regions with abundant sunshine, solar is the way to go. The initial cost of setting up is quite high; but over time the savings are generally recouped in full and, as long as the equipment is durable, future savings should continue. Electricity generated by solar panels and stored in battery modules is ready for immediate use at no extra cost other than for repairs and replacement of



equipment. Provided power generated is sufficient, homes employing this setup have no need to pay for electricity from the usual supplier. In Australia, an alternative compromise is to fit solar panels which feed the State grid. Electricity is still paid for at the standard price, plus normal service charges; but the energy injected into the grid is credited against the account. Although the provider gives back a lot less per unit than it charges, savings can be considerable. Our neighbour uses this system and often pays as little as \$2 in total for a two-month account period; and as the feed-back equipment is paid for and serviced by the Company, the only expense to customers is for maintenance of their solar panels. The one drawback is during a power-cut because, being a relayed supply, there is no electricity either in or out for the duration.

Solar water-heating is another money-saver. Once again, the pre-requisite is sunshine. Captured by the panels, it is converted to energy which heats water in a storage tank, meaning instant hot water from the power of the sun, at least for the first shower or three. On a clear day, the water temperature climbs to boiling point very quickly, so a thermostatically-controlled switch is fitted to interrupt the conversion when the pre-set level is reached. Even times when the sky is overcast, the system still works, although not as efficiently. Days of little or no sun are compensated for by an auxiliary electrical booster which is also governed by a thermostat, cutting in and out automatically as necessary. We always left ours off to save on power costs, only switching it on if the water was too cold. We also changed our routine, ensuring showers were taken in the morning, after which the sun had all day to re-heat the tank water.

An alternative energy source for areas which experience predominantly low sunshine might be wind power. As with solar, setup costs are likely to be high and there is no guarantee of sufficient and continuous wind speed. Then there is the water-wheel which is fine if there's a flowing river or creek nearby. Next, you'll probably think, he's going to suggest generators driven by pedal or donkey power. Although not beyond the bounds of possibility, these are venturing into the realms of rustic fantasy and are impractical for the most part. Self-sufficiency, it would seem, can only be partially achieved.

The greatest compromise will be the acceptance of money as a necessary evil. It will always be an issue and there has to be enough of it; so anyone thinking of trying an alternative lifestyle needs to review the situation to decide which current and continuing expenses can either be reduced or cut out altogether. It boils down to saving on costs. Maybe home-generated power is out of the question; but even an existing residence can be made more energy-efficient. Insulation in walls and roof-spaces helps retain inside temperatures for longer, so heaters and air conditioners don't have to be on for as long. Double-glazing on exterior windows and glass panels also keeps the heat or cold at bay to a degree. Exterior blinds that can be raised and lowered are more efficient than the interior kind. I realise all these things require an outlay of money, but less will be eventually required if a portion of available funds is invested with the future in mind. There are also a number of other cost-saving ideas that can be found in Money Matters MM06. Most are free and just require a little thought and a slight change in routine.

As well as pruning back energy costs, home-produced food is also worth consideration. Admittedly, not everyone has enough land to grow extensive crops or run livestock, but there are ways to utilise relatively small spaces for the cultivation of vegetables, fruits and herbs. See Healthy Living HL29 for some ideas. Even small savings in the kitchen will assist with the weekly budget; and you'll find that the little you may be able to grow will taste better and is far healthier than supermarket fodder.

Some adventurous people who are determined to make a go of an alternative lifestyle may have the wherewithal to up stakes and begin again from scratch. It is arguably the best way, as long as certain important factors are taken into consideration before taking the plunge. Whether buying a block or an acreage, location will determine any future success, as will weather. Knowing in advance what each season generally brings means no nasty surprises. A property that looks lush and green in spring could become a parched dustbowl in summer and a swamp once the winter rains hit. Presumably food production will be on the agenda, so these things matter. Soil type and condition also dictate the kind of crops and livestock that the land can support well, or not at all. It is worthwhile taking samples and having them tested for elements present that might be detrimental such as high salinity or residual chemicals from previous usage. Livestock as part of the ecology works; but animals have particular requirements that need to be met. Unless there is sufficient area for grazing of a reasonable quality, supplementary feed will have to be purchased. As an example: except for the cost of buying a few chickens and building a coop, they provide eggs and fertiliser for free, as long as there is plenty for them to eat that costs nothing. Having to buy in laying pellets and wheat seems to defeat the object. So, the land has to be able to support whatever it is destined to be used for. Money spent bringing it up to standard can only be justified if the returns eventually exceed outlay.

Pretty much as it was for the first colonists, a ready supply of fresh water is essential for own use as well as reticulation. In areas where it rains a-plenty, seeds sown and crops planted will be taken care of by Mother Nature; initially, anyway. Regions subject to extended periods of drought dictate the need for water storage, plus some kind of irrigation system. Should the raw material for this be provided by the local water authority, it will have to be paid for.

Then, of course, shelter from the elements also comes into play. Construction of buildings, especially the main residence, can be costly; and even if wood is the material of choice and there is an abundance of trees on the property, permission for felling may have to be sought from the local authorities; and, of course, plans for any structures will probably have to be submitted.

There are so many reasons why self-sufficiency is really just a pipe-dream for most; and I could go on till the cows come home listing them; but that might put people off trying. Any small stand we can make towards independence is proof that we are not dumb animals to be restricted and herded by officialdom. And should governments and the system tumble at some future time, at least we'll have learned enough of the basics to survive on our own, hopefully for years to come.

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