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We had originally intended to go on to Magna Charta Island, a sweetly pretty part of the river, where it winds through a soft, green valley, and to camp in one of the many picturesque inlets to be found round that tiny shore. But, somehow, we did not feel that we yearned for the picturesque nearly so much now as we had earlier in the day. A bit of  
5 water between a coal-barge and a gas-works would have quite satisfied us for that night. We did not want scenery. We wanted to have our supper and go to bed. However, we did pull up to the point—"Picnic Point," it is called—and dropped into a very pleasant nook under a great elm-tree, to the spreading roots of which we fastened the boat.

Then we thought we were going to have supper (we had dispensed with tea, so as  
10 to save time), but George said no; that we had better get the canvas up first, before it got quite dark, and while we could see what we were doing. Then, he said, all our work would be done, and we could sit down to eat with an easy mind.

That canvas wanted more putting up than I think any of us had bargained for. It looked so simple in the abstract. You took five iron arches, like gigantic croquet hoops,  
15 and fitted them up over the boat, and then stretched the canvas over them, and fastened it down: it would take quite ten minutes, we thought.

That was an under-estimate.

We took up the hoops, and began to drop them into the sockets placed for them. You would not imagine this to be dangerous work; but, looking back now, the wonder to  
20 me is that any of us are alive to tell the tale. They were not hoops, they were demons. First they would not fit into their sockets at all, and we had to jump on them, and kick them, and hammer at them with the boat-hook; and, when they were in, it turned out that they were the wrong hoops for those particular sockets, and they had to come out again.

But they would not come out, until two of us had gone and struggled with them for  
25 five minutes, when they would jump up suddenly, and try and throw us into the water and drown us. They had hinges in the middle, and, when we were not looking, they nipped us with these hinges in delicate parts of the body; and, while we were wrestling with one side of the hoop, and endeavouring to persuade it to do its duty, the other side  
30 would come behind us in a cowardly manner, and hit us over the head.

We got them fixed at last, and then all that was to be done was to arrange the covering over them. George unrolled it, and fastened one end over the nose of the boat. Harris stood in the middle to take it from George and roll it on to me, and I kept by the stern to receive it. It was a long time coming down to me. George did his part all right,  
35 but it was new work to Harris, and he bungled it.

How he managed it I do not know, he could not explain himself; but by some mysterious process or other he succeeded, after ten minutes of superhuman effort, in getting himself completely rolled up in it. He was so firmly wrapped round and tucked in and folded over, that he could not get out. He, of course, made frantic struggles for

40 freedom—the birthright of every Englishman,—and, in doing so (I learned this afterwards), knocked over George; and then George, swearing at Harris, began to struggle too, and got *himself* entangled and rolled up.

I knew nothing about all this at the time. I did not understand the business at all myself. I had been told to stand where I was, and wait till the canvas came to me, and  
 45 Montmorency and I stood there and waited, both as good as gold. We could see the canvas being violently jerked and tossed about, pretty considerably; but we supposed this was part of the method, and did not interfere.

We also heard much smothered language coming from underneath it, and we guessed that they were finding the job rather troublesome, and concluded that we would  
 50 wait until things had got a little simpler before we joined in.

We waited some time, but matters seemed to get only more and more involved, until, at last, George's head came wriggling out over the side of the boat, and spoke up.

It said:

"Give us a hand here, can't you, you cuckoo; standing there like a stuffed mummy,  
 55 when you see we are both being suffocated, you dummy!"

I never could withstand an appeal for help, so I went and undid them; not before it was time, either, for Harris was nearly black in the face.

It took us half an hour's hard labour, after that, before it was properly up, and then we cleared the decks, and got out supper. We put the kettle on to boil, up in the nose of  
 60 the boat, and went down to the stern and pretended to take no notice of it, but set to work to get the other things out.

That is the only way to get a kettle to boil up the river. If it sees that you are waiting for it and are anxious, it will never even sing. You have to go away and begin your meal, as if you were not going to have any tea at all. You must not even look round  
 65 at it. Then you will soon hear it sputtering away, mad to be made into tea.

It is a good plan, too, if you are in a great hurry, to talk very loudly to each other about how you don't need any tea, and are not going to have any. You get near the kettle, so that it can overhear you, and then you shout out, "I don't want any tea; do you, George?" to which George shouts back, "Oh, no, I don't like tea; we'll have  
 70 lemonade instead—tea's so indigestible." Upon which the kettle boils over, and puts the stove out.

We adopted this harmless bit of trickery, and the result was that, by the time everything else was ready, the tea was waiting. Then we lit the lantern, and squatted down to supper.

75 We wanted that supper.

Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*. London, 1889

Most of the people I met on my tour of America are losing faith in the grid, in both its literal and metaphorical sense. They don't feel a sufficient advantage to being inside the fabric of society.

This led me to conclude that living off the grid is more than a lifestyle choice. It is a political act, with benefits way beyond the individual off-gridder. And compared to listing environmental problems or complaining about the oil industry, it is a positive act, one that adds to social diversity and is good for the species.

For one thing, if off-the-grid building permits were easier to come by in more parts of America, hundreds of thousands would be allowed onto the property ladder, including many who have been in foreclosure or who are trapped in mortgages they cannot afford.

The depopulation of rural America has left a vast countryside where highways speed us through a near-empty landscape and horses outnumber humans in some of the lushest and most livable areas. Many city-dwellers would prefer to live in the country, but are prevented by the artificially high price of real estate.

The zoning laws operate in favor of existing homeowners by excluding others from building on the most desirable locations. Even when they are allowed to build, the code can be onerous if all one can afford is a small wooden cabin but the code calls for brick and double glazing. "The entire system," says Robert Bruegmann, a professor of urban planning at the University of Illinois and the author of *Sprawl: A Compact History*, "is designed to protect the kind of urban neighborhoods in which [the advocates of the current planning system] live, and the country houses where they vacation, while the problems fall most heavily on other parts of the population."

As well as cheaper housing, living off the grid reduces energy bills (after the initial outlay on power generation equipment). That benefits the wider energy security of the nation. In the event of disruption of energy supplies, whether for economic reasons or due to peak oil or to natural disaster, a sizable off-grid population would increase the resilience of society as a whole and its ability to continue to supply power to those who need it.

Whether consciously or by accident, off-the-grid households in the United States are firmly part of the larger environmental movement. Living off the grid just happens to be good for the environment, fostering lower energy consumption and increased awareness of the natural forces shaping our planet and introducing a radical approach to cutting consumption of everything in our domestic lives, not just energy and water. Although climate-change science has been partly discredited, that is no reason to stop protecting the environment from corporate polluters and overexploitation of dwindling resources. To me, that is what environmentalism has always been about.

Policies favorable to off-the-grid living would bring hundreds of thousands back to the land, revive dying communities and nurture long-forgotten skills needed to grow food and live self-sufficiently.

Smaller, more mobile, and more efficient versions of existing products—batteries, phones, solar panels, wind turbines, computers, and much more—are being developed at an incredible rate. Fuel cells may soon entirely replace our century-old battery technology. Other innovations aimed at marine and camping communities have given us the means to live luxuriously in the middle of nowhere, with all the standard household appliances, from fridges and TVs to computers and lighting systems. And wireless broadband Internet allows us to surf the Web or check e-mail almost anywhere.

Thanks to this technology, the off-gridgers don't need to turn away from society as drastically as their sixties and seventies back-to-the-land forebears did (only to return as lawyers or real estate agents, or, in Northern California, as wine and pot growers). They

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50 can keep writing, or making craft items, or telecommuting, earning their living from home in a variety of ways.

To me, the most heartening aspect of the off-grid movement is its opposition to overconsumption—the bane of American health and wealth.

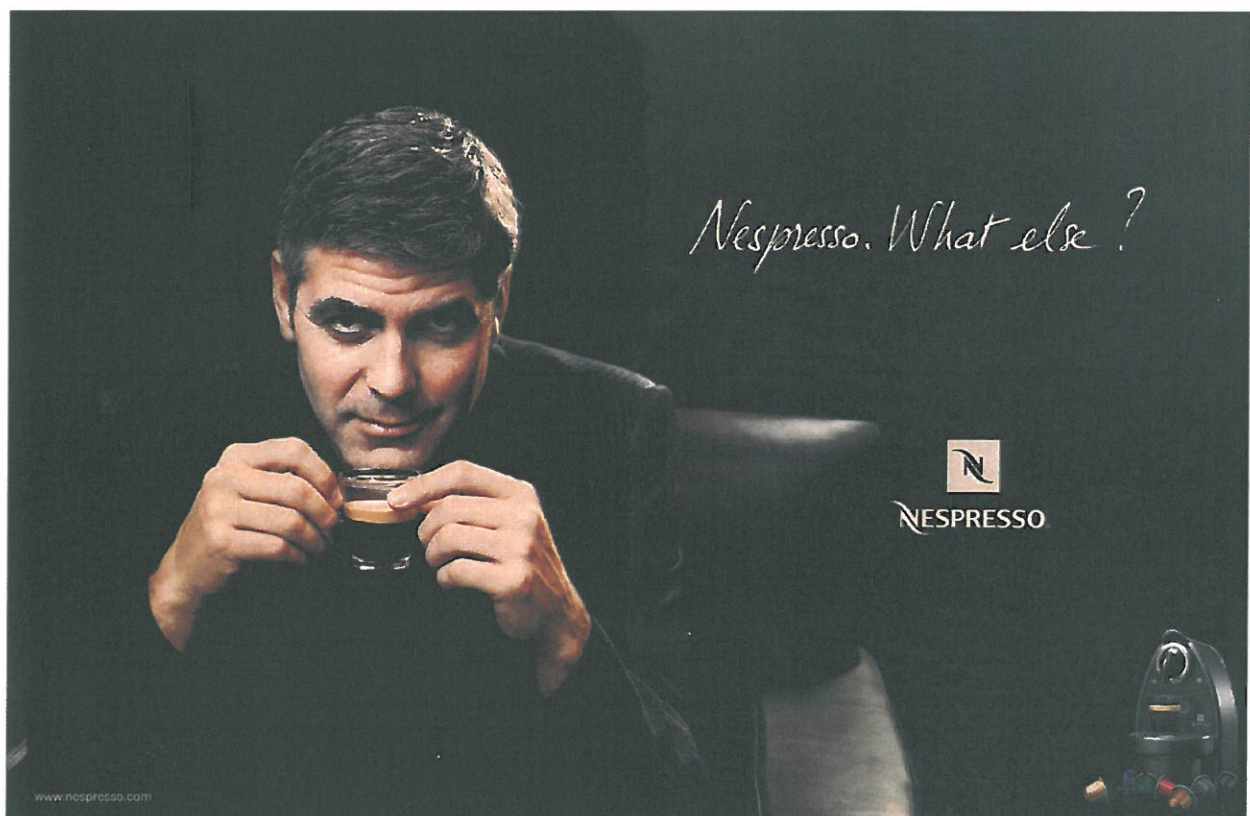
55 During the eighties and through the long boom, we were all lulled into thinking of ourselves as consumers. But the "consumer" will seem like a tired, outdated concept in the future, with its overtones of slurping up scarce resources.

As individuals, some of us are ashamed of our previous high levels of consumption. We've had enough of brand names and shopping-as-entertainment; we'll never lose interest in dressing to the latest trends, but many resist *buying* the latest trends. These 60 days we are as likely to "shop the closet" as we imitate magazine spreads on the latest must-have color or hemline.

Houses became the essence of the consumer society, to an absurd degree. Bigger houses, gated communities, marble-topped kitchens, heated pools—by the time the crunch came, Americans had overhoused themselves to the point that the home became 65 not an asset but a liability, so high are the utility, tax heating, and maintenance costs.

Nick Rosen, *Off the Grid. Inside the movement for more space, less government, and true independence in modern America*. Penguin, 2010





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