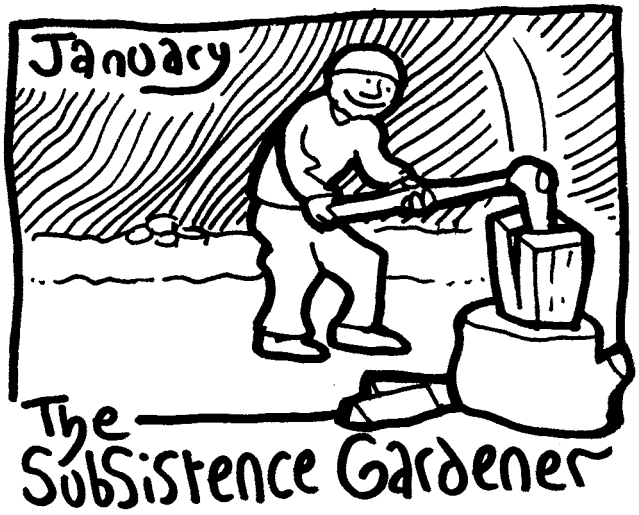

Firewood

Human beings have one of the largest geographical ranges of any animals on Earth. Even before the age of modern technologies, there were people living in almost every corner of the planet, except Antarctica – from the Arctic circle to the southern tip of South America. Our ability to thrive in a wide range of extremely different conditions is not due to our having an unusually versatile or resilient physical body – in fact, the reverse is probably true, and we are more physically vulnerable than a lot of animals that have a narrower distribution. Our ability to live in such a wide range of different conditions is due to our being able to shape our environment to suit our needs. And the key to that has always been fire.

In many latitudes, people need a house, with heating, in order to survive the winter, and, in most areas of the world, people cannot survive on raw food – they need a fire on which to cook.

Living in the modern world, it is easy to imagine that we have transcended the primitive dependence upon fire, but, in most cases, the fires upon which we rely have been cleverly displaced so that we are not aware of them – they are burning in oil and gas-powered power stations, for example.

Traditionally, people had no doubts about their reliance on fire, and in each place in which people were living, their lifestyle was based around having enough fuel to keep a household fire burning throughout the year. In most places, that fuel was wood, or wood charcoal, and life depended on the careful management of trees.

In many places this involved a sophisticated 'slash and burn' system of land management, which involved rotating round several sites, farming each of them until soil fertility and fuel resources were temporarily depleted. In places where people established permanent dwellings, resources had to be managed in such a way that both soil fertility and the supply of firewood was maintained indefinitely, from one area of land.

This had implications for how people lived. The more people who were able to share a house with each other, the more value was gained from the wood being burned, the less work each person had to do to keep the communal fire burning, and the more people who could be supported in a particular area. Similarly, in order to ensure an adequate supply of firewood over the long term, there had to be a clear agreement between everyone living in a village about who had the right to cut which trees, and how often. For a village to survive and prosper, these agreements had to be maintained from one generation to the next, so that some trees, destined to provide wood for house building, could be allowed to reach maturity, perhaps over hundreds of years, whilst others were harvested regularly to provide firewood. This required a strong and coherent form of local self-governence, without which a village could not survive.

The use of coal, gas and oil for heating the home, and for cooking, held out the promise of freedom from the social and ecological constraints that exist in wood-burning societies.

Over the past few hundred years, in developed countries, wood has been mainly supplanted by fossil fuels. Instead of spending their winters cutting firewood, people have been free to pursue other activities – most notably, paid employment. The use of coal, gas and oil for heating the home, and for cooking, held out the promise of freedom from the social and ecological constraints that exist in wood-burning societies. What people did not realise was that they would be exchanging a dependence on their local village, and its supply of firewood, for a dependence on a global fossil fuel industry over which they had no personal control: on balance, a reduction in personal freedom rather than the reverse.

Now we are being told to believe in a fossil-fuel-free future in which we will have all the energy we need for our homes from sun and wind power (plus some nuclear), but, even if one believes this to be possible, it does not bring us any closer to personal energy autonomy. The wind and solar industries are truly global, and rely upon technologies, and raw materials, far beyond the scope of even individual countries to supply on their own.

Ironically, perhaps, it has never been easier to cut and collect one's own firewood. Even if one is not skilled in the use of hand tools, a top-quality chainsaw is relatively cheap compared to the cost of heating a home; just a few days work with such a machine can generate enough wood for a year. Of course, spending the next few weeks cutting wood with a chainsaw will not in itself restore the ecological balance and the village community traditionally found in a firewood-dependent society, but it could be a step in the right direction, and would restore an element of energy autonomy to your home.

Gareth Lewis


Splitting
Firewood
samuel