



A dispute over a
Bowen Island playing field
illustrates the complexities of planning
for an “earth-friendly” future

Turf War

BY JAMES GLAVE
PORTRAITS BY MARINA DODIS

It began with a piece of sidewalk chalk. In mid July, an anonymous citizen picked up a fat stick of gypsum and scrawled a public appeal along the concrete curb next to the cedars, poplars, and hemlocks that stand in front of the elementary school on Bowen Island. “Please, please, save these trees,” it read.

The 13 second-growth trees were indeed on death row; in fact, the people had already officially bid them farewell. A delegation of Squamish First Nation members in ceremonial dress had stopped by a couple of weeks earlier to bless the trees and thank them for the decades they’d spent purifying the air and shading the children who had for years played beneath their boughs. That was supposed to be the end of it. Community closure? Check.

But something about the plaintive bit of graffiti stuck. Citizens who’d missed the newspaper articles about the project—and all the other public notifications that had been circulated—suddenly started paying attention. More signs appeared, fashioned from cardboard and scraps of plywood. The new notices had an angry, defiant tone. One alleged a local government cover-up: “Municipal lies, integrity dies.”

Driven by passion and armed by Google, an outraged electorate began meeting online to compare notes about the new facility to be built where the trees stood. They concluded that while in operation, it could potentially release carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide—all within plain sight of the school. Whoa, Nellie. All of a sudden this wasn’t just about trees coming down. It was about *cancer*.

Petitions were drawn up. People threatened to lie down in front of the machines. A municipal councillor who had voted to approve the project now circulated a protest poem condemning it. One fellow cut a YouTube video, in which a four-year-old child slowly gripped a chain-link fence to the soundtrack of a Bob Marley protest song.

It all came to a head at a standing-room-only public hearing, where worried and offended parents stood up to address the municipal council upon whose vote the project would live or die. “This is absolutely insane,” stated one. “I am not prepared to bargain with my child’s life.”

Meanwhile, out on the main road, a small plywood protest sign—tacked to a power pole—succinctly captured the community’s collective end-of-days anxiety. It read, simply, “Hope.”

IT WAS A FAMILIAR AND HEARTENING STORY: townspeople unite at the eleventh hour to shut down a looming toxic threat hiding in plain sight. Seven-year-olds were deployed as props, friendships strained, characters impugned. The stakes were high; the cause, just. There was just one key difference. The facility at the centre of this particular uprising wasn’t a nuclear or pesticide plant. It wasn’t even a small waste-incinerator pilot project. It was an artificial-turf soccer field.

Well, to be fair, it wasn't just a soccer field. It would be used for Ultimate matches as well. And volleyball. And field hockey sometimes, too. But then, this is Bowen Island, where the locals consider themselves not only significantly more earthwise than their mall-happy brethren across the channel in West Vancouver, but also proud and defiant defenders of the kind of sleepy rural atmosphere that you might otherwise need to motor an hour east of Chilliwack to find.

In one sense, the *Queen of Capilano* is a regular B.C. Ferries tub, logging 15 or so round trips a day between Horseshoe Bay and Snug Cove. But the ship is also a kind of time machine. Walk up the ramp on the Bowen side and you enter an authentically scruffy village fronting a forest of maple, cedar, and fir. Eagles soar overhead, salmon thrash up the fish ladder, herons nest behind the library, and four-point bucks browse the salal by the softball field. The island is a throwback to a simpler time. With the exception of the Irlly building centre, there is not a franchise in sight; every last business is locally owned and operated, including the gas station.

The 3,500 people who call "the Rock" home have traditionally welcomed eccentrics, artists, and writers. There are plenty of regular folks here—builders, brokers, nurses—but there is also a fair number square pegs about, including a clutch of "unschoolers" who have opted their kids out of structured education, and an assortment of iconoclasts, PhD geniuses, and misfits who might otherwise get lost in the urban shuffle. In this way it is a genuine community—the kind that Bob Rennie would give his left nut to distill, sanitize, and replicate for some rack 'em, stack 'em outfit fronting False Creek.

Bowen is a wonderful place to raise a family—it's peaceful to the point of boring, with a dozen deserted beaches, miles of forest trails, and a lily-white elementary school free of ESL challenges. More to the point, it doesn't look anything like suburbia. There is no convenience store. In fact, if you don't count the restaurants, the organic grocery and pharmacy, the post office, and a few other shops and services, there are few conveniences at all. All of which may help explain why it's the



last place one might expect to stumble across a green plastic playing field laid atop a base of crushed car tires that would last about a decade before being rolled up and tossed in a Dumpster.

"I did not move here to live in a place with fake grass," says Rob Bailey, a music producer who came to the island with his wife, Laurel, in 2001 to raise their family. "I moved away from that. We are supposed to be living in an environmentally responsible place."

Unfortunately, while Bowen Island is indeed supposed to be an environmentally responsible place, the reality is somewhat murkier. "The weakness of being a small community somewhat cut off from other things is that we tend not to be able to think more broadly," explains Alan Boniface, an architect who lives on the island and who led the team that developed the most recent master plan for Snug Cove.

Indeed, the so-called Field of Shame has forced a great deal of simmering anxiety and frustration to the surface in a place that once marketed itself to weekenders as the Happy Isle. Some of these demons are beyond the population's control; others lie closer to home. And while proven solutions may lie within grasp, sustainability's great bugbear—fear, entitlement, and good old-fashioned

denial—may be standing in the way of the best path forward.

That's why this is more than just a small-town tale. Because once you back out the picturesque wildlife, Bowen Island's struggles with an "earth-friendly" future really aren't just Bowen Island's. They're everyone's.

“Sustainability” is a wretched term, but it's one of the more useful keywords in the greener-living search engine. The metaphor most often deployed to convey its message of careful balance is the three-legged stool. To wit: our collective prosperity hinges on not just environmental considerations but also social and economic factors; take one of the three away, and the stool falls over. And by any objective measure, on leafy-green Bowen, all three legs of that footrest are cracking and splintering.

Until a few years ago, a young family like mine could still afford to buy a detached home on the Rock. No longer. Between 2003 and 2006, the median house price increased 95 percent—from \$314,000 to \$613,000. Couple this stat with the fact that the island's population is too small to support any meaningful economy, and you understand why between 40 and 60 percent of Bowen's workforce commutes to the city each day. On public transit, that's just shy of two hours each way.

Since these people are on the mainland already, many do their shopping there—goods are slightly cheaper when you don't have to factor in ferry rates that seem to inch up another buck or two every time a roadside bomb goes off somewhere on the far side of the world.

You can't blame Bowen's commuting

All in the same boat Clockwise from top right: architect Alan Boniface, lead author of "Eco-Village in the Park," aka the Snug Cove Master Plan; Naked Soapworks owner Laurel Bailey with music-producer husband Rob; biologist and former Bowen Island Conservancy chair Sue Ellen Fast at the island's historic Collins Farm property; Chamber of Commerce president Tim Rhodes; anti-turf activist Erin Little; glazier Stu Davidson with artist-partner partner Mara Brenner and kids Jasmine and Adin; municipal councillor and former David Suzuki Foundation staffer David Hocking; Emily van Lithe de Jude, artist, mother and "unschooler" of two children. Centre: author James Glave, who doesn't actually play soccer



workers for hitting Costco; everyone is struggling with monster mortgages and painful fuel costs, and a few bucks saved on a grocery-shop make a difference. But without hometown cash-register support—especially after September, once the tourists and summer residents have gone home—many of the shops and businesses struggle to make payroll. “The economy is unstable,” says Tim Rhodes, president of the Bowen Island Chamber of Commerce. “We have businesses that are barely surviving. Businesses that are important to our quality of life here, that are going to close by the end of this year.”

Big deal, right? Enterprises come and go. But Bowen’s economic core really only exists because of tourists—and there are no programs or facilities to welcome them after Labour Day. A 20-room inn project proposed for the island has languished in municipal red tape for the better part of a year. All around Snug Cove, the financial strain is showing. Holes need filling; paint is peeling. A bakery that burned down a couple of years back is now a weed-choked vacant lot. The village is starting to feel uncomfortably hard-bitten around the edges.

Wander Snug Cove and you’ll notice something else—a plethora of help-wanted signs. Because the housing stock is mostly expensive single-family homes, with just a smattering of apartments, there are few rental options for trade, retail, and service-sector workers. Cheap digs are in such short supply that many service jobs are now filled by people who commute from the mainland. But when the ferry costs more than you make in your first hour of work, why bother?

“Bowen is in danger of losing its valued diversity and becoming an island paradise accessible only to high-income groups,” notes a recent report by the Bowen Community Housing Association. That’s because the housing squeeze and the



Island commute The environmental price of living on Bowen is exacted every time islanders hop the ferry to the mainland. Total up all the happy motoring and the results are grim. As of a 2000 estimate of Metro Vancouver greenhouse-gas emissions, Bowen’s per capita carbon count was 17 tonnes. Coquitlam was a modest 6, Maple Ridge an even-better 5.4

fuel pinch are not only hitting this groovy green rock hard in the pocket-book—they’re eroding its soul, too.

To any islander under the age of 12, Mara Brenner is simply Miss Mara, the ballet teacher. Or the French teacher. An artist, performer, and adviser on umpteen volunteer boards, Brenner is a beloved member of the community. Each fall since 2003, she has single-handedly produced a semi-

underground theatre showcase called the Fridge Festival. She’s a free spirit, and one of the island’s creative forces majeure.

Brenner lives in a champagne-coloured 300-square-foot travel trailer parked on an undeveloped quarter-acre lot that she owns with her partner, Stu Davidson, the island’s only glazier. They have two kids, seven and eight. The trailer was intended as temporary accommodation but has stuck around longer than planned. “We came to the island 12 years ago, and as much as we would have liked to buy a

place then, we couldn’t, so we rented,” she recalls. “Our first place was \$800 a month for a three-bedroom.

“Then when Stu’s dad passed away a few years back, he left us enough for a down payment on this piece of land, so we bought it and stuck this trailer on it. We thought we could build. At any rate, we knew the lot was a good investment and that we could always go back to renting if we sell it.”

While the couple struggled to find a footing and start building, construction costs on Bowen spiralled steadily upward—driven not only by Metro Vancouver’s pre-2010 Olympics boom but also by a spike in McMansion and custom-second-home building. Rising fuel costs weren’t helping, either. “Now we can’t go back to renting,” she says, “because rent is \$2,000 a month. We can’t afford to build without a half-million mortgage, and we can’t afford to rent.”

Meanwhile, the neighbours—“old-time Bowen people,” Brenner says—keep calling the bylaw officer, complaining that the family is not legally allowed to occupy a trailer without a permanent foundation. So instead of shopping for cinder blocks, the family will leave for good. Brenner’s land is up for sale. “I am angry and frustrated, but mostly I am just sad,” she says, and begins to weep. “I wish I could stay. Not an option. I am in a survival position now.”

Is there any hope she can find a way to make it work? “I don’t think there’s any reversal on this trend,” she says. “I don’t want to be the last surviving artist on Bowen Island.”

Indeed, she isn’t the first to fold up her tent in recent times. She rattles off a long list of like minds who recently decamped for friendlier shores—like Corbin Keep, the cellist who painted houses for a living. He and his wife, Cyndi, left in the spring.

Though the kindergarten is jam-packed this fall with 42 kids enrolled, the realtors will tell you that young families are no longer home-shopping here. Every time a family of four moves out of the Cates Hill neighbourhood, it seems, a couple of cashed-out boomers move in to replace them. It’s no surprise, really; who else can afford \$735,000 for a three-bedroom bungalow?

Then there’s the environmental leg of the stool. Here again, Bowen isn’t as

Christie Chavez

10 Great Ideas

The New Green is about the confluence of unfettered imagination and practical smarts



Green Gold

IN ALL THEIR GRIMY, viscous glory, algae just may be paydirt for the clean-tech industry and the best alternative to our glutinous oil consumption. The eukaryote naturally excretes lipids and ethanol through its carbon-dioxide-eating photosynthetic process (which accounts for the greasy sheen on pond water). According to M. Glen Kertz, a plant physiologist and principal scientist at alternative-energy company Global Green Solutions, algae are the fastest-growing plants on the planet and sequester the greatest amount of carbon dioxide. In a joint venture with eco-tech developer Valcent, GGS has harnessed the plant’s potential by taking it out of the pond and cultivating various

strains in a vertical garden of sorts with hanging-plastic-bag “bioreactors.” Unlike other biofuel sources, the unicellular organism can grow virtually anywhere (no competition with food crops for arable land) and can be harvested daily (instead of once a year, like soybeans or corn). The limiting factor? Algae need a steady diet of CO₂, so scientists plan to construct their algae farms beside industrial plants in order to sequester noxious emissions and put them to profitable use. The idea isn’t new. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory conducted a \$25-million study on the algae biodiesel from 1978 until 1996, at which time funding was cut because biodiesel couldn’t compete with fossil fuel’s low prices.

Now researchers are revisiting their terminated work. The onslaught of algal-biofuel startups (Solix, Livefuels, Greenfuel) has everyone asking: who will make the oilgae industry profitable? Vertigro, GGS’s algae-to-biodiesel technology, may have pushed this project ahead of the rest. The companies, advised by Vancouver venture capital firm Sweetwater Capital, have poured about \$5 million into a six-acre Texas research facility, where they continue to parse out the best algae strains for biodiesel production. Kertz estimates that he can produce 33,000 gallons of algae oil from a single acre. In 2010, they expect to construct pilot plants in the U.S., Portugal, and South Africa.—Suzanne Mozes

green as it seems. “A lot of the island’s ruralness tends to get expressed as environmentalism,” explains David Hocking, a municipal councillor who worked at the David Suzuki Foundation between 1996 and last year. “But it’s not environmentalism. It’s not looking at the full range of issues.”

Chief among those issues is global warming, and here the community is a clear leader—but for all the wrong reasons. Per capita, Bowen boasts more miles of asphalt than any other jurisdiction in the province. Making matters worse, in an effort to preserve the island’s rural character, those roads were deliberately laid out in such a way—as spokes leading out from the village—that travel from one part of the island to another can involve miles of backtracking. In many places the streets are steep, narrow, winding, and lacking shoulders, making them less than friendly for cycling.

The standard zoning on Bowen is RR1, which allows one dwelling per 10 acres of land. And because the population is too thin to support much transit (there is a community bus on the island, but few take advantage of it), people drive. Many do so behind the wheel of pickups, minivans, SUVs, or—since AirCare’s tentacles do not extend into Howe Sound—oil-burning beaters.

Now add the *Queen of Capilano*, which islanders depend on for not just work but many services, like a trip to the optometrist or a new pair of jeans. Last year, B.C. Ferries retrofitted the vessel to better withstand unpleasant encounters with the submerged logs that bob about Howe Sound after winter storms.

Unfortunately, the vessel now consumes even more high-sulphur bunker fuel than it did before. All this helps explain why those who live on Bowen have an estimated carbon footprint of 17 tonnes per capita. For comparison, Coquitlam is 6 tonnes; Maple Ridge, 5.4.

This might seem like an abstract issue to the good people of Bowen, who tend to shop organic, compost their kitchen scraps, and—despite the absence of a curbside blue-box program—run a successful volunteer-driven recycling depot. But nature is sending the island plenty of clues about an imbalance that a million dutifully rinsed tin cans may not address.

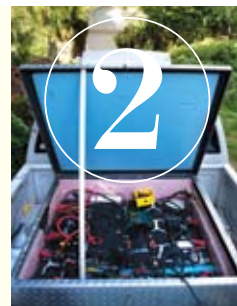
“It’s hard to measure the health of an ecosystem,” says Sue Ellen Fast, an environmental educator, naturalist, and chair of the island’s municipal Greenways Advisory Committee, which guides decisions on planned trails and parks. “One measure is species richness. We’re losing our salmon. This year, we know of one viable chick from eight heron nests around the island; last year we had lots, but only about five of them got to the water. The disappearing fish mean that the bald eagles seem to have switched to a bird-based diet. So the eagles are hammering away at the heron population.”

There are other clues that all is not well in the neighbourhood. “Take Pam Rocks, just up Howe Sound,” Fast says. “It used to have plenty of double-crested cormorant nests—that’s a red-listed spe-

cies,” she explains, referring to the birds’ protected status. “The year before last, someone went out there and found only 11 nests—and not all cormorants’.”

Of course, we can’t directly connect the dots between vanishing fins and feathers and climate change—nature is simply too complex. Overfishing and industrial effluence may have more to do with the upset. But one thing we can say for sure: when you run triage on the list of challenges we face as a bioregion, the Big Melt dwarfs all others. The science is solid, the time frame tight, the consequences dire.

The municipality has signed on to Premier Campbell’s Climate Action Plan—which requires about a 33-percent reduction in heat-trapping carbon emissions by 2020—but so far it has no real idea how to get results. Worse, nobody seems to want what may be the best hope for



Charge It!

GIVEN THAT THE COST of gas is a pressing issue, that reliance on foreign oil is politically charged, and that automobile emissions contribute heavily to the greenhouse effect, a vehicle that uses an alternative energy source is the holy grail. So far, the auto companies have made relatively little progress in freeing their cars—even hybrids—from the tyranny of the pump. Enter Rob Matthies, a Vancouver hobbyist who runs his 1982 GMC S-15 Sierra pickup on 18 discarded batteries, ganged together. The truck costs a mere three cents per kilometre to run. The end of the internal-combustion engine just moved a bit closer.—*Jesse Spencer*



Blowin' in the Wind

LAST SPRING, a merchant ship called the *Beluga SkySails* completed its 12,000-nautical-mile maiden voyage by sidling into a Norwegian port. The *Beluga* was powered by conventional means (oil) but featured one soaring addition: a 160-square-metre kite, rigged to its foredeck, had reduced the ship’s engine use by 20 percent. Wind is not only cheaper than oil; it’s also cleaner, and kinder to marine life. The technology, which is designed in Germany but inspires competitors around the globe, may soon make its way into Canada’s busiest port. (We trade \$53 billion in goods here annually.) Like much in the new green wave, kite-flying tankers are a return to the future. Even vintage schooners start to look modern: this summer, a 108-year-old, triple-masted ship delivered 30,000 bottles of wine to Dublin. SkySails kites saved the *Beluga* two-and-a-half tonnes of fuel and more than \$1,000 a day. Fuel prices are a large part of the operating costs of the shipping industry.—*Michael Harris*

fixing all three legs of Bowen's precariously balanced stool. Why? Because the one thing that may kick-start the island's flagging economy, help reverse affordability, downshift greenhouse-gas emissions, soften the coming blow of peak oil, and preserve miles of forest and meadow from the march of estate-home sprawl is the very thing that many Bowenites came here specifically to escape: density.

"You only have to go to Europe and see the way things were developed before the car," says Alan Boniface, lead author of the Snug Cove Master Plan, a municipally financed document that recommends the island concentrate growth in the sleepy village. "People there live together in tighter quarters," he says. "There's a bigger tax base and less burden on infrastructure because people are closer together. You can use sustainable district energy systems, you can do less heating, you have more walking and cycling, and less driving."

The plan doesn't envision banks of Vancouver-style high-rises. Instead, it suggests focusing the population increase—planners expect thousands of newcomers will arrive in the coming decades—in the village. There they might live in four-storey apartment buildings that step back from the street. It's classic walkable, mixed-use stuff, with retail below, homes above, and an Arts and Crafts, cedar-shake flavour all around. But as far as many islanders are concerned, you might as well try to tuck a Wal-Mart in behind the Bowmart.

"There's a real fear of change," says a respected islander who asked not to be named. "Density equates with urbanization—which equates with values where you don't know your neighbours, where you only look out for number one, where you take care of your own. People get pretty rabid about it, and nasty about it."

Indeed, if there is a powerful anti-apartment lobby in bucolic Howe Sound, it is the Bowen Island Eco-Alliance, a non-profit incorporated in 1992. Its 200 or so dues-paying members consider themselves staunch defenders of the island's unique character.


"People on Bowen Island want a connection to nature," explains Eric Sherlock, an Eco-Alliance board member. "They want ground-oriented development, where densification occurs slowly and organically."

Sherlock—who lives on the mainland


4

Second City


MOST GARAGES ON BACK LANES don't do much. They might house a car or two, or hide excess household junk. Jake Fry and Aaron Rosensweet believe those back-lane spaces can do much more. That's why they founded Smallworks, a company that replaces underachieving garages with tiny, custom-built homes. Ranging from 240-square-foot studios (roughly the size of a single-car garage) to 650-square-foot spaces with a loft sleeping area, most of their homes feature large glass doors and windows and smart cabinetry that's built into benches and walls. The homes are highly sustainable, too: they're made entirely from Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood and other local materials, and offer on-demand water heaters, soy-based insulation, high-efficiency wall panels, and radiant in-floor heating. And one of the greatest environmental benefits, of course, is simply that they're compact. "It's such a simple step, but it will have a very significant impact," says Fry. "And they perform really well in the neighbourhoods. They just disappear." Fry and Rosensweet expected interest in their company to come from home buyers who were priced out of the market but could own a property with friends. Most of the calls they're getting, however, are from professionals who want a second house for aging parents or adult kids, or from seniors who want to add to their incomes by building small rental houses. Prices, from studio to deluxe double-garage model ring in at \$250 per square foot, and that includes everything from handling the city permits to the finishing touches, inside and out.—*Jennifer Van Evra*




Laneway housing adapts existing garages, maintaining the old footprint



Power is pulled from the back alley, so there's no intrusion onto the street



Construction is greatly simplified by the use of prefabricated walls and roof



and visits his Bowen cottage on weekends—is careful to point out that the group doesn't oppose density per se. But he does advocate a more gradual, gentler interpretation of the idea: "Single detached homes become duplexes, which become townhouses—all retaining the same general character, all with ground-level entry.

"People want to experience nature in their daily life as part of their housing," he adds. "People living in harmony with nature—and not bottled up in an urban high-rise—are going to be happier. There will be less youth alienation, less civic passivity. There will be great harmony and a close, caring community."

A lot of islanders agree with him. It's easy to argue for so-called smart growth—compact, mixed-use communities—when the before picture is a blighted suburban strip mall. It's a tougher sell against a backdrop of winding country lanes overhung with maple trees. But what so many of the island's architects and planners wish for their community is that it have enough amenities and opportunities to work and play that its residents need not leave the island unless they want to.

Why is this idea of change and growth so difficult? "We have a very special place here," explains Erin Little, a long-time islander and one of the more passionate campaigners against the artificial-



Take it all in.

Harbourfront dining

Al Fresco patio

Relaxing lounge

Live Jazz



PAN PACIFIC

Vancouver

Tel 604.662.8111

visit panpacific.com/vancouver

turf project. “I wish I could go back in time, to even 10 years ago. It has changed so much.”

It’s a common lament. “Bowen used to be perfect. Why can’t it stay the same?” To which municipal councillor David Hocking has a harsh but honest response: “We live next door to one of the world’s great cities. Fuel is going up, along with the associated costs of using fuel, such as the carbon tax. The lifestyle we’ve had here is going to disappear. And the only people who will be left if we don’t do anything are those who are rich enough to commute or to afford these homes.”

Hocking undertook a rigorous carbon assessment, from cradle to grave, of the proposed artificial-turf playing field. He adapted data compiled for another turf project in Ontario, and ran numbers that factored in the removal of the trees and the carbon emissions associated with the turf’s manufacture and eventual disposal. Averaged out across its life span, the plastic field would pump about 2.75 tonnes of equivalent carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year. When Hocking did the math on the emissions that would be saved if the island’s soccer moms didn’t make hundreds of trips each year to the soccer pitches of West Vancouver, he came up with a startlingly bigger number: 13.2 tonnes. The turf wasn’t a perfect solution, in other words, but atmospherically speaking it was the better option.

“From a carbon-dioxide perspective,” Hocking told the packed public hearing, “the loss of the trees and the use of the synthetic field so that we can have these kinds of facilities on Bowen Island offers an enormous advantage.”

Aesthetics, of course, are another matter. A week after the hearing—officially for financial reasons, but undeniably also due to political pressure—council effectively killed the turf scheme. It shuffled the project into legal purgatory by requiring that it meet a number of conditions relating to cost and location it was unlikely to achieve.

The Snug Cove Master Plan met a similar fate. “It’s a reference document that is not being referenced,” says Alan Boniface. Eric Sherlock puts it more bluntly: “We killed that one. It’s off the table, because of an outcry by the Eco-Alliance in the form of lobbying to councillors, letters to the editor—

it was that reaction that caused the municipality to shelve the plan.”

The people won. The trees were saved. The island’s character was preserved. And Bowen Island’s future was postponed for another day.

On a warm Saturday evening in August, Emily van Lithe de Jude holds her annual invitation-only Rickshaw Masquerade—a pagan-friendly potluck garden party that celebrates the early harvest. Like Mara Brenner, van Lithe de Jude and her family live in a converted trailer—this one on a grassy five-acre parcel owned by her parents, near the end of a quiet country lane. Also like Brenner, van Lithe de Jude is an artist and mother of two. She argued passionately for affordable housing. “I’m only here at all because of my parents’ generosity,” she told the room.

But this evening isn’t about politics. It’s about celebrating friends and local foods—“about strengthening the bonds that make our community whole,” as she put it. Kids run feral all over the place. The bartender makes mojitos with mint pulled out of the nearby duck pond. Someone offers special cakes, “for grown-ups only.” Everyone wears festive masks, all bright feathers and glitter. One fellow sports a purple velvet cape, old-school aviator goggles, and a flexible plastic tube on his head. It’s the very essence of the Bowen Island underground—eclectic, bohemian, and entirely unpackaged.

The hostess asks everyone to join hands. About 40 masked islanders link up in a giant circle, and she begins to sing a song she wrote for the occasion.

Let the sun keep burning, and the earth keep turning; holding hands, we will dance into the moonlight.

Let the green earth feed us, and cool water relieve us; singing free, joyfully, into the moonlight.

The guests join in, then van Lithe de Jude leads them in a traditional spiral dance. Holding hands, the partygoers weave in a tight circle—like a snake coiling in on itself—then unwind, brushing past one another, singing into the cool night air as the swallows join them overhead.