

Ten Things Learned Living Off-grid in Canada

For two years we travelled the country to find off-gridders, and studied their ways of life.

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It was in 2011 that I first understood what off-grid living really meant. Before then I had heard people claim they were off-grid if they switched their cell phone off for a day or two. Other people thought anyone who lived in remote places was off-grid. None of that made any sense. It was when I first visited British Columbia's [Lasqueti Island](#) and later the floating home community of [Clayoquot Sound](#) that I got a real taste of the off-grid life: life, that is, in a place disconnected from large natural gas and electricity networks.

For the next two years, photographer/videographer Jonathan Taggart and I travelled close to 105,000 kilometres together across Canada to find people who live off-the-grid and visit them in their homes. Occasionally we lived with them for a short period of time. Sometimes we followed them around as they fished, harvested, collected wood and built or fixed their homes. And we too practiced living in off-grid homes and cabins for short stretches of time. Overall we visited about 100 homes and interviewed about 200 off-grid Canadians, as well as many American and British expats living in Canada. We managed to find off-gridders in every single province and territory, and through our [book and forthcoming film](#) we narrated our travels and chronicled the experiences, challenges, inventions, aspirations and ways of life of a few of them.

To make our travels and encounters with off-gridders possible, Jonathan and I had to fly on dozens of planes, ride snowmobiles, paddle kayaks and canoes, walk in snowshoes, ride ATVs, sail on ferries and small boats, bike and trek across many beautiful regions of our country. Our encounters with off-gridders young and old, far and near and rich and poor inspired us to reflect not only about off-grid life in itself, but also to question our collective, modern, *on-grid* way of life. The lessons we learned are about disconnection as much as they are about everything we all take for granted about the modern condition and its comforts, conveniences and connectivity.

To end our Tyee occasional [series](#), we thought we would share with readers 10 simple lessons.

1. An off-grid home is not a hands-off home

Our modern homes are designed to run themselves, free of our involvement. They are also meant to shelter us from the outside and separate us from nature, with a guarantee that power, heat and water will flow unrestrained under all weather conditions.

Off-grid homes, instead, demand that you take care of them. They require you to become involved in how efficiently they run. They expect you to be aware of how they work and why they work, and sometimes why they don't. They need you to be patient with them, to wait for resources to become available and for technologies to be adapted to local conditions and sudden changes.



A builder works on an off-grid home in Quebec. Photo by Jonathan Taggart.

2. Off-grid life is simple, but not uncomplicated

One of the great appeals of off-grid living is that it allows you to practice a form of voluntary simplicity based in frugality, sustainability, self-sufficiency and resilience. The “voluntary” part refers to a deliberate act of choice: an awakening leading to a lifestyle conversion. The awakening consists of gaining the critical awareness that global society has spun out of control. Simplicity consists of voluntary choices, such as to buy less, consume sustainably and ethically, eat more local and natural foods, reduce clutter, recycle and re-use, practice creativity, take a more active role in self-education, use renewable energy resources, prefer smaller-scale forms of living, and develop skills based on the values of self-reliance.

Off-gridders are simplifiers. But the first thing they will teach you is that simplicity does not mean living free of complications. Rather, it means embracing challenges and living genuinely and free of pretensions.

3. Off-gridders are people like you and me

Most Canadians who live off-grid did not choose to move off the grid; their local utility made the choice easy for them. It did so by making the connection of their homes to the grid too expensive.

Rural properties far from the nearest electricity pole need to pay a lot of money to stretch the grid all the way to their outside walls -- as much as half a million dollars. Who would do that and then pay monthly bills on top?

In two years we met all kinds of these people: single men, single women, young families, retirees, professionals, farmers, artists, expats and individuals young and old.

4. You don't need to live in the bush to live off-grid

Most off-grid homes are in rural areas, where availability of land makes it easier to collect (and burn) wood, tap into groundwater, dispose of waste through septic fields or composting systems and even grow food. The old rule that you need at least 10 acres to live off-grid isn't a bad rule at all.



Waiting for wind in Alberta. Photo by Jonathan Taggart.

But a 10-acre property isn't a cheap buy in some places, especially in areas like the West Coast or in highly popular ex-urban areas nearby Canada's major cities. So, for some, living off-grid in a small lot in the middle of a city may work very well instead. The sun shines in

Calgary or Ottawa just like it does in rural Alberta or Ontario, and firewood can be found aplenty and gratis in the discard piles of construction sites. Besides, when you live off-grid in a city you don't need to have a truck to drive to work or to the grocery store -- a bus or a bike might even end up giving you the carbon footprint edge over environmentally-sensitive but car-dependent rural off-gridders.

5. The whole of Arctic Canada is off the grid

The expression “off-grid” is typically used in the context of single detached dwellings, but it can also be used to refer to entire communities disconnected from a broader regional infrastructure (like Jasper!)

Interestingly, most of Canada -- as far as size of territory goes -- is off the grid. Arctic towns and hamlets depend on diesel imported from the south to produce heat and power. Contained in large “tank farms” located at the edge of town these massive holding tanks will remind you at first sight how much a comfortable domestic life can cost.

On the other hand, the “energy tourist” might find great delight in hiking along unusual off-grid infrastructure such as Inuvik's utilidor; a network of pipes snaking its way above ground (rather than under) in order to keep its neck above the permafrost.



The ‘utilidor’ in the Northwest Territories. Photo by Jonathan Taggart.

6. Off-grid life is neither uncomfortable nor inconvenient (though it requires serious adjustment)

Off-gridders like domestic comfort as much as you and I do.

Many people wrongly believe that off-grid homes are cold, dark, shaky and damp. Quite the contrary. Off-grid homes are vastly more efficient than yours or mine: better insulated, more-responsibly heated, more-intelligently-lit, and better designed to take advantage of passive solar energy.

Off-grid may seem inconvenient. After all, you might not be able to run the washing machine if the sun hasn't been shining or the wind hasn't been blowing. You might need to chop your own firewood. And you might have to let it mellow if it's yellow.

But what's more convenient than picking food you have grown yourself, just outside your front step? And what's more convenient than cooking it with the free solar energy that fuels a sun oven? The truth is that a visit to an off-grid home will force you to re-think the very meanings of comfort and convenience.



A swank looking solar home in Alberta. Photo by Jonathan Taggart.

7. Living off-grid will teach you a few skills you may have forgotten

The corporate world is there to take care of you and me. Whenever we need something, we can always buy it. And if we need the services of a trades professional, we just need to Google a phone number.

Off-grid living pulls you away from a commodified world of hyper-specialization and pushes you to become a Jack or Jane-of-all-trades. Generating your own power forces you to learn to understand electricity, to monitor consumption, to maintain systems. Growing food requires you to not only understand how to plant and harvest, but also how to preserve. Conserving energy and water teaches you to dry clothes without a dryer or how to wash and clean more efficiently.

And then there is building. Though, ironically, many off-gridders can be found at Ikea looking for energy-conserving lighting solutions, most of them build their own home or become deeply involved in their design.

8. Off-grid living isn't for everybody

Living off-grid is a lot of work. It is very difficult for two partners who work full-time outside the home to live off-grid. Or at least it can be very expensive to do so (as more money will need to be spent on a bigger and more reliable system, or on professionals with the time and skills to maintain and repair that home).

Living off-grid on one's own might also be too difficult for people who are not physically able to take care of certain chores (firewood-chopping easily comes to mind).

But ultimately off-grid living is not for people who expect things NOW, who want no involvement in the way a home works, who are not ready to adapt and make the occasional sacrifice to consumption habits, and who are not interested in understanding basic principles of ecology or mechanics.

With all this said, off-grid households need never sacrifice on necessities. Of the 100 homes we visited, 98 had Internet (very few, on the other hand, had cable or satellite television)!

9. Off-grid living means living with, not "in," a place

It rains on the West Coast. A lot. Our rain runs down hills and mountains, making creeks and streams that can easily be turned into a source of micro hydro-electricity. Very small, very cheap waterwheels have a nearly insignificant impact on the local ecology and can be assembled and maintained by most people right in their (hilly) backyard. To boot, they produce electricity year-round.

Micro-hydro, however, is almost unheard of in the rest of Canada, where flat land, seasonally-drying water sources or freezing weather can make it an impractical solution to local electricity generation.

Nevertheless, the rest of Canada has a great deal of renewable resources we West Coasters relatively lack. Solar radiation maps of the country show that southeastern Ontario and southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan are ideal spots for getting the best out of photovoltaic panels (cold temperatures do not affect production). And much of the East Coast is an ideal environment to reap the clean energy benefits of wind.



Solar panels in Nova Scotia. Photo by Jonathan Taggart.

Off-grid living means living with whatever the land and sky provide, when they provide it, and consuming less when resources are not as available.

10. Off-grid living isn't the magic bullet solution to the world's problems

Off-grid living can teach volumes about ethical and responsible consumption, resource conservation, sustainability, resilience and adaptation. Yet, it is not THE answer to global energy scarcity.

It makes little sense, from a planning and engineering perspective, to isolate ourselves into small, separate, fully-independent atom-like homes. It makes more sense to pool and share resources whenever possible, and to all play a fair role in doing so. Off-grid living can then teach us about learning that role, about what it means to do our part.

Our energy futures won't be characterized by a simple, magic solution but rather by many diverse renewable resource technologies sensitive to local conditions and responsive to changing needs and intelligent, responsible demand. It is in this sense that off-grid living can be understood: as an experiment, happening today, to solving the problems that we will all need to face tomorrow.