

it's a good (zero-carbon) life!

James Macfarlane steps off grid to learn how one eco-couple have created a zero-carbon home – located on the blustery lands of the Shetland Isles.

Can we live zero-carbon lives? A challenge, perhaps, but, with a world population of over seven billion clustering around what is left of our natural resources, we need to try. Realisation of the gravity of the situation has drawn an increasing number of people toward living in a sustainable manner. The current rate of resource consumption needs to be slowed and renewable resources around us must be utilised.

Michael and Dorothy Rea, both in their sixties, are pioneering the way, and combining it with a love for the Shetland Isles. Wishing to leave behind their hectic lives in England, they constructed a zero-carbon house up on the tiny Island of Unst.

Back in 1983 the couple had embraced their love for this remote setting by buying an old dilapidated house. The purchase was completed on the final day of their holiday in that year but, sadly, after a hurricane, the house was destroyed - leaving them with a blank canvas. In the face of defeat by the elements, they focussed attention on constructing their new home. This came in the form of an off-the-shelf timber kit and was constructed, amidst gale force winds, in four and a half days. "This was a record for Shetland," reminisces Michael, who has fond memories of those early days. Today, with the eyes of the world's media upon them, they continue to face the many challenges that the Shetland Isles throw their way.

On first glancing over the neatly-constructed timber frame, and uplifting mellow shades of paint, you might, perhaps, find yourself pleasantly surprised; zero-carbon living doesn't necessarily involve inhabiting a space-age construction in discord with its surroundings. In fact, it fits rather nicely with Unst's wind swept landscape: a simple shed-like construction nestling snugly between a loch and a one-track road. "When we designed the house we had to choose a structure that would fit the environment," says Michael. This respect for the natural

surroundings has existed for thousands of years on the island - a recognition that both humankind and nature can work in harmony to sustain each other. Over the blustery expanse of the Shetland Isles there is no hiding from the full force of mother-nature, but as the 100mph wind whips up around the timber-frame it spins the blades of their wind turbine, generating electricity and powering those familiar home comforts such as a cooker and dishwasher.

With the use of sustainable technologies in Shetland, the Rea's are setting the standard for a future lifestyle that many of us might adopt. Michael's personal opinion is that, to live in a zero-carbon way, the burning of fuel needs to be avoided. The couple harness energy from those renewable resources surrounding them: hot water is obtained from an air-to-water heat pump, but most of their heat is captured from the sun itself. Argon gas between the panes gives the windows radiator-like qualities, juicing the sun of its warmth. Once inside heat is captured and recycled using a heat-renewal system. The house itself is heavily insulated preventing any moisture or draft entering and keeping the interior nice and toasty throughout the winter months.

Sustainable food production, in this remote and harsh environment, was one part of the project that Michael and Dorothy were determined to prove was possible. Their vegetable patch provides the couple with a variety of produce including: carrots, onions and cauliflowers - grown in box structures to protect them from the elements. Community spirit plays a big part in their endeavours and the couple collect waste vegetables - used for compost - from their neighbours, in exchange for vegetables grown in their garden. This harmonious circle of giving and receiving is something that they aim to develop



further. Future projects, including growing food without the use of bought in compost, are underway which they hope will create jobs in their local community. "I am amazed that produce like spring onions is shipped from Egypt when it could easily be grown here," says Michael.

The Rea's lifestyle has completely changed but the couple never stop working; more touches to the house are being planned

as we speak. "It does not matter how old you are," declares Michael, with passion, "if you have a good idea, stick with it and, if combined with self-belief, it will happen." What a fabulous perspective to adopt as we step into the New Year; change is possible when we have faith in ourselves and others. But there is an underlying urgency: "There is no way that we can go on consuming natural resources at such a fast rate," claims Michael. He hopes more of us will place a stronger importance on making ethical, eco-choices in our everyday lives. The



technology harnessed up in Shetland can be adapted anywhere and these two modest eco-warriors are sure that if they can do it, anyone can!

off-grid living websites

zerocarbonhouse.com: The Rea's own website detailing the project & technology used in their home

self-sufficiency-guide.com: Information on all aspects of sustainable living from energy to food production

towards-sustainability.co.uk: Tackles sustainable issues



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