

# The Ohu Movement in New Zealand: An Experiment in Government Sponsorship of Communal Living in the 1970s

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New Zealand is a country of great contrasts; long and thin, it stretches from the sub-tropical to the sub-Antarctic, has mountains that are snow covered all year round, lush vegetation from which it is possible to step onto the only two growing glaciers in the world, and barren hillsides kept that way by millions of sheep. Settled by Maoris some thousand years ago, Europeans became aware of it late in the period of discovery, and Europeans only settled it in the last century.

Among the earliest colonists were people intending to create a Utopia out of this new land, some wanting a conservative, somewhat hierarchical one, others wanting an egalitarian one. Initially, the conservatives were the more successful, but from the beginning the hierarchy was supposed to be without the very top, an aristocracy of wealth, or the very bottom, the poor. Hence, there was egalitarianism even in the conservative Utopia.

In the early years of this century, New Zealand gained a reputation as a center of serious social experimentation on a large scale. Edward Bellamy and Henry George were widely read, the single tax was seriously debated, and land nationalization was put into practice with the intent, carried out at least in part, to break up large estates.<sup>1</sup>

New Zealanders seriously tried to create a society without class conflict and many believed that they succeeded in creating a Utopia. But for some of a later generation, the Utopia created by their parents and grandparents grew stultifying, and they became convinced that they lived in a deadening dystopia rather than the good society they were told they inhabited. In 1951, James

K. Baxter (1926-1972), New Zealand's most famous poet, wrote,

I believe that our island is in fact an unjust, unhappy one, where human activity is becoming progressively more meaningless. The mere statement of this observation has a salutary effect. The pioneering dream was of a Just City. If we suppose that this dream has been realized we condemn ourselves to the ultimate nonentity of false prophets. If we state the truth (that we now live in an Unjust City) we thus purge ourselves of a lie commonly held to be truth and begin to speak meaningfully."<sup>2</sup>

This sense of the difference between the dream and the perceived reality led Baxter to become a spokesperson for the disaffected, to found an influential commune and live in others. At one stage, every time Baxter settled in one place, a commune formed around him.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that communes were thought of as an appropriate response to social problems points to the existence of a communal tradition in New Zealand. But except for the Riverside Community, now 55 years old, and Centrepont, nineteen years old but apparently coming to the end of its life, New Zealand's communal experiments are generally little known even in New Zealand. This is unfortunate because it has been the location of a number of significant communities like Beeville, an anarchist community founded in the Thirties that lasted for about twenty-five years, and Wilderland, a direct offshoot of Beeville, founded in 1965 and still flourishing today.<sup>4</sup>

The history of intentional communities in New Zealand goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century, not long after the first European settlers arrived, but the most important communal movement in New Zealand developed in the third quarter of the twentieth century, and particularly at the end of that period, in the mid-'70s. At that time, influenced both by European and North American communal experiments and by a growing recognition of the long tradition of Maori communalism in New Zealand, many New Zealanders considered the possibility of communal living, and a substantial number joined or formed communities.

And, remarkably, the New Zealand government established a program intended to provide public land to people wanting to form communes. The story of this program, met with enthusiasm and high hopes followed by rapid disillusionment, has never been told. It is a story of idealism against bureaucracy, naivete against political realities, weakness against power. But the idealistic, naive, and weak were not easily defeated, and one of the communities formed still exists twenty-two years later. It is a story that can tell us a lot about the hopes for a better life held by people, mostly in their twenties, in a country long known for its social experimentation and egalitarianism, even though to the young the period of experimentation seemed long in the past. Egalitarianism seemed conformity, even repression, and many young people wanted to recreate the dreams that their parents thought had already been fulfilled, but what the parents had achieved seemed deadily dull, and what the youth wanted could, many of them believed, be found on the land in commu-

nal groups living and working together.

### The Origins

According to an official brochure, "The first indication that the Government was considering a scheme of this nature came in August 1973, when the Minister of Lands [in the Labour government], Hon. Matiu Rata, said he was considering the possibility of allowing young people to lease Crown land so they could try living off the land in a communal organization away from the noise and pace of the city."<sup>5</sup> All published reports suggest that the idea originated with either Prime Minister Norman Kirk (1923-1974) or Rata, but, while producing no alternate names, informal discussions with some of those involved has raised questions about either as the source. Kirk made the first statement that led to the establishment of the scheme in an interview with the *Australian Financial Review*, in which he referred to the Israeli kibbutz as a possible model for New Zealand. This article compares Kirk with Gough Whitlam, the Prime Minister of Australia, much to Kirk's benefit—"Kirk is visionary, yet down to earth; Whitlam is pragmatic, yet rhetorical."<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, at this early point, Kirk seems to have a specific vision; "He says he intends to start off with three kibbutzim into which younger New Zealanders could go for a period as a means of contributing with their own hands and sweat to the building of a nation."<sup>7</sup> Kirk's vision of these communities as a temporary stage in the lives of young New Zealanders got lost as the idea developed, but it is closer to the reality of most communities than the dream of a permanent membership that was at the base of many of the actual proposals that the idea brought forth.

On 10 October 1973, Margaret Hayward, Kirk's personal secretary, noted in her *Diary of the Kirk Years*,

Although Mr K has been pushing kibbutz-type collectives as an alternative life-style he's having trouble getting the idea across to the New Zealand public. But he's got through to Peter Robinson of the *Australian Economic Review* who noted Mr K 'returned again and again' to the need for young New Zealanders to contribute with their own hands and sweat to the building of the nation.... He saw a kibbutz-type environment as an antidote to the ills of modern society, as well as a means of showing people the virtues of a simpler life.

Yesterday Mr K made it official policy. He announced that Mat Rata as Minister of Lands, and Arthur Faulkner who is Acting Minister of Lands while Mat is convalescing, would look into the possibility of making Crown land available for people of all ages to participate in settlements run on similar lines to the kibbutz system in Israel. He did not particularly like the word kibbutz but so far could find no Maori equivalent.<sup>8</sup>

Kirk, Rata, and Faulkner became outspoken supporters of the program. On 1 December, Hayward added, quoting Kirk:

The main theory behind this kibbutz idea is to let young people work out a life-

style that isn't determined by money.

I want to see real equal opportunity being shared and to throw the door open for people. We can wipe out this personal housing backlog in three years if local bodies will co-operate.

The government can't change people's life-style. But it can create the opportunity to let people work it out for themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The Ohu Advisory Board said Kirk's reasons for the proposal were ... mainly spiritual. From the start he spoke about the need to involve people more deeply in the affairs of the community as a whole.

He said that in the last few years a lot of young people had been saying that the Establishment had gone soft, that it had lost its ideas and its drive. The people who said this, those who were disillusioned with the way things were going, were to be given an opportunity to see if they could do what they said should be done. They were being given this opportunity because there was a place in nation-building for them.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein Rata spoke to the Ohu Working Party in August 1974, saying,

The over-emphasis on the gross national product, perpetual greed, speculation, profiteering, unethical practices and the cult of individualism can only result in the further alienation of those who seek a return to community and group feelings. I share with other Government members the hope that the Ohu will, in some way, lead the way to a more concerned society and recapture anew the deep links of people and land.

There is hope, too, that it will soften the harsher aspects of much of New Zealand's life style and result in a finer quality of life. Since many individuals and groups have expressed the desire to adopt different life styles, and as some are already living this way, we cannot neglect the opportunity of letting New Zealanders and their friends recapture the satisfaction based on cooperation, mutual assistance and communalism, which had been the force which motivated both the first Maori and the first European settlers of this land....

It is not meant to be a cheap method of developing marginal lands—it is meant to give an opportunity to New Zealanders to experience the earth, the country, and each other in a new fraternal way.<sup>n</sup>

### **The Early Stages**

Much happened between these two statements of intent with their positive sense of the possibilities of the scheme. In late November and early December 1973 someone prepared at least two position papers outlining alternative approaches to characterizing the scheme. The earliest, dated 20 November 1973, suggests that the government provide on site training in agriculture and other practical skills needed by community members. It also provides details on proposed community life that clearly assumes a community with a fairly large membership. The second, dated 3 December, suggests that only

two communities be established initially, one on the North Island and one on the South Island. Again, this document assumes a fairly large community and argues that a successful community will need a range of ages. A third, undated document clearly from roughly the same time period (before the word "Ohu" was adopted) provides a detailed analysis of the Israeli kibbutzim drawing both positive and negative lessons for the New Zealand experiments.

I expect but cannot prove that these documents were prepared for a meeting of government Ministers early in December 1973 to set the broad outlines of the scheme. The official statement of the process is that Arthur Faulkner, Acting Minister of Lands and a supporter of the scheme, developed guidelines within the department, and,

In early December it was agreed that the main objective of the settlements would be to offer to the participants an alternative way of life. The land would not have to be developed in any specific way, nor would there be an obligation to create an economic unit that was fully efficient in terms of normal agricultural development. On the agricultural side, settlements would probably aim for self-sufficiency or even a slight surplus, and other activities such as cottage crafts could develop; but these decisions would be made by the participants.

It was decided that the Government should be prepared to lease Crown land to groups but the choice of the actual areas of land would be worked out with the intending participants. Regulation of the affairs of communities would be the concern of the communities themselves; they should establish their own rules rather than be tied rigidly to Government guidelines. "

Young people greeted the announcement with great enthusiasm. A meeting attended by over 100 people was called at Elsdon, Porirua, just north of Wellington, the national capital, on 13 February 1974; invited to the meeting were all the people who had written to the Prime Minister after his initial announcement, and most of the people who attended were already involved in communal experiments somewhere in the country. At the meeting, Acting Minister of Lands, Arthur Faulkner is reported to have said that it was the government's job

... to find ways of helping. We may not agree with the way you want us to help but we don't say no. We say no you can't do that but you can do this. That's the sort of approach that we are making to it. Since I will probably be involved, and my four officials, we will do the very level best we can. On the other hand we must avoid appearing to give you a preference. It is just not on politically, not at all.<sup>13</sup>

Although people attending who I have been able to ask do not remember this, a report of the meeting states that it was announced that six to eight sites ranging in size from about 700 to 2800 acres had already been identified as available.<sup>14</sup> Given the later history, this seems unlikely, but, if true, it would have provided a solid basis for the disillusionment when sites turned out to be hard to find.

These proposals met, as I have said, with great enthusiasm and high

expectations. But on 7 March, Margaret Hayward wrote,

Arthur Faulkner, still Acting Minister of Lands, has announced that the proposed communes will be called 'Ohu'—a Maori word meaning to achieve something 'by means of friendly help and work'. But press officer Peter Kelsey, who has transferred from our office to work on the scheme, of which he is an enthusiastic advocate, tells me the Lands and Survey Department has decided that applicants should have only land designated as suitable for nothing else, 'and that's pretty bad land to go on to'.<sup>15</sup>

The Ohu scheme appears to be a classic case of an idea coming from the top levels of government and being almost immediately undermined by the bureaucracy. Although there is evidence that Faulkner and Rata later tried to overcome this situation, I contend that at this point, four months after its initial announcement, the Department of Lands and Survey deliberately killed the Ohu scheme.

Still, the enthusiastic people anxious to join the scheme did not know that their hopes had already been rendered virtually impossible, supporters worked hard to make the scheme work, and they met with such enthusiasm and support from the target community that some things happened despite Lands and Surveys. As a result the bureaucracy went through the motions of supporting policy while making sure that the communities failed, and the fact that one still exists later is testimony to the strength of the feeling the scheme touched.

### **The Working Party**

At the Elsdon meeting a working party of 15 was formed, including members of established communities and people who wanted to create new communities. The Working Party invited groups to submit proposals, and, between April and August 1974 it met four times and twenty-five groups were approved. One community, Sunburst, had started, no others had found land, and one had already disbanded.

The last meeting of the Working Party was held in September 1974, and, in December, The Ohu Advisory Board, chaired by Peter Kelsey replaced it. The Working Party recommended an Advisory Committee composed of four specified representatives of Ohu groups, the Director-General of Lands, and Peter Kelsey. It also emphasized that any changes in the composition of the Advisory Committee should be made by the committee.<sup>16</sup> While the composition of the actual Advisory Committee cannot be determined, it is known to have not followed this model.

### **Brochure**

The Advisory Committee drafted a proposed brochure in February 1975 and published the final brochure shortly thereafter. The final brochure has fewer administrative details but does not differ much in substance from the draft.

A few points in the draft not in the final brochure relate to issues that were important in the development of the movement. For example, the draft reads "Ohu are sensitive to neighbors and local authorities, and willing to exercise diplomacy and promote goodwill."<sup>17</sup> Since relations with local authorities were a major issue for most of the Ohu as they sought land and tried to get established, it is noteworthy both that the Ohu members are expected to be diplomatic and that the district offices were not allowed to judge the suitability of the land or select among groups seeking land.<sup>18</sup> In order to nip potential problems in the bud, groups were encouraged to meet with local authorities to discuss planning considerations early in the process.<sup>19</sup> This was replaced with a more specific statement regarding town and country planning.

Two steps were dropped in the process of approval, review of the application by the Ohu Advisory Board before it went to the Land Settlement Board for final approval and public notification. Also dropped was the point that only the head office of the Land Settlement Board rather than district offices was empowered to make the final decision, but the final brochure provided for an appeal from the Land Settlement Board.<sup>20</sup> A description of the membership of the Land Settlement Board—"Its membership is made up of senior public servants representing land use departments and four private members representative of the farming community"<sup>21</sup>—was eliminated. This description would have undermined any faith in the system that potential Ohu groups had. Finally, the published brochure added an analysis of the alternative legal entities for Ohu.<sup>22</sup> This statement appears to have been prepared by Keith Langford, a lawyer and a member of the Timatanga Community.

### Sunburst

One community, Sunburst on the Coromandel Peninsula, one of the most attractive parts of the North Island, got started before all the rules were laid down. The people who formed the community had been together in a loose group in the Auckland area and then in the Hokianga area, on the northwest coast of the North Island, where they thought they had found land on which to settle.

The land on which the Sunburst Community was established was

... on the other side of the [Rangihau] river from the road and access [in 1975] is by foot \_ A neighboring farmer cut a bulldozer track across the river and up the hill. He is going to be repaid with labour. There are five gardens laid out (the heavy scrub had to be cleared first) and a temporary dwelling for the family. Everything has had to be carved out of the bush. They have a license to use 80 hectares (200 acres) for a year.<sup>23</sup>

At that time they were working on improvements and building housing designed to meet the local building code.

Sunburst lasted about six years; as with most such communities, it is difficult to find out either what happened to it or when it happened. All the

evidence that I have found suggests that like so many others it just faded away.

### **The Problem of Available Land**

The members of Sunburst found their own land, and the sites possibly mentioned at Elsdon had quickly vanished, if they ever existed, so the availability of land under the scheme became an important issue. But when the district land offices were asked to produce lists of available land, virtually none had any. When this was said to be unacceptable, a few district offices produced short lists. When this was said to be unacceptable and the offices were required to produce lists of all unoccupied public lands in their areas, it turned out that there was land available in all districts. But the resistance by the district offices demonstrates that no one had done the needed work to get support for the scheme from within the bureaucracy. The later requirement that groups looking for land work directly with the district offices that had said there was no appropriate land set the stage for obstruction, delay, and frustration, which was precisely what happened.

### **The Establishment of Regulations**

Sunburst got started before there were detailed regulations on what was required or the procedures specified, but it was held to the same standards as those that started later. These regulations were laid out in the brochure outlining the history of the movement and laying down the procedures for the future.

The guidelines specified that:

1. Each Ohu must have a minimum of eight adults (initially fifteen but lowered).
2. Ohu were required to become some kind of legal entity. A limited liability company was suggested and groups were encouraged to consult a lawyer.
3. Most members of each group must be New Zealand citizens.

While these general guidelines probably posed few problems for the groups, the need to set themselves up as a limited liability company using a lawyer to do so undoubtedly went against the grain for many, but a limited liability company made the lower number of participants legally possible.

The general guidelines only introduced the actual procedures, and these procedures were the stroke that killed the Ohu scheme. In the initial stages of the scheme, there was a central office in Wellington, which dealt with all issues, but now parts of the process were decentralized. The groups were told to contact the district office in which they hoped to settle. They then had to examine the available land and choose a site. "When a site has been agreed on, group representatives and district offices should work out the area to be leased and also discuss other relevant matters such as access, fencing and



valuation."<sup>24</sup> If they did not find suitable land in their preferred area, they then had to move on to another district office. In practice little of the land found suitable had easy access, and the groups had to negotiate for access. For example, one group found land that was surrounded by land in private hands and their request to build an access road was denied. Federated Farmers were strong opponents of the scheme as were people from the forest industry. Both were given representatives on the Ohu Advisory Committee. If this was an attempt to co-opt them, it didn't work.

But the biggest hurdle was that the groups had to negotiate with local county councils for permission to build on the land. "In some cases groups will fit into a predominant use of the Rural A zone, but in other cases groups will eventually want to erect more dwellings on their site than are allowed for in their particular district scheme, and 'conditional use' applications or 'specified departures' will be required."<sup>25</sup> One example of what happened when this occurred is found in *Croixilles Ohu Ltd v Marlborough County Council*.

This appeal was for a change of use and specified departure to permit the construction of nine cottages and other buildings on land containing 20 hectares and zoned Rural A in the proposed district scheme. That zoning would not permit more than one dwellinghouse as of right. The appellants sought to establish a community where they can manufacture goods for an outside market and produce their basic food requirements.

Held, (disallowing the appeal): (1) In effect the proposal is for the creation of a small village dependent on urban uses. Granting the application would have significance beyond the vicinity by creating a precedent. Great difficulty would be experienced in distinguishing persons genuinely interested in communal living from those grouping themselves together to circumvent the scheme." [The Ohu had gone through the lengthy procedures laid down by the Ohu Advisory Committee and been approved.]

(2) Granting the application would be contrary to the public interest in that it would promote sporadic residential development in a rural zone.<sup>26</sup>

Later, the decision continues with, "They propose to make and sell a wide range of goods, but on the evidence before it, the Board has serious doubts as to the viability of the venture."<sup>27</sup>

Given the prior approvals required, it is clear that the court was rejecting the entire scheme, not simply the appeal by the Ohu.

Any dwellings built must satisfy local building codes. While this did not pose a problem for some, it clearly undermined the desire for other groups to establish an alternative life style. According to *Mushroom* (the main New Zealand alternative lifestyles magazine), the government wrote to the Counties Association telling it that Ohu would have ". . . to meet all existing by-laws and regulations of the local bodies concerned."<sup>28</sup> *Mushroom* adds that it is expected the central government would assist the groups in dealing with "overly severe" applications of the rules. The belief in this intent is regularly repeated and could be mere wishful thinking, but there is some evidence that

in the initial stages, some mediation was forthcoming, and Peter Kelsey accompanied some groups to their meetings with local bodies, but that didn't last.

### Proposals

The Ohu Advisory Board described the proposals that came in as follows:

Most groups seek, and offer, an alternative, largely self-reliant, life style on the land. They are interested in organic agricultural methods and the recycling of materials, in alternative technology and the decentralised generation of energy by non-pollutive methods. Groups are interested in the communal sharing of amenities and equipment, and in experimental social relationships. They are concerned about education and the need to look for and explore alternatives in this sphere, and they are interested in the exploration of alternative forms of architecture, uses of materials, forms of construction and methods of design<sup>29</sup>

Reviewing a substantial number of the actual proposals illustrates that this is a fairly accurate overview, but it misses some of the flavor of the times and the diversity of the groups involved.

Many of the groups searching for land were never identified beyond the name of the person who sent in the proposal, but other names demonstrate the range of groups involved. The New Zealand Christian Way Society, a proposal for a Buddhist community, and the New Zealand Dharma Society show that religious groups were involved; Middle Earth and The Anti-Perspirant and Nasal Congestion Society show that "hippies" were involved, or, in the latter case, possibly just people with a sense of humor. The Anti-Perspirant and Nasal Congestion Society became the Reef Point Community, which had begun with people who met at James K. Baxter's Jerusalem Community.

Statements regarding the status of the groups demonstrate that there was interest in land throughout the country, not just, as opponents of the scheme have argued, in the most attractive parts of the country. The Anti-Perspirant and Nasal Congestion Society was in the process of settling on freehold land adjacent to the Crown land they wanted in East Taranaki, a fairly isolated area on the east of the North Island, two groups were negotiating with the Dunedin office, one group wished to settle in the Invercargill area, both in parts of the South Island far from the areas most often identified as the "only" areas of interest to those wanting to start Ohu. That said, the majority of groups were looking for land controlled by either the Nelson office, which covered the northwest corner of the South Island; the Hamilton office, which covered the Coromandel Peninsula; or the Auckland office, which covered the area to the north of Auckland, all areas of exceptional natural beauty.

Specific proposals reveal the diversity behind the similarities described by the Advisory Board. The Goodwill Community, for example, describes its goal as,

To Revere and Love the Creator in all things, Mineral, Vegetable, Animal and

Human. Spiritually, in His Angels and Archangels, His Powers and Dominions. So that we may learn to understand the Outer and the Inner and by understanding Learn to Work with the Creator. So His will may be done on Earth as it is in Heaven by forming a community. By combining our resources and by upholding one another we feel that we stand a better chance of achieving this end. ^

The Goodwill Community wanted to move to a specific location on the North Island where they had been told land would be available. But the Wellington District Office did not want to release the land, and the County Chairman filed a petition opposing the settlement. To try to overcome the opposition, some members of the group rented a house in the area and worked with local farmers.<sup>31</sup>

An unnamed community that described itself it as having been developing as a community for four years and consisting of six men and two women, planned to practice "lacto-vegetarianism, organic farming and living, community involvement with bringing up and education of children in the community, an aim towards total self-sufficiency with a phasing out of machinery, a balance of sexes, and living in a geographical area which allows for seclusion, plenty of sunshine (not a high rainfall area), pure running water through the land, and also preferably near the sea."<sup>32</sup> The following February this group was listed as still looking for land.

The New Zealand Christian Way Society proposed an Ohu designed to help people unable to function in modern society, as long as they agree to "wholeheartedly endeavour to practice" the Christian principles; if they could not, they would be expelled.<sup>33</sup> They found site near Kaitaia in the north of the North Island, but after they had agreed to settle there, the Auckland Office withdrew the site.<sup>34</sup>

Most proposals stressed the desire to create communities that were in harmony with nature. For example, the Papatuanuku Ohu listed as its first principal "Living in harmony with Nature and each other, on an organic and ecologically sound basis."<sup>35</sup> They found land near Greymouth on the West Coast of the South Island but were never able to settle on it. The Pacific Ohu (name changed later to Pungaera Ohu) included in its proposal a detailed description of the school it hoped to establish as part of the community.<sup>36</sup> It got a temporary license for fifteen acres near Kerikeri in the north of the North Island, but in March 1976 *Mushroom* reported that they needed members.

At least eleven of the groups that submitted proposals identified land that was acceptable to them by February 1974, five had made it past the District Office report, but, at that point, Sunburst was the only community on land. Most communities had experienced some degree of opposition from the local community, the district office, or others involved in the process.<sup>37</sup>

### **Earth Extract Ohu**

Since a number of the names of proposed groups changed throughout the process of approval, it is difficult to be certain, but the only group that got established on land where we have the original proposal is the Earth Extract Ohu.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it deserves special attention.

At the time of the proposal the group was living together in Devonport, a suburb of Auckland, and included three architects, a chemical engineer, a teacher, an artist, a photographer, and an actor. All were under twenty-five. There were also three members who were in the process of opening a restaurant in Christchurch, the largest city on the South Island, and planned to join the Ohu in about a year.

The proposal included a suggestion that the community would use environmental and energy sensitive building techniques (these are spelled out in great detail), organic agriculture for both self-sufficiency and sale, including fruit and nut orchards. They also suggest that they would, in the future, open a school.

Initially Earth Extract, established in the north of the North Island, succeeded through support from members working in Auckland who hoped to be able to later move onto the land. But it ran into financial problems and, in 1979, it asked the Riverside Community for a loan to help it through a crisis. Because Riverside had spent all the money it had set aside for such loans, no loan was forthcoming, but the community was able to survive.

In 1981 a study of communities in New Zealand reported on Earth Extract, "It is not yet possible to live off the land—it is not very fertile and would require high expenditure to develop. Until the size of the group increases and some income earning project from the land is developed, there is little prospect of being self-sufficient."<sup>39</sup> The community was actively involved in the local community and appears to have been accepted by that community. But by 1981 only one of the original members was left on the land, and members living in Auckland were still supporting it.

### **Financing**

In mid-1974 a proposal was made to establish an Ohu Trust Board to assist in financing Ohu. The problem was, while some groups had sufficient funds, many didn't, and many of the governmentally administered funds could not under current legislation be given to a community, or at least that is how the bodies involved interpreted the legislation. A proposal dated 7 June 1974 presenting the financing scheme noted, "There is also a certain amount of bias against alternative lifestyle groups."<sup>40</sup>

The proposed Ohu Trust Board would hold funds generated by individuals joining Ohu and groups forming Ohu as well as contributions from government, churches, charities, and established communities. The motivation was to protect both individuals and communities from the instability expected as communities were getting established and to provide funds for

initial capital investments needed to get the Ohu up and running.

Representations were made to both the Post Office Savings Bank and the Government Life Insurance Office asking them to participate in the Trust Board. Both refused. In each case the letters of refusal are couched in the finest bureaucratic language and say that the legislation regarding their institutions would have to be changed to allow them to participate, although the Postmaster-General suggested that the Government Life Insurance Office should be able to assist. After further representations to these bodies, the idea appears to have died.

This proposal appears to have originated with Jonathan Hunt, Labour M.P. for East Lynn and a member of the Ohu Advisory Board. His letters to Peter Kelsey suggest that he believed that the various government bodies were not legally barred from assisting the Ohu. This incident illustrates the tensions involved. A young Labour M.P. rightly identifies a serious problem for the potential Ohu, one that beginning communes regularly face, tries to do something about it, and is blocked by bureaucrats hiding behind their very narrow interpretation of their duties. While this incident alone did not doom the Ohu experiment, it aptly illustrates what did.

### **AhuAhuOhu**

The only commune established under the Ohu scheme that still exists is the Ahu Ahu Ohu, on the Ahu Ahu River, a tributary of Wanganui River, in an isolated area on the east of the North Island. At first access involved rowing across the Wanganui River and walking along a bush track for 50 minutes. It recently celebrated its twenty-first year on the land, and ". . . over the years and with hundreds of hours of hard slog we now have a 2m track capable of taking all three and four wheeled terrain vehicles with small trailers."<sup>41</sup>

The members created the Ahu Ahu Ohu over the years through the expenditure of great effort. Most buildings have been constructed from materials obtained by demolishing buildings and having it flown in by helicopter. Given the effort, the tragedy of fire and flood that has taken buildings and, repeatedly, the track to the Ohu, has been particularly stressful. As a result, there has been significant turnover; the last of the original members left in 1989. At present, the membership is low, but the celebrations around its longevity has brought considerable publicity and may attract new members. The Ahu Ahu Ohu is currently at a low period in membership, but it has survived such periods before.

### **The End of Support for the Ohu Movement**

Norman Kirk died in 1974, and although the Ohu were never the high priority for him that some Ohu aspirants believed, it was his policy initiative and, without him, it became less important. Even if the Labour Party had won the 1975 election, the Ohu movement would probably have died, but the Na-

tional Party won. Prior to the election, the National Party announced its support for the Ohu scheme, but after the election it wound up the Advisory Committee, removed Peter Kelsey, and shifted all authority to Lands and Surveys, thus removing any input from people wanting land or already living in communes. Acceptability to the local community was added as one of the criteria for approval, and rather than being set aside for Ohu, any land available had to be publicly advertised and made available to anyone.

In 1974 *Mushroom* published a letter from the Waimea Ohu, one that never got land. It reads in part:

We have made three applications for sites on the West Coast north of Westport, two of which have been turned down and the third is still in the pipeline (although we don't hold too much hope). It has taken almost 18 months to get this far and as many of you probably know by now it is hard to keep a large group enthusiastic for that length of time when they could be pursuing other ways of getting some land.<sup>42</sup>

A letter provided to me by a member of the Papatuanuku Ohu notes that the Grey County Council deliberately delayed their decision until the same day that the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board ended its six month sitting in Greymouth, thus forcing the Ohu to wait another six months before their appeal could be heard.<sup>43</sup> Although they believed that they could win the appeal, the Ohu did not survive the extra six months.

Delay was clearly a tactic to defeat the scheme. As was noted in the next issue of *Mushroom*,

... the Ohu scheme seems to have become much less the great hope that it once was; mainly through the amount of time involved (can be up to 2-3 years), the energy in writing endless letters to bureaucrats and the overall uncertainties as to whether the groups will gain the land they seek anyway.<sup>44</sup>

The bureaucrats had won. It had taken only two years to deliberately destroy the dreams of hundreds of well-meaning if naive young people.

To be fair to the bureaucrats that naivete should not be overlooked. As one commentator put it,

The Labour government's Ohu Scheme failed for varied reasons. The realities of these groups of up to twenty individuals, mostly from the cities, moving onto a block of land were not really considered. First, the land allocated to the groups was mainly scrub and bush covered, hard to break in. In a lot of cases access was extremely difficult, and many of the sites were too remote from towns and cities to enable the people living within to earn money for establishing and developing their community.<sup>45</sup>

Also, Ohu members were not all agreed on what they wanted to achieve, and the failure to resolve these differences in advance brought tension and potential failure. For example, some people were interested in creating viable farms and even communities that would last and provide a basis for a different way of life while others wanted to drop out and live as simply as possible on the land.

And communal life proved difficult for many. Living in a commune and, in particular, creating a lasting group takes foresight, insight, and continued hard work. Many Ohu were created from people who had known each other for a long time and had even already been living communally, but others were created for the purpose of forming an Ohu. Many advertised in the pages of *Mushroom* for members to bring the number up to the eight required by the regulations, and this boded ill for the longevity of the groups advertising, but most were never given the chance to try.

The Ohu movement was unusual for its time period. Most governments, including that of New Zealand, were regularly in conflict, often violent, with the young people of the country. The vision of Norman Kirk and Matiu Rata, if indeed they were the scheme's progenitors, was to create a basis of trust and cooperation between people interested in creating a different way of life on the land and government. The Ohu movement failed utterly to achieve that goal because the government that proposed it never gained the support of the bureaucracies that were supposed to make it work. The result was greater not less disillusionment with government.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See John A. Lee, *Socialism in New Zealand*. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1979; Hugh H. Lusk, *Social Welfare in New Zealand. The Result of Twenty Years of Progressive Social Legislation and Its Significance for the United States and Other Countries*. London: William Heinemann, 1913; Frank Rogers, "The Single Tax Movement in New Zealand." M. A. thesis. Auckland, 1952; and Bert Roth and Janny Hammond, *Toil and Trouble: The Struggle for a Better Life in New Zealand*. Auckland, New Zealand: Methuen New Zealand, 1981. I am grateful to Jonathan Hunt, M.P. for East Lynn, for telling me about his papers and then giving me permission to quote from them. I was able to undertake this research as a result of a leave granted to me by E. Terrence Jones, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Missouri-St. Louis. In New Zealand, I was greatly assisted by an appointment in the Stout Research Centre for the Study of New Zealand Society History & Culture, Victoria University of Wellington. I wish also to thank individuals in New Zealand who assisted me with materials and suggestions related to the Ohu Movement, including Peter Callister, Michael Crawshaw, Brian Easton, Margaret Hay ward, Keith Henbrey, Keith Langford, Andrew Sharp, and Dianne Yates.

2. James K. Baxter, "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry." In *James K. Baxter A Critic: A Selection From His Literary Criticism*. Edited by Frank McKay (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), 10. Originally published 1951.

3. On Baxter, see Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter*. Auckland, New Zealand: Oxford University Press, 1990.

4. The first attempt to correct this is Lyman Tower Sargent, *Intentional Communities in New Zealand: A Research Guide*. Wellington, New Zealand: Stout Research Centre for the Study of New Zealand Society History & Culture, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997.

5. *Ohu: Alternative Lifestyle Communities* (Wellington: Published for The Ohu Advisory Committee by the Department of Lands and Surveys, 1975), 5.

6. Peter Robinson, "A Visionary Pragmatist Tackles Modern Ills: Kirk's Kibbutz Stimulus for New Zealand's Nation-Building." *Australian Financial Review*, no. 3245 (October 2, 1973): 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Margaret Hayward, *Diary of the Kirk Years* (Queen Charlotte Sound: Cape Catley/Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1981), 173. The Maori equivalent found was "Ohu," but early documents refer to the scheme as "kibbutz-type settlements" and "community farms."

9. Ibid, 183.

10. *Ohu*, 3.

11. Ibid, 4.

12. Ibid, 5-6.

13. "Transcript of Comment on Checkpoint 13.2.74 (Following the Meeting at Elsdon, Porirua)." Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.

14. Ibid.

15. Margaret Hayward, 223. According to Brian Easton, a member of the working Party, the word was chosen by the Working Party. There were no Maori members of the Working Party.

16. Draft Working Party Recommendation. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.

17. Draft Brochure. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland, page 1.

18. Draft Brochure. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland, page 9.

19. Ibid.

20. *Ohu*, 12.

21. Draft Brochure. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland, page 10-11.

22. *Ohu*, 15-16.

23. Malcolm McSporran, "The Sunburst Community or the divine light can hardly be seen for the trees." In *The 2nd New Zealand Whole Earth Catalogue*. Edited by Dennis List and Alister Taylor (Martinborough: Alister Taylor, 1975), 29.

24. *Ohu*, 11.

25. Ibid, 12.

26. 6 NZTPA [New Zealand Town Planning Appeals] 74 (12 August 1976).

27. Ibid, 75.

28. "Ohu." *Mushroom*, no. 1 ([1974]): 7.

29. *Ohu*, 3.

30. "Ohu Concept" [Goodwill Community, 11 March 1974]. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.

31. "Ohu: Group Progress As At 19 February 1975." Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.

32. "Ohu Concept" [Unnamed Community, 11 March 1974]. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.



33. "Proposed Christian Way Village (June 4th, 1974). Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
34. "Ohu: Group Progress As At 19 February 1975." Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
35. "Proposal for Papatuanuku Ohu." [31 July 1974]. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
36. "Pacific Ohu." [12 June 1974]. Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
37. "Ohu: Group Progress As At 19 February 1975." Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
38. The proposal has the best presentation of any I have been able to review and includes some cartoons.
39. *A Guide to Co-ops* (Auckland: Auckland University Environment Group, 1981), 41.
40. "Ohu Financing Proposal." Jonathan Hunt Papers, Department of Politics, University of Auckland.
41. Ahu Ahu Ohu, 1992 Information Sheet.
42. "Ohu Where To Now?" *Mushroom*, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 11.
43. Undated letter about the Papatuanuku. Copy in my possession.
44. "Ohu." *Mushroom*, no. 5 (Autumn 1976): 15.
45. "A Viable Alternative." In *Nambassa: A New Direction* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1979), 7.

