

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

The little island that could

Randy Udall | OPINION | ESSAY | Mar 2, 2009 | *From the print edition*

Last fall, a Viking washed up on my doorstep. His name was Soren Hermansen. For the past 10 years, he has spearheaded one of the most audacious experiments in the world: the attempt of 4,000 people living on the small Danish island of Samsø to liberate themselves from fossil fuel.

A few weeks after being anointed an Environmental Hero by *Time*, Soren came to America on a speaking tour with his wife, Melane, an artist and photographer.

Everyone wants to hear the story of Samsø. In 1997, Denmark held a contest to select an island that would eventually be run entirely on renewable energy. Samsø won. In the decade since, the islanders have invested \$70 million of their savings and government grants in wind turbines, district heating plants, solar panels and biofuels. Today, they are energy independent. Their carbon footprint is not just small, it is negative, since they produce more energy than they consume.

Reporters who visit the island sometimes describe its farmers as "beefy." Like farmers everywhere, those on Samsø occasionally have difficulty finding wives. This led them to create a Web site called farmerdating.dk. The personals are in Danish, but a typical one reads: "Beefy farmer with large tractor seeks attractive woman with boat. Must be able to sew and clean fish. Send picture of boat and motor."

Soren grew up on the island raising beets and onions. One day, Melane arrived with dyed crimson hair, an urban refugee. She needed a place to stay; he had a room to rent. They are an affectionate pair. Drinking wine one night, I asked them

about their initial attraction.

"Soren looked like he might have a big tractor," she said. "Melane had nice jeans," he recalled, "and seemed perhaps suitable for breeding."

In Telluride, Colo., Soren showed slides to an overflow crowd. Tossed by the incessant wind, the ruddy-cheeked natives of Samsø are conservative, rural and intensely pragmatic. Since World War II, they have imported coal-fired electricity through an underwater cable from the mainland. Fuel for their tractors and automobiles was delivered, expensively, by ship.

When the islanders first learned that Samsø had been selected to be Denmark's "renewable energy island" many were skeptical. A proposal to build a centralized district heating plant that would provide heat and hot water to hundreds of homes was finally approved -- but only after many meetings. As the years passed, the islanders began to embrace renewable energy, as a business opportunity, a brand, an ethic, something akin to sport. Pensioners insulated their homes. Teachers installed solar systems. Their ambitions grew, and under Soren's leadership, they successfully raised \$40 million to construct an offshore wind farm, 10 gleaming white towers hovering over the blue sea.

Today, the farmers of Samsø seine the sky, shipping a surplus of clean power to the mainland. On calm days, they import. During the summer, the turbines lure thousands of tourists to the island. "They spend the night and their money, we shear them like sheep," Soren said.

What does any of this have to do with the West? Everywhere I went with Soren, we heard that "America isn't Denmark." Fair enough. The Danes pay three times as much for electricity as we do (and use 40 percent less.) They pay six bucks for gasoline. In short, there is no Powder River Basin in Denmark, no place to mine 1 million tons of coal each day.

The irony is that the West's renewable resources are better than Denmark's. Far better.

In many parts of the Great Plains, each square mile gets swept by \$5 million worth of untapped wind power per year. The solar flux raining down on the desert Southwest is worth \$2 million per square mile per year. Within 10 miles of Medicine Bow, Wyo., you could plant enough wind turbines to run the entire state. At noon on a sunny day, there's 50 horsepower of sunlight striking your south-facing roof. But drowning in fossil fuels, we turn our back to the sun. Coal stymies wind. Natural gas blocks biomass.

Outdated policies are part of the problem. In Europe, the grid is increasingly a two-way street, with easy access, transparent rules and attractive tariffs that reward farmers and homeowners for producing power. Here in the West, however, the grid is like a highway whose on-ramps are blocked with "Do Not Enter" signs, stifling innovation and independent power providers. These differences help to explain why 5 percent of Danes own shares in utility wind turbines, while most Americans have difficulty imagining themselves as energy producers rather than mere consumers.

Of course, in a crisis, people and policies can change. Last year, \$17 billion worth of wind was installed in the United States. Many legislatures have adopted mandatory renewable energy standards. Rural electric utilities promote geothermal heating, solar, and small-scale hydro. Rifle and Eagle, Colo., have announced plans for multimillion-dollar solar farms. A municipal utility in Lamar, Colo., operates its own wind farm.

Speaking in Telluride, Soren told the schoolchildren: "Don't fret about the polar bear. Don't think global and act local. Just act local. If enough of us do, then someday we might do something good for a polar bear."

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