



GREEN HORIZONS: A VENTURE INTO SLOW LIVING

BY JAMIE SCHLER

At first glance, James Smith appears to be your average laid-back Florida surfer—baseball cap tugged low over unkempt, sun-bleached hair, scraggly beard framing a deeply tanned face, baggy shorts, flip-flops, and a T-shirt advertising a surfboard company. But hidden beneath this casual, soft-spoken facade is a serious young man who is passionate and knowledgeable about the environment and has made green living the commitment of his life. I spoke with him in the backyard of his family's home in Florida, surrounded by surfboards, green plants, and his quiet enthusiasm.

James grew up in a family whose existence revolved around the outdoors. Boating, fishing, and surfing are in his blood, his heritage, as is a passion for environmental preservation. His parents, Rodney and Karen, founded *Coastal Angler Magazine* and Anglers for Conservation, a nonprofit educational group dedicated to defending and safeguarding the Indian River Lagoon, one of the most diverse estuaries in the world and the place they call home. The group teaches the general public, children and adults alike, the ins and outs of responsible fishing to create, instill, and nurture a passion for angling, boating, and other water-related and outdoor activities. They hope to foster an awareness of Mother Nature's delicate balance and the importance of living sustainably, especially related to water. The way they see it, the more that people understand the environment, the more they will want to preserve it and keep it clean.



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Apart from being an enthusiastic outdoorsman, James is as strong an advocate for environmental conservation and sustainability as his parents are. Since his teens, he has been evolving toward a purer, cleaner lifestyle by applying his larger conservation concepts to his everyday way of life. He has been making changes gradually over the years in how he lives as he becomes aware, understands, and experiments. “We make mistakes but try to learn, evolve, and do better,” he explained as he described how he and his brother, Jake, have been breaking away from a materialistic to a simpler life one step at a time, living closer to the earth and teaching themselves such basic concepts as gardening, composting, and cooking.

His concept is simple: Use less to have more. On a practical level, he uses his car less and his bicycle as often as possible, even if that means setting off earlier for an appointment; he sails instead of using a motor, even if that means slowing down and following the wind’s course. He proudly showed me the solar grill he has jerry-rigged in his backyard and the jars of homemade prickly pear wine fermenting in the back of a closet. He explained the ins and outs of composting as we wound our way through his garden after he ducked into the small coop holding half a dozen hens. His raised garden bed, wild with collards, is organic and pesticide free, and he uses only natural fertilizers. He pointed to his father’s garden on the opposite side of the yard and shook his head. “He’s almost there but refuses to give up the last of the chemical fertilizers. We keep a divider between the two plots so that what he is using doesn’t spread to ours and pollute it.”

We peeked into his video studio—a huge map hung on the back wall, and reference books lined his shelves. “My brother and I taught ourselves everything about taking pictures and making videos, from working the equipment to shooting and filming to editing. When we decided to start sharing our experiences and knowledge, when we decided that we wanted to urge and inspire others to fish, sail, understand the ocean, and live sustainably, we just bought the equipment and learned how to use it. Just a little trial and error, like everything else we do.”

James lamented that most people believe that they must choose all or nothing, that they must live off



the grid, totally green and organic, or simply continue to be immersed in a culture of waste and destruction. Through their series of *Pure Living* videos on Pure Ocean TV, James and Jake aim to show others that it is possible to start with small changes, one step at a time, and that each small change will make a difference. By cutting back, not overusing our resources, using renewable energy, recycling, and lessening our reliance on man-made products, we can reduce our impact on the planet.

As he professed, he would love to live off the grid. “But,” he explained, “it is costly and often just not feasible.” There is little need for luxuries or fancy things, he stressed, and no need to rush through life. By slowing down, you will have a smaller impact, create less waste, and contribute to less destruction. Plus, you will save money and find more enjoyment in what life has to offer. “Time,” James explained, “has the biggest impact on the environment. Everyone is simply in too much of a rush.” By taking more time for yourself and your family, cooking from scratch more often, and walking or biking, you can start down the path toward a more sustainable life.

His next project is already in the planning stages. In a manifestation of pure living, he and his brother are organizing an interactive adventure they are calling “Green Horizons: Journey off the Grid.” Early next year, they will take off on their all-original 1978 31-foot Bombay Clipper, aptly and romantically named *Valhalla* (Viking Heaven), and sail down to and through the Bahamas on a six-month tour, living completely green and documenting the experience. Using no electricity

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and using gas only for the motor in emergencies, James and Jake will impose neither a fixed itinerary nor a calendar; they plan to go where the wind takes them, to follow a natural map and let go of time. Living and sailing this way will cost little and reduce their impact on the ocean and the planet.

“We will stock up on foods that are healthy and sustainable and that last. And plenty of homemade wine,” James explained as he led me through his small garden. For any other need, more food or necessities, they will barter by working or by trading some of their supplies with other boaters, tourists, or locals. “Everyone on the water is friendly and open,” explained James, recounting stories of past adventures and shared meals with strangers and fellow travelers. And as with everything else in his life, James taught himself to sail almost on a whim.

This will be the brothers’ fourth trip to the Bahamas; he and Jake practically learned how to sail, navigate, and manage the boat on their first trip in 2010. “We had a great time, but the trip itself wasn’t much of a success,” he said. “The solar panel was weak and not at all adapted to our needs, so it didn’t function well. We had bad gas, so the generator didn’t work. But we learned and made adjustments, and we were much better prepared for our second trip.” They had by then outfitted the boat to allow them to live and sail green with minimal emissions; they regulated and recycled waste, even converting it into resources, by composting and using a green toilet.

Once they are back home and have edited the video of their voyage, James and Jake plan to bring their documentary *Green Horizons: Living off the Grid* to the Sundance Film Festival. They will make the trip from Florida to Utah by bicycle, filming the whole route. Through instruction and by example coupled with strong doses of passion, they hope to carry their parents’ projects one step further and inspire a wider audience to preserve the earth’s resources through best practices and a greener, healthier lifestyle.

As I prepared to leave, his dad, Rodney, popped out to say hello and began talking about his sons with awe in his voice. His whole demeanor became animated. “I would love to live as sustainably as they do, but they have set the threshold so high that I don’t think I can follow them!” he laughed.

James walked me back through the house, past racks of fishing rods, and we paused in the kitchen where we found Jake squeezing tubs full of grapefruit for wine. James lifted the lid on a simmering pot on the stove full of chicken and dates. “You’ll have to come back for lunch next visit!” And I promised him that I would. ■

