

Earl's Pearls

Mall camping is next

by Earl Higgins

A few months ago in Arizona, amid fanfare and wearing raiment appropriate for having dinner on the set of "Star Trek," six adventurous souls entered a hermetically sealed dome covering a few acres of what was designated "Biosphere II." The purpose of the project is to replicate the biosphere of the entire earth in those few acres under glass, Earth itself being "Biosphere I."

After two years these eco-hermits will emerge and, made wiser by their observations, experiences, and meditations while living in the equivalent of a laboratory beaker, will expound to the rest of us on the meaning of life, the essence of truth, and How To Save the World.

I am intrigued by the naivete (or perhaps chutzpa) of the project: the assumption that the world's ecology can be understood by hanging out for two years in the equivalent of a bottle.

But, skeptic that I am, I surmise that there is as much a commercial as a purely intellectual reason for this unusual project of discovery. After all, Columbus didn't sail west in search of truth, beauty, and the American Way; he was looking for gold, spices, and Chinese fortune cookies.

I am afraid that the financial backers of Biosphere II are engaged in a pilot project, with attendant publicity, for the next generation of theme parks: ecologically correct camping malls.

For over 30 years Walt Disney has given us, in technocrats' jargon, virtual reality in real time. You can go among the pirates of the Caribbean, hang out at the ol' swimming hole with Huck Finn, and descend with Captain Nemo to the ocean depths.

These experiences can be had while you and your family have parked your live-in truck in a commercial parking lot, about which the manipulators of language and virtual reality have told you that you are "camping" in a "recreational vehicle." It is not a far journey from Disney world to Biosphere-mall camping.

We have seen that state parks created in the 1930's for outdoor

recreation have become places where hundreds of recreational vehicles gather on summer weekends and create a dusty, noisy, and crowded atmosphere. Artificial-wave swimming pools and jet ski boats with their eardrum-maiming noise further isolate the state-park visitor from the natural environment.

Those who want the authenticity of an outdoor experience provide a waiting market for the Biosphere II financial backers to franchise their idea. Build a Biosphere bubble dome and make it any environmental "theme" that may be available. The Amazon rain forest could be put in Minnesota; the Arctic tundra would beckon from a big bubble in Brownsville.

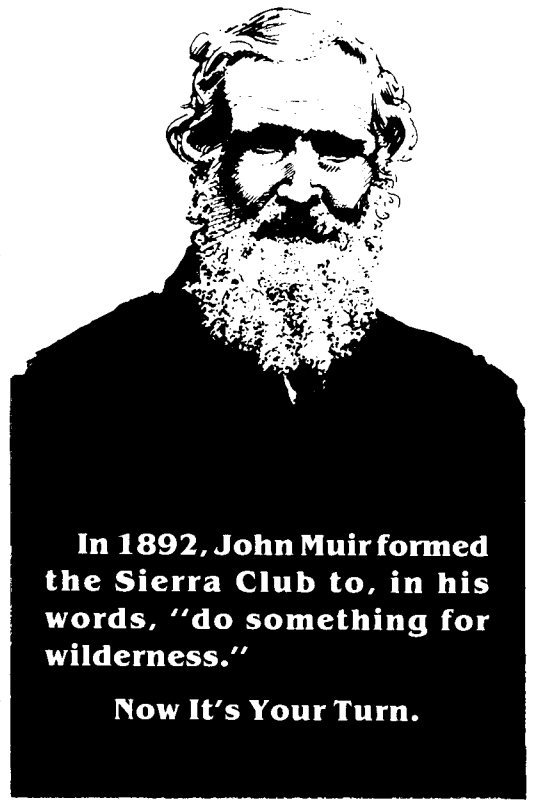
By the year 1999 the Delta Sierran may be announcing outings and even chapter meetings in a franchised Biosphere dome. Just think, you could drive to Cut Off or Dry Prong or Waterproof or whatever little Louisiana town was the site, and the outing would be as though you were in the Gobi Desert.

Meanwhile, enterprising Cajun environmentalists would be developing a bayou-country mini ecosystem to put under glass and sell to Biosphere franchisees in other parts of the world. (A good Cajun salesman — Edwin Edwards, for example — could convince Connecticut yankees that the "Bayosphere" must include water moccasins and alligator snapping turtles.)

But why stop at bubble domes? The Rouse Company has developed big theme malls all over the country, including the Riverwalk in New Orleans. With its expertise in developing malls, Rouse may pick up on the Biosphere idea and apply it to commercial malls.

In a Rouse/Biosphere mall, a potential customer will be able to, say, ride a river canoe through the equivalent of equatorial Africa and purchase outdoor clothing from "Mister Kurtz" at the "Heart of Darkness" trading post. Such an enterprise would give serious competition to Banana Republic, Eddie Bauer, and other shops that were the Army-Navy stores for yuppies of the eighties.

What, then, lies beyond mall camping? At the rate Rouse and its kind are proceeding, we may see the entire North American Continent under a dome by the year 2092. Stick around for the adventure. Δ



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