

# In Britain, green squatters seize island

April 30 2009, by Loic Vennin

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A visitor arrives on a launch at Raven's Ait, an island on the river Thames in west London. The idyllic hideaway on London's famous waterway seems an unlikely setting for an environmental standoff - but that's what green squatters are staging against a local council that is determined to force them, and their self-proclaimed alternative lifestyle, from the sliver of land.

A bucolic, sun-dappled island in the river Thames seems an unlikely setting for an environmental and lifestyle standoff -- but that's what green squatters are staging.

For the last two months a group of eco-activists have occupied Raven's Ait, a sliver of land just downriver from the world-famous royal palace at Hampton Court, west of London, resisting all efforts to remove them.

"It's not hippie heaven or something," said bearded activist Rick, his purple hat topped with a jaunty white feather and T-shirt emblazoned

"Eco-pirates".

Despite his scruffy appearance, the 28-year-old seems more like a businessman than a green dreamer, constantly on his mobile phone and consulting his electronic diary to arrange meetings and list tasks.

"No alcohol, no drugs," reads a poster on the island's main building, underlining the message that this is not just an excuse for an open-air party.

The occupation began on February 22, when environmental activist who calls himself Nick Revolving was out on his sister's boat when he noticed that the ait -- an old English word meaning a small river island -- was unoccupied.

The spit of land, 300 by 50 metres (985 by 164 feet), had been used by a wedding and conference company as a picturesque setting for events, but the firm fell victim to the global downturn, going under last November.

The island offered an obvious setting for a fantastic rave.

"It crossed our mind," said Rick, but added: "It would have been a waste to destroy everything in one night".

Instead, the squatters decided to "transform the island into an eco conference centre," aimed at showcasing green ideas and promote sustainable development, he said.

Grand ambitions -- although when AFP visited the island, only one small wind turbine was in evidence, with power provided by traditional electricity providers.

But Rick insists the squatters are "working their ass off".

"We're not squatting for the pleasure of squatting," said French activist Assia, 22, adding: "We're not just sitting here doing nothing."

To that end, they have submitted formal plans for their "sustainable island" to the local Kingston upon Thames council, which holds the freehold of Raven's Ait.

"They're having a look at it", said Sirius Green, who drew up the draft plans.

A council spokesman denied this was the case. "The occupiers have been informed that the council will not discuss any proposal whilst they remain on the island," he said, noting that an eviction order had been issued.

The squatters respond that their aim is "to give it back to the people, to protect it, so that it's not sold off to privatized interests," said Green, claiming that a hotel chain wants to take it over.

Kingston council says only that there are "companies interested", giving no further details.

The squatters say they have an "excellent relationship" with locals, even if some press reporters have suggested that some well-heeled Kingston residents are angry at the "long-haired hippies" occupying the hitherto upmarket island.

"They don't pay any rights nor fees. They don't have any right to be here," said one member of a nearby boat club.

The Raven's Ait squatters say they have nothing to hide -- offering to ferry anyone interested across to the island to take a tour.

A wooden tree-house has been built in the tallest tree on the island, and picnics are encouraged, while at the weekend workshops are organised including on natural healing methods and massage.

On the Queen's Promenade, a path which runs along the riverbank across from the island, people are reluctant to criticise the squatters.

"They're serving the community", said Sharon, a young mother throwing pieces of bread to ducks with her young child in a push-chair.

Faced with an eviction order, the eco-activists have said they will leave in eight weeks' time, said Green.

But above the island a police helicopter occasionally appears, echoing a statement by Kingston's municipal authorities: "The Council is resolute in its determination to seek repossession of the Island."

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