

# The Ecovillage Movement

by Ross Jackson, *Permaculture magazine* No. 40, Summer 2004

*“Would it be an exaggeration to claim that the emergence of the ecovillage movement is the most significant event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? I don’t think so.”*

— sociologist Ted Trainer, University of New South Wales, Australia

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*“In my view, ecovillages, and the larger social movements of which they are an integral part, are the most promising and important movement in all of history.”*

— Robert Rosenthal, Professor of Philosophy, Hanover College

The “most significant event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”? The “most important movement in all of history”? Powerful words. Let us look at what is behind them.

When Findhorn community in northern Scotland announced the topic for their annual autumn conference in 1995 as “Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities”, they were overwhelmed with applications from all over the world, breaking all previous records. Eventually, they had to turn away about 400 people for lack of capacity in beautiful Universal Hall. Somehow they had struck a chord that resonated far and wide. The word “ecovillage”, which was barely four years old at the time, thus became part of the language of the Cultural Creatives. It was appropriate that the first major conference was at the “planetary village” of Findhorn — founded in 1962 — because it was one of the oldest and best known of the many intentional communities around the world. After October 1995, most of them, like Findhorn, began calling themselves “ecovillages”, and a new movement was born. Following the conference, a group of about 25 people, from almost as many countries, decided to formalize the sense of a major historic event by founding the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) to link the hundreds of small projects that had sprung up around the world with a common motivation, but without having knowledge of each other. Gaia Trust, Denmark, committed on the spot to fund the network for the first five years. <sup>1</sup>

## A Sustainable Lifestyle

Thus was born a new lifestyle movement, which may prove to be far more significant than has been realized to date in government circles and the media, who have yet to discover what is happening all across the world. The ecovillage movement — although still in its early embryonic stage — is a global phenomenon responding to global causes. It is best understood as a part of the anti-globalisation movement. But while the more visible parts of the anti-globalisation movement protest the corporate-dominated global economic model through demonstrations in the streets and consumer boycotts and through single issues movements, ecovillagers have a different approach. They are quietly building small, sustainable communities with their limited

resources, with personal commitment — walking their talk. They see ecovillages as models of how we must all live eventually, if the threat to our environment and social structures posed by corporate-led globalisation is to be taken seriously. It is a lifestyle possible for everybody on the planet.

Many politicians and others, who have observed the phenomenon, tend to classify ecovillagers as “idealists”, as if to dismiss them as irrelevant. But this reaction is flippant and quite misleading. The reality is that ecovillagers are the true “realists”, who take the threats to our way of life seriously, and are taking personal action to deal with the problem. It is our traditional politicians who are unwilling or unable to deal with the issues. They are living in a fantasy world that cannot continue for long. Their almost religious belief in unending economic growth as a solution to our problems is untenable and is simply delaying the time when serious action will have to be taken.

Politicians are taking the easy way out, while ecovillagers are confronting the problem head-on, doing the hard but necessary work with little or no support from the broader community. They are establishing the very foundation of a new culture, which society will eventually embrace, partly through necessity, but also because ecovillage living simply offers far more satisfying life conditions than the dominant Western model, as a closer examination would demonstrate to any curious citizen.

An ecovillage is, ideally speaking, a microcosm of the macrocosm, as it represents in a very small area — typically with 50-400 people — all the elements and all the problems present in the greater society, while providing visible solutions to these problems, whether it be living sustainably, resolving conflicts peacefully, creating jobs, raising children, providing relevant education, or simply enjoying and celebrating life. Contrast this with the broader Western society, with fragmented families, separation of work and home, separation of rich and poor, crime in the streets, and living in constant fear under stress, not least because deep down we all know that the current Western life-style of exaggerated consumption and social inequity is unsustainable and unjust on a global scale, and will come to an end sooner or later.

However, the ideal ecovillage does not exist. It is a work in process — a fundamental component of the new paradigm, where much is yet to be learned. What do exist are thousands of partial solutions in a myriad of variants on the same general theme, in different cultures, under different climactic conditions, and under different kinds of societies, but linked together, as if in one extended global family, by a common Life-based value system that defies traditional divisions of race, religion and culture. <sup>2</sup>

## **Motivation**

If we examine the motivations of ecovillagers, we find that they fall naturally into three categories — social, ecological and spiritual. Most ecovillages are dominated initially by one of these impulses, but tend gradually to integrate the other two aspects as they grow and come into contact with other members of the network. This is a quite natural evolution, as the three aspects are in reality just three components of any Life-based way of living, but it takes people a little time to realize this. Findhorn, for example, was originally a spiritually based community. But in recent years, it has begun to prioritise ecological building techniques for new homes. There are many examples of

the opposite, where a group that was inspired by ecological considerations, gradually and naturally developed an interest in personal development and various spiritual paths. Perhaps the most common motivation historically has been the social aspect, exemplified in the co-housing movement, which originated in Denmark in the late 1960s, and has since evolved into a variant of city-based ecovillage living in many countries. These people have realized that a closely-knit community simply improves the quality of social life, without sacrificing the privacy of one's own home. The latest development in Denmark is the exploding interest in senior co-housing projects, as many pensioners realize that they can still have a high-quality social life in their later years, and need not be isolated in some institution or even a home in an indifferent suburb or rural town. Note that in spite of differences in race, religion and culture, ecovillagers share the same vision, which can be summarized as the prioritising of community, culture and a natural environment above Money-based consumerism.

### **Global Ecovillage Network**

Many of these initiatives are now linked up by the Global Ecovillage Network, covering both the global North and South. The network includes three major regions. Europe has 20 national networks; in North and South America there are 9 bioregional networks; Asia has a less developed network, but it is growing steadily; Africa has just formed its first regional network recently. The networks include both the intentional communities of the North and the traditional villages of the South.

No one knows exactly how many ecovillages exist. Most have started up historically as local initiatives. Many are not yet connected to GEN. Our rough estimate of the number of intentional communities, including co-housing projects, would be about 4-5000, depending a little on the definition. Although Albert Bates of the GEN International board, estimates that there may be as many as 15,000 with a broad definition. The size of intentional ecovillages varies a lot, but is seldom greater than 500. Of course, the South is a different story, as hundreds of thousands of traditional villages still have their social structure intact, although they are under great pressure from commercial globalisation. The largest GEN constituent is the 40-year old Sri Lanka Sarvodaya movement, which includes about 12,000 traditional villages.

### **Root Causes**

The social aspect is undoubtedly the most important driving cause behind the ecovillage movement. To understand why, we must understand that the root causes of the current global crisis are a result of the dominant economic model. The key point here is that the neo-liberal economic system takes no account of the negative social and environmental effects of the production and trading of goods. In economic language, these effects are “externalized”, i.e. outside their models. As a consequence, their negative social and environmental damage has no economic value whatsoever. The damage literally becomes invisible — outside of the economists' field of vision. How else can one explain the so-called “green revolution” of India being claimed to be an “economic miracle” by free market advocates and an “unmitigated disaster” by the people of India.

Our current economic system is fundamentally flawed. The very basis of human existence is grounded in the Life-based systems of a community with a functioning social network existing in an environment of clean soil, water and air. And yet, our current economic system is destroying these life-based structures. By treating all Life-based aspects of society as being without commercial value, the system actually encourages environmental and social destruction. Ecovillagers consider such a system as patently absurd. The WTO rules give foreign commercial interests priority over local citizen interests, forcing nations to compete with each other by cutting corporate taxes, providing gratis infrastructure, subsidizing corporations through publicly funded research and other more direct tax breaks and subsidies, forcing wages down, closing down native industries and small businesses with subsequent rising unemployment, and not least, cutting back on the social benefits of the welfare state. In effect, corporate profit is pumped up artificially by extracting wealth from communities, working people and the environment. This is not real growth, but is more like a global cancer. It is in resistance to this self-destructive system that ecovillagers are reacting.

A system which creates financial profit for the few while destroying the very foundation of life-based existence for the many is unacceptable to the ecovillage movement. This realization is, of course, what is behind the whole anti-globalisation movement. Young people in particular see more clearly than their elders that our political leaders have made a fundamental, undemocratic error in ceding so much power to unelected corporate interests. Furthermore, they dare to challenge the holiest concept of the new corporate religion — economic growth. They are in no doubt that economic growth is a cruel illusion, and that it is destroying life and community everywhere. For them, a Life-based society, focusing on community, global equity, environment and diversity is their alternative vision for the future.

In the following, we will look at several aspects of this alternative vision, including some concrete examples relating to the design of human settlements, as evolved within the ecovillage movement over the last decade.

### **The Social Dimension**

In traditional political thinking, social networks are not usually seen as an important aspect of sustainability. But the social dimension is definitely critical. Ecovillages create holistic social models for an alternative to the destructive trends of our fragmented modern society. They create the possibility of raising children so that they experience the whole of society and nature within walking distance. They offer an alternative to consumerism and the institutionalisation of social services. For women they pose a realistic compromise between leaving the children to institutions or being isolated in sleepy suburbs. The increasing number of elderly is posing a real problem in many countries. The senior co-housing trend in Denmark is one solution for senior citizens. But an even better idea with superior social characteristics would be to integrate them in ecovillages having all age groups represented.

One of the newest Danish ecovillages, Munksøgaard, does just that! The same is true about the handicapped, unemployed and other marginalized groups. As social costs continue to rise and foreign commercial interests continue to extract wealth from local communities, the downward pressure on

the welfare state is going to be unbearable. Ecovillages may be the only way to keep the welfare state alive in the long run. In the event, it may well be economic pressures that finally forces politicians to act, realizing that by delegating responsibility to local communities rather than relying on impersonal and expensive institutional solutions, the ecovillage concept can solve social problems at lower cost and provide a higher quality of life and meaningful jobs at the same time. The extended family network has always been the preferred solution for real people. Eventually, our politicians will make a virtue out of necessity and start supporting them with public funds in a win-win cost-saving solution.

### **The Ecological Dimension**

Reduction of the pressure of human settlements on nature is the key to sustainability. The issue is lifestyle! Building ecovillages brings together home, workplace and recreational activities. It is this triple settlement structure that is the main culprit in consuming energy and producing CO<sup>2</sup> in our car-based society, as our gas-guzzlers race back and forth between home, work and summer cottage. But this structural aspect, which is partly a result of the dominant Money-based economic model with enormous indirect subsidies to the automobile, is seldom recognized in the public debate. Ecovillages create work where people live, produce fresh local foods and allow for a diversity of recreational and creative activities, all within walking distance, resulting in a higher quality of life while using fewer resources. Examples of better-known ecovillages where the ecological motive was dominant are Crystal Waters in Australia and Earthhaven in the USA. Both are global leaders in permaculture techniques. Crystal Waters transformed itself from a dry and desolate wasteland into a beautiful paradise of high trees and beautiful ponds and swimming holes in less than twenty years. They have produced a beautiful video that documents the transformation.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Spiritual Dimension**

Many ecovillages have been created by people who want a more spiritual lifestyle. A change in consciousness is often a factor in choosing such a lifestyle. Findhorn in Scotland, Auroville in India, Lebensgarten, Zegg and Sieben Linden in Germany, Hertha in Denmark, Tamera in Portugal, and Damanhur in Italy are some of the better-known ones. They try to live a new worldview of global interconnectedness and solidarity. Within GEN, spiritual and religious diversity is seen as a blessing and not as a problem. We see Buddhists, Moslems, Hindus, Christians and Jews coexisting happily with each other and with other lesser-known spiritual traditions, not to mention atheists. They meditate and celebrate together with total mutual respect as they learn from each other without any problems. One of the favourite pastimes at GEN meetings is learning new circle dances from different cultures. Ecovillage Living is a simple, mindful life, which is possible for everyone on the planet.

### **Going Mainstream**

Ecovillages have to date been developed and built by groups of people rather than traditional developers. This human aspect is an important part of creating community and “glue” in a settlement as opposed to just building a

new suburb with buildings but no “soul”. The mainstream adaptation of the ecovillage concept will require a reorganisation of the traditional thinking of the building industry. We need smaller firms — with more flexible, more ecological methods — which accept the idea of co-designing settlements with their future inhabitants. The role of architects and public authorities must also change to support participatory processes and to accommodate such things as compost toilets, more flexible zoning laws, local renewable energy and local biological wastewater treatment. These shifts need a change in mentality but pose no great difficulties. The technologies are all well known in ecovillage circles, but seldom in traditional consulting engineering firms.

Many ecovillage principles are beginning to influence traditional town planners, such as peripheral parking, common community facilities and central open spaces without fences. Below is shown the design of one of the newest Danish ecovillages — Munksøgaard, consisting of 5 clusters of 20 homes. It is so mainstream that it has a long waiting list of “normal” people wanting to get in.



**Figure 1: Munksøgaard Ecovillage, Denmark**

A common pattern in establishing a new project is: get a group together with a common vision; find a site, for example 100-200 acres of land adjacent to an existing settlement; start with one cluster of homes of 20-30 households; include rental, coops and owner homes together; add more later; and start a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme. Unfortunately, the process can take many years to get off the ground because society is not generally friendly to the ecovillage concept, which challenges traditional

thinking. Ecovillage at Ithaca in upper New York State is one example of doing it this way. Of course, this does not work in inner-cities, which have different problems.

### **Inner City Ecovillages**

While the word “ecovillage” suggests to some a strictly rural setting, this is not so. The unifying concept has always been one of lifestyle, whether intentional or traditional, and whether rural or urban. Ecovillages are just as relevant in inner cities, though fewer examples exist to date because of the far greater difficulty of establishment. A key design aspect in cities is that all major functions of daily life need to be within walking distance; in particular, a local food market is critical. Traffic patterns must be redesigned with greater emphasis on comfortable public transport and more automobile-free areas.

Once the concept of ecovillages is accepted and begins spreading as a new paradigm in lifestyle, suburbs and inner cities can gradually be turned into functioning ecovillages. But it requires conscious public support because of all the current barriers to change. To date most inner city ecovillage projects have focused on retrofitting existing buildings — putting external greenhouses onto an apartment block, growing food on the roof of a high-rise, introducing energy-saving appliances and structures, and establishing social networks in the neighbourhood, coordinating community supported agriculture projects with a local farmer, etc. But it is tough work when almost everything in the current system is a barrier.

A recent example of a “brownfield” inner city ecovillage is the Beddington Zero Emissions Development, or BedZED in south London, UK. The project was initiated by a large housing association, the Peabody Trust, in co-operation with an environmental organisation called BioRegional and Bill Dunster Architects. As the name suggests this 82-unit project is of the ecological type, with the major focus on ecological building. The building maximizes passive solar features, has 300mm super-insulation, and triple-glazed windows, eliminating the need for central heating, as well as water-saving appliances and rain collection. Energy needs are met by a woodchips from waste timber in an on-site power plant. Monitoring shows that residents achieve enormous savings relative to the average UK figures — 56% on water consumption and 55-65% on electricity bills.



**Figure 2: BedZED Ecovillage, London**

A “green transport plan” with the support of the local community promotes walking, cycling, and a car pool with electric vehicles charged by on-site photovoltaic cells, and good public transport links. In addition, residents have a link to a local organic farmer, while many grow their own food and compost their wastes.

The residents are enthusiastic. As one woman said, “The community aspect is the best I have ever experienced.” That comment is especially interesting because the residents were not included in the planning phase, as is the case in most ecovillage projects. This suggests that the very concept of an overall ecological vision for the project has stimulated a sense of community among strangers. “I organized a get-together on the village green and 60 people came,” said one member enthusiastically. BedZED, like Munksøgaard, is a breakthrough project that demonstrates for the mainstream, and not least, for politicians and city planners, the attractiveness and feasibility of the ecovillage concept, whether rural, inner city or suburban. With a lower ecological footprint and an improved quality of life, what are we waiting for, folks? <sup>4</sup>

### **A New Development Model for the South?**

People in the South grasp the revolutionary potential of ecovillages much quicker than Northerners. They still have their social fabric more or less intact and see the ecovillage model as fully compatible with their village-based culture. Just as important, they can see directly how the so-called “structural adjustment” policies of the IMF in practice means destruction of their local communities — the very fabric of their lives, while the ecovillage concept does the opposite. Thus the idea of using the ecovillage concept as an alternative development model has surfaced recently in Senegal, the first government to officially adopt the ecovillage vision as a key part of its strategic development policy, and the first nation anywhere to actively support the formation of an ecovillage network. This network is now being extended as a cooperative venture to all of West Africa. A new ecovillage-based development model for

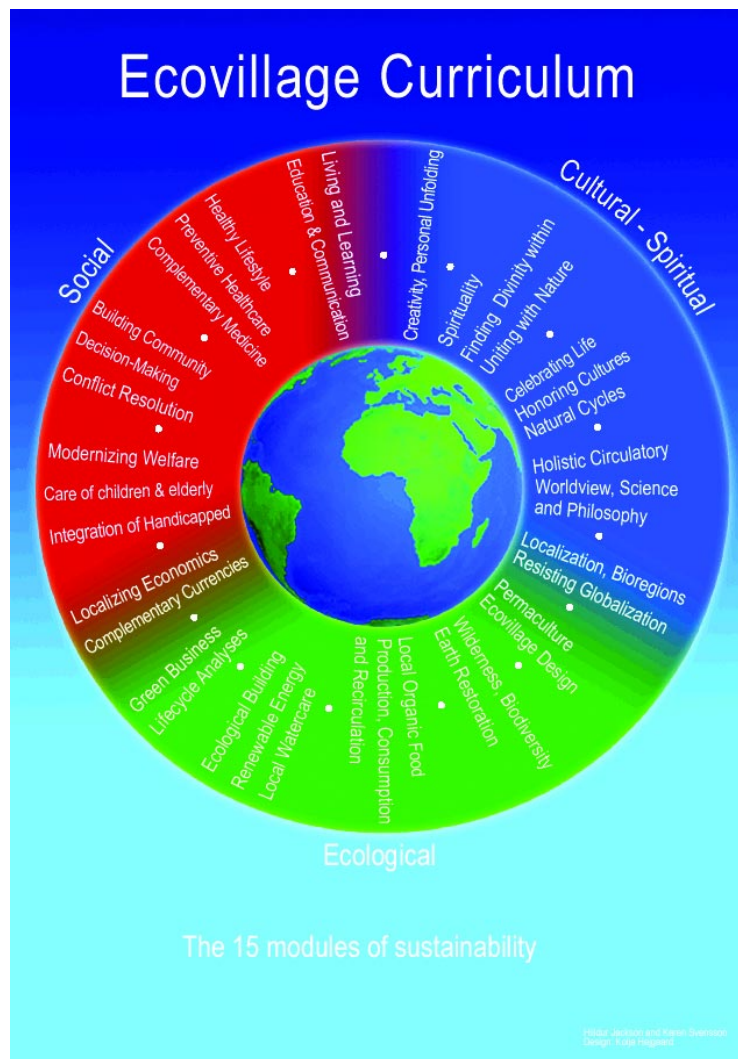


North and South may be what the planet needs more than anything to create true co-operation, while eradicating global inequities, mass migration, terrorism and creating a truly sustainable future.

## **Education**

While more and more universities are introducing programs in environmental studies, the focus tends to be on the academic side rather than changing lifestyle, which is the root problem. It is not possible to understand the ecovillage concept in a classroom. You have to get out there and experience it — by helping to build a straw bale house, designing a biological waste-water treatment facility, learning sacred dances, making a permaculture design for a new site, experiencing first hand how ecovillage decision-making and conflict resolution works, etc. A few pioneering universities are starting to do this, for example, within the Living Routes program in the USA.<sup>5</sup> As part of their accredited education, students spend 1-3 months visiting an ecovillage in what GEN calls the “living and learning” experience – a combination of theory and hands-on practice. For example, Findhorn, Auroville, Crystal Waters and Plum Village (France) have all received such students. The now classical student reaction, as documented in many student evaluations is that it is “a life-changing experience”. Many students from the USA and Japan, particularly city dwellers, never dreamed that such an appealing community life was possible, or that such *fun* was possible, and return to their countries with a new sense of meaning in their lives — determined to make it happen there too.

Educators within the ecovillage movement are currently discussing the creation of a comprehensive educational program for sustainability, which would integrate the concepts of organic farming, permaculture, renewable energy, wastewater treatment, facilitation of meetings, ecological building, conflict resolution and much more into a program which can be taught at ecovillages and illustrated with on-site field work. Hildur Jackson, a co-founder of GEN, has proposed as a fifteen-module curriculum with five topics in each of the three major areas; social, ecological and spiritual/cultural.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3: Education in Sustainability**

Current thinking is that this curriculum might be offered initially in Europe in co-operation with leading ecovillages, as a three week program, for example as a summer school program for American university students. Later it could be expanded into a full two-year education.

### **How Can Governments Support the Ecovillage Movement?**

Western governments are currently subsidizing the unsustainable economic growth model with billions of Euros, undermining the efforts of their own people who are trying to live up to the ideals of Agenda 21 proclaimed by these same governments. If just a small fraction of these subsidies could be redirected to support the people trying to build truly sustainable communities, it could make a world of difference. There are many people waiting in line to join this movement, but zoning laws and traditional thinking are major obstacles. Getting land and building permission, together with educating ecovillage designers, represent the eye of the needle that the camel has to get through.

### **Recent Ecovillage Material**

Two recent books on ecovillages deserve special mention for those who wish to know more. *Ecovillage Living* presents a kaleidoscope of over 400 colour images from ecovillages on six continents around the world along with dozens of articles on all aspects of the movement from the GEN pioneers themselves.<sup>7</sup> *Creating a Life Together* is a practical, hands-on book that deals with all the nitty gritty of actually getting a project off the ground, and supplements the first book perfectly.<sup>8</sup> With these two books in hand, anyone can make it happen anywhere.

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## References

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