

Ecovillage Roots (and Branches)

When, where, and how we re-invented this ancient village concept.

By *Albert Bates* 2930 words: 1759, text; 213, 1st sidebar; 335, 2nd sidebar; 623, 2nd sidebar;

Ecovillages came into being through apparently simultaneous ideas arising in different locations at about the same time.

In 1975 the magazine *Mother Earth News* began constructing experimental energy systems, novel buildings, and organic gardens near its business office in Hendersonville, North Carolina, and in 1979, began calling this educational center an “eco-village.”

At about the same time in Germany, during the political resistance against disposal of nuclear waste in the town of Gorleben, anti-nuclear activists attempted to build a small, ecologically based village at the site, which they called an *ökodorf* (literally ecovillage). In the largest police action seen in Germany since the Second World War, their camp was ultimately removed, but the concept lived on, and small *ökodorf* experiments continued in both eastern and western Germany. The magazine *Ökodorf Informationen* began publishing in 1985 and later evolved into *Eurotopia*. After reunification of Germany, the movement coalesced and became part of the international ecovillage movement.

About the same time in Denmark, a number of intentional communities began looking beyond the social benefits of cohousing and other cooperative forms of housing towards the ecological potentials of a more thorough redesign of human habitats. In 1993 a small group of communities inaugurated the Danish ecovillage network, *Landsforeningen for Økosamfund*, the first network of its kind and a model for the larger ecovillage movement that was to follow.

For the past half century environmental scientists have been warning of the consequences of unchecked industrial development, exploding human population, and proliferating weapons technology, but few proposed any comprehensive solutions. Thus we drift, as Einstein observed, towards unparalleled catastrophes: global warming, famines, accelerating extinctions, and weapons of mass destruction—bio, robo, nano,

info, and nuclear—in the hands of small terrorist cells with opaque ideologies, or worse (as in the case of Colombia), no ideologies at all. Ecovillages, on the other hand, pose a universal solution: voluntary, culturally sensitive, democratic, spiritually attuned, pacifist, in harmony with the natural world. Ecovillages work from the bottom up, making individual lifestyle change the cornerstone of global transformation—a sustainable balance of human and ecological needs.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990, on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, Robert and Diane Gilman used their journal, *In Context*, to publish stories and interviews describing ecovillages as a strategy for creating a more sustainable culture. When Hildur Jackson, a Danish attorney and social activist, discovered *In Context*, the ecovillage movement suddenly got traction.

Ross Jackson, Hildur's husband, was a Canadian computer whiz who had been working in the financial market, writing programs to predict shifts in international currencies. When he took his algorithms public as Gaia Corporation, his models made a fortune for his investors, but Ross, being a deeply spiritual man, wanted little of it for himself. Searching for the best way to use their prosperity, Ross and Hildur contacted the Gilmans and organized some gatherings of visionaries at Fjordvang, the Jackson's retreat in rural Denmark, to mull over the needs of the world.

Three strategies with potential leverage emerged from those meetings. The first was inspired by Swedish physician Karl Henrik Robert's "green cell" model, from which came the Natural Step program for reforming industrial goals. The second was reform of the standard Western educational model, the pedagogy which prepares children for specialized, compartmentalized lives and deaths in large produce-and-consume machine-like economies. The educational reform called for new and alternative courses, curricula, and learning centers. The third strategy, inspired in part by young Russians whose country was experiencing rapid transformation from a planned economy to a free market, was to assist estranged youth to build alternative models for how humans might *actually live* sustainably; that is: ecovillages.

Ross Jackson was also interested in utilizing the new information technology that was just then emerging: email and electronic file exchanges between universities and research centers (although it would still be a few years before the appearance of shareware browsers and the open-to-all World Wide Web).

Ross and Hildur Jackson created a charitable foundation, the Gaia Trust, and endowed it with 90 percent of their share of company profits. In 1990, Gaia Trust asked *In Context* to produce a report, *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, in order to catalog the various efforts at sustainable community living underway around the world,

and to describe the emerging philosophy and principles in greater detail. The report was released in 1991 as a spiral bound book (now out of print).

In September 1991, Gaia Trust convened a meeting in Fjordvang to bring together people from eco-communities to discuss strategies for further developing the ecovillage concept. This led to a series of additional meetings to form national and international networks of ecovillages, and a decision, in 1994, to formalize networking and project development under the auspices of a new organization, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN).

By 1994 the Internet had reached the point where access was becoming available outside the realm of university and government agencies and contractors. Mosaic was the universal browser of the day, and the first Internet cafés had begun to appear in major cities. Ross Jackson brought in a young Swedish web technician, Stephan Wik, who'd had a computer services business at Findhorn, and the Ecovillage Information Service was launched from Fjordvang at www.gaia.org. With Stephan and his co-workers gathering both the latest in hardware advances and outstanding ecovillage content from around the world, [gaia.org](http://www.gaia.org) began a steady growth of "hits," increasing 5 to 15 percent per month, that would go on for the next several years, making the GEN database a major portal for sustainability studies.

In October 1995, Gaia Trust and the Findhorn Foundation co-sponsored the first international conference "Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities—Models for the 21st Century," held at Findhorn in Scotland. After the conference, GEN held a formative meeting and organized three worldwide administrative regions: Europe and Africa; Asia and Oceania; and the Americas. Each region was to be overseen by a secretariat office responsible for organizing local ecovillage networks and developing outreach programs to encourage growth of the movement. A fourth secretariat was established in Copenhagen to coordinate all the offices, seek additional funding, and oversee the website. The first regional secretaries, chosen at the Findhorn meeting, were Declan Kennedy, Max Lindegger, and myself. Hamish Stewart was the first international secretary.

With generous funding from Gaia Trust for this new model, the ecovillage movement experienced rapid growth. Kibbutzim that re-vegetated the deserts of Palestine in the 20th century developed a new outlook with the formation of the Green Kibbutz Network. The Russian Ecovillage Network was inaugurated. Permaculture-based communities in Australia such as Crystal Waters and Jarlanbah pioneered easy paths to more environmentally sensitive lifestyles for the mainstream middle class. GEN-Europe hosted conferences attended by ecovillagers from dozens of countries, and

national networks sprang up in many of them. In South and North America, nine representatives were designated to organize ecovillage regions by geography and language. By the turn of the 21st century GEN had catalogued thousands of ecovillages, built “living and learning centers” in several of them, launched ecovillage experiments in universities, and sponsored university-based travel semesters to ecovillages on six continents.

GEN also made the ecovillage concept heard in the corridors of government. By 2001 it had obtained consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It was in attendance at Habitat-II in Istanbul, the World Social Forum, and the World Summit in Johannesburg, handing out its books and action plans to delegates and policy makers. Working with a coalition of UN agencies, private companies, and governments, GEN began to provide training seminars and consulting services to municipal leaders, architects, and city planners throughout the world.

Ecovillages today are typically small communities with a tightly-knit social structure united by common ecological, social, or spiritual views. These communities may be urban or rural, high or low technologically, depending on circumstance and conviction. Oködorf Seiben Linden is a zero-energy cohousing settlement for 200 people in a rural area of eastern Germany. Los Angeles EcoVillage is a neighborhood around an intersection in inner Los Angeles. Sasardi Village is in the deep rainforest of Northern Colombia. What they share is a deep respect for nature, with humans as an integral part of natural cycles. Ecovillages address social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability in an integrated way, with human communities as part of, not apart from, balanced ecologies.

Although influenced by utopian philosophers such as Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Rudolf Steiner, Arne Naess, Bill Mollison, John Seed, Ralph Borsodi, Leopold Kohr, George Ramsey, Helen and Scott Nearing, J.R. Rodale, and others, ecovillagers break new ground, learn as they go, and bring needed change to zoning laws, tax laws, building codes, and social patterns, in support of sustainable human development.

The year 2003 finds GEN at a new crossroads. It maintains much of the same structure it began with a decade earlier: three elected regional secretaries and three elected regional delegates make up the board; the international secretary has been dropped; and an advisory council has been added. But our seed funding from Gaia Trust has come to an end and ecovillagers, being outside of, or in the early stages of, the wealth-creation process, are unable, through membership dues, to pay for the expensive administration of a global network (just bringing six people from six different countries to a meeting can be very costly!), so at this writing the future of GEN is uncertain. It may

be that GEN will become a smaller, more volunteer-based, collection of communication efforts. Or it may be that readers (such as yourself) will see the vital importance of shortening the glacial learning curve of *homo sapiens* and will help to fund the next wave of useful and attractive experiments in sustainable living.

As environmental scientist Bill Metcalf (and *Communities* magazine columnist) first observed in 1977, any real solutions to the global environmental crises of the present era must necessarily begin with changes in lifestyle. Ecovillages are now providing both an individual vessel and a cultural vehicle for rapid evolutionary transformation.

Albert Bates is one of the three Regional Secretaries of GEN and a founder of the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA). He is director of Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee and co-editor of this issue. ecovillage@thefarm.org.

Donations to GEN, made payable to Global Ecovillage Network, may be sent to Ecovillage Training Center, Box 90-C, Summertown, TN 38483. For online giving: www.ecovillage.org/English/Intro/Get_Involved.html.

Pull quotes:

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Sidebar #1:

Where They Are

213 words

Here's a sample of some of the more well-known ecovillage projects to date. Some of them were formed as spiritual, social, or service-oriented intentional communities in the '60s, '70s, or '80s, and began calling

themselves ecovillages later, as they become more aware of and committed to ecological, social, and/or spiritual sustainability in the 1990s.

Europe:

Solheimer, Iceland, 1930.

Camphill Communities, 1930s–Present

Findhorn Foundation, Scotland, 1962.

Damanhur, Italy, 1977.

Svanholm, Denmark, 1978.

Lebensgarten, Germany, 1985.

Torri Superiore, Italy, 1989.

Munkesoegaard, Denmark, 1995.

Oködorf Sieben Linden, Germany, 2000.

Middle East and Africa:

Yoff, Senegal, 1400s.

Thlolego, South Africa, 1990.

Green Kibbutz Group, Israel, 1996

Asia, Pacific, and Australia:

Tanamalwila, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka, 1970s.

Crystal Waters, Queensland, 1988.

Jarlanbah, Australia, 1990s.

South America:

Reserva Integral Sasardi, Colombia, 1985.

Institute for Permaculture and Ecovillages in the Cerrado, Brazil, 1990s.

Marquina Ecovillage, Boliva, 1998.

Centro Venezolano de Ecoaldeas y Permacultura, Venezuela, 1990s.

Ecoaldea Fronteriza El Pauji, Venezuela, 1990s.

North America:

Camphill Communities, 1930s–Present

The Farm, Tennessee, 1970.

Huehucoyotl, Tepoztlan, Mexico, 1973.

Sirius, Massachusetts, 1978.

Earthaven, North Carolina, 1990.
Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York, 1992.
Dancing Rabbit, Missouri, 1993.
Los Angeles Ecovillage, California, 1993.
O.U.R. Ecovillage, British Columbia, 1990-99.

—*Diana Leafe Christian*

Sidebar #2 - 342 words

An Ecovillage Education

Many communities offer workshops and courses as part of their central mission or as a side-business, but few of these programs are specifically targeted at creating ecovillages or educating people specifically to become ecovillagers.

In April 1994, the Ecovillage Training Center was inaugurated at The Farm community in Summertown, Tennessee. In October of that year, the Center hosted a gathering of environmental educators to address the idea of using ecovillages as models for advanced instruction.

The planning meetings brought together ecovillagers from North and South America, Europe, Russia, and Africa, career educators, permaculturists, media professionals, and others. Over a period of a few weeks, they brainstormed about what a curriculum for ecovillagers might include. From this some standard workshop themes emerged: organic gardening; natural buildings; village design; conflict transformation; consensus; health and natural healing. The common thread seemed to be the conscious design of lifestyles that are elegantly frugal, holistically balanced, and responsible for the many generations still to come. Similar meetings within the ecovillage movement have continued to explore the potentials of this new, immersion form of learning ever since, most recently at Damanhur in Italy in 2002.

The Center itself also became a laboratory for experimentation in sustainable technologies, methodologies, and culture.

In December of 1994, the Ecovillage Training Center put out the first issue of *ENNA*, a newsletter of the “Ecovillage Network of North America,” which, in 1998, became *Ecovillages*, official newsletter of the Ecovillage Network of the Americas. This newsletter is published today in Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French. The Center also launched a website in 1994, which eventually became www.ecovillage.org.

Today the training center at The Farm is one of many such projects around the United States and Canada, and in the rest of the world, serving as model living spaces, within the larger framework of aspiring eco-community. These centers offer instruction from their own experience, and an opportunity to try on the lifestyle for a little while, to see if it suits you.

—A.B.

Sidebar #3:
Living and Learning Centers

by Philip Snyder 623 words

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) works cooperatively with Living and Learning Centers in Sri Lanka, Brazil, and Senegal to provide hands-on training in green technologies and regenerative systems. As part of the international ecovillage movement, these Living and Learning Centers are evolving a collaborative system of experience, education, and research for their countries.

Based upon a partnership education model in which instructors and students mutually learn from each other, the comprehensive educational programs at these centers integrate the traditional wisdom, knowledge and skills of each society with permaculture design and related appropriate technologies for organic food production, waste recycling, ecological restoration, and renewable energy.

Tanamalwila Living and Learning Center, Sri Lanka. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka, begun more than 40 years ago, is the largest people's self-help organization in the country. With over 13,000 member villages, a strong organizational structure, and extensive outreach, Sarvodaya takes an integrated, holistic approach to development, peace, and spiritual awakening that reaches all areas and ethnic groups of the island. Its guiding vision is of a society with no poverty and no affluence, based on principles of truth, non-violence, and self-sacrifice, and governed by ideals of participatory democracy and human rights. Sarvodaya's Tanamalwila Living and Learning Center marries this vision with ecology on a diverse 350-acre site. The center is currently running training

programs for Sri Lankan villagers in permaculture, ecovillage design, and enhancing biodiversity, to name a few, while hosting international programs from Japan, Australia, Europe, and the United States. www.sarvodaya.org.

Institute for Permaculture and Ecovillages in the Cerrado (IPEC), Brazil. Collaborating closely with its partner PAL (Permacultura Latina America), IPEC develops sustainable systems to address Brazil's social and ecological problems. IPEC runs an *ecoversidade* (ecoversity)—the Mollison Center for Sustainable Studies, named after Bill Mollison, co-founder of permaculture. The Center's purpose is to demonstrate permaculture solutions to rural living and to train people to implement them throughout Brazil. This center works closely with four other permaculture centers, each based in one of the other major ecoregions of the country. The first nine-month, in-residence training, currently underway, is a comprehensive program of study, practical application, and outreach in all aspects of sustainable communities: design, ecosystem cultivation, natural building, water, renewable energy, waste recycling, holistic health, etc. IPEC is also the central hub for the rapidly developing national permaculture network, and publishes the magazine *Permacultura Brasil*. www.permacultura.org.br/ipec.

EcoYoff, Senegal. Coordinated by the non-governmental organization CRESP-Senegal, EcoYoff is a sustainable community development program based in the ancient fishing community of Yoff, now a small city incorporated into the capital city of Dakar. In addition to sponsoring local education and research programs dedicated to community development, health, and nutrition, EcoYoff offers a variety of urban permaculture projects, including the construction of the Yoff Habitat Ecovillage as a living demonstration of sustainable systems for urban Africa. Accredited programs in cooperation with North American universities include a month-long course in sustainable development, offering a full immersion into the traditional life of this African community. EcoYoff functions as the hub and catalyst for the new Senegalese Ecovillage Network, which recently received a United Nations Development Program grant for improving the economic and ecological sustainability of its 12 member villages. EcoYoff also manages a major Internet education and information program serving Senegal and West Africa. www.cresp.sn.

Each center operates amid great demands and limited resources. Already rich with positive, inspiring examples and programs, these Living and Learning Centers are, in E.F. Schumacher's words, "making a viable future visible in the present."

Philip Snyder is an organizational development consultant and former director of the international office of the Global Ecovillage Network based in Denmark.