
EDITORIAL

What Is an “Ecovillage”?

Linda Joseph and Albert Bates 965 words

Among the most frequently asked questions of the offices of the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA) are: “What is an ecovillage?” “How do I create an ecovillage?” Or, “What does my community need to do to qualify as an ecovillage?” “ Sometimes we get questions about whether a particular community can or should be entitled to call itself an ecovillage at all.

In helping develop the number and networking connections of ecovillages, and the ecovillage movement as a whole, the Ecovillage Network of the Americas and the two other Global Ecovillage Network divisions (GEN Europe/Africa, and GEN Oceania/Asia) have attempted to define and evolve the definition of ecovillage, since the term first came into use. Robert and Diane Gilman, in *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities* (1991), offered the following definition, which we use as a starting point: “A human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.”

Ecovillages typically build on various combinations of three dimensions: social, ecological, and spiritual. These dimensions also describe the reasons why people most often are attracted to ecovillage living, although one of these dimensions may predominate more than others in some ecovillage projects and be completely absent in others. The Community Sustainability Assessment Tool is a self-administered survey created by the Global Ecovillage Network to show the many approaches—including those in the social, ecological, and spiritual dimensions—that can be taken to make a community more sustainable. (*See “Ecovillage Resources,” p. ___.*)

From the early stages of our networking activities, we and other ecovillage activists considered whether it would be useful and appropriate to specify criteria and establish a minimum threshold of achievement for a community to identify itself as an ecovillage. We decided that we’re not about sitting in judgment and monitoring; rather, we’re encouraging everyone to do what they can in order to live sustainably. The CSA became an auditing tool communities could use to find direction and identify steps they

could take. It is a measuring rod, allowing comparison to other communities. Perhaps more importantly, it allows an ecovillage to track its own progress against a somewhat more objective standard.

In 1998, at a sustainability and education conference held in conjunction with a GEN board meeting in Denmark, attendees affirmed that a community is an ecovillage if it specifies an ecovillage mission, such as in its organizational documents, community agreements, or membership guidelines, and makes progress in that direction. No “ecovillage police” enforce these standards. Rather, the Ecovillage Network of the Americas and the other GEN divisions offer connection with other aspiring ecovillages, and an opportunity to exchange experiences and methodologies, information and fellowship.

Sometimes people question our rather liberal position about what constitutes an ecovillage. We’ll get mail asking whether a community can really be an ecovillage if a particular aspect of sustainable living isn’t in place. Sometimes we’re asked if our choice to be more inclusive doesn’t detrimentally impact the ecovillage movement as a whole.

We respond that the ecovillage movement is too wide-reaching and experimental to fit some tidy model with enforceable standards. We stand at the junction between two millennia. The past one was about building societies that ran on fossil sunlight and militarism. The next one, still a mystery, must be more conscientious and humane or we won’t survive.

There may be, among more than 15,000 identified sustainable community experiments, no single example of an “ecovillage” in the sense of a full-featured human community untainted by earlier technologies, or polluting material flows, or which hasn’t engaged in theft of our future natural heritage to some extent. The discrepancy between the dream and the reality of sustainability is an important ongoing topic for all ecovillage activists to explore.

The challenge of transforming urban environs is especially difficult. The alternatives, displacing topsoil and other biota for new expanses of steel and concrete, or suffering drastic human population cuts, are both unthinkably cruel and unsustainable. So it has to happen. There have to be vertically oriented ecovillages. Ecocity Cleveland is inspired by the example of Los Angeles Eco-Village. That neither are as far along as, say, a rainforest eco-settlement in rural Columbia or a permaculture village in suburban Australia is more a measure of the greater distance city reformers have to travel than any lack of resolve.

Our ecovillage movement is blessed with diversity. From rural to urban, neighborhood experiments to large districts in transition, in many cultures and

geopolitical climates, people are reading the handwriting on the wall and getting on with the work that must be done. They are not waiting for government or foundation grants. They are picking up shovels and hoes and building the future, often without a blueprint or even the ability to read and write. It is on the shoulders of these pioneers that the dreams we all have now rest—for peace, security, prosperity, family, and happiness into the coming generations of our children—whether they, or we, recognize it yet.

Be they traditional, tribal settlements or urban retrofits, young and forming or seasoned and well-rounded, for the ecovillage network, there are still many possible answers to the question “What is an ecovillage?” We like them all.

Linda Joseph, president of Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA), lives at EarthArt Village in Moffat, Colorado, linda@ecovillage.org. Albert Bates, ENA International Secretary, is director of Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee and co-editor of this issue. ecovillage@thefarm.org. Context Institute and In Context Journal: [/www.context.org](http://www.context.org).

For further perspectives, click on “What is an ecovillage?” at the GEN website, gen.ecovillage.org, or that of the Ecovillage Network of the Americas website, ena.ecovillage.org, to access additional and different perspectives.

Pull quotes:

**“A human-scale,
full-featured settlement
in which human activities
are harmlessly integrated
into the natural world in a way
that is supportive
of healthy human development
and can be successfully continued
into the indefinite future.”**

The ecovillage movement is too wide-reaching and experimental to fit some tidy model with enforceable standards.

In many cultures and geopolitical climates, people are reading the handwriting on the wall and getting on with the work that must be done.

