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After decades of being more or less off the radar—dismissed as kooks and freaks—ecovillage initiatives around the world are now increasingly affecting mainstream culture, and in fact, ecovillages are being sought out as partners by conventional, mainstream organisations. A few examples:

- The United Nations, through its UNDP Global Environment Facility, is now funding 30-some ecovillages in Senegal—which comprise Global Ecovillage Network/Senegal (GEN Senegal).

- La Caravana (“The Rainbow Caravan of Peace”) is a “mobile ecovillage,” a bus caravan of artists and ecological activists who have toured Latin America for 10 years teaching sustainability and ecovillage skills to towns and villages where they stop with music and theatre. The legendary Brazilian singer, Gilberto Gill, who is now Brazil’s Minister of Culture, describes La Caravana as “the most original socio-cultural experiment in Latin America.” Brazil’s Ministry of Culture is funding La Caravana to help develop 50 community-based cultural centres in Brazilian towns and villages,

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- A local government authority in Germany recently gave a prestigious award to ZEGG, an ecovillage in Belzig, Germany, for its work promoting bioregional development.

- The German legislature recently changed its planning regulations to allow strawbale buildings without going through the lengthy and expensive process of seeking planning permission, thanks to the advocacy work by another German ecovillage, Sieben Linden in Poppau, Germany.

“Living Culture Points,” in which Brazilians will learn how to use the arts to help teach sustainability and permaculture to others throughout Brazil.

- Regional planners in Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, created a brand-new zoning classification, “Rural Residential Comprehensive Development Zoning,” allowing new kinds of sustainable land uses and have set a precedent for progressive zoning across Canada,

as a result of advocacy by O.U.R. Ecovillage in the Shawnigan Lake area. (See *"When 'No' is Just an Uneducated 'Yes',"* pg. 39.) These examples represent the tip of a much larger iceberg.

Yet it is easy to forget just how little—and just how recently—mainstream society has paid attention to the sustainability agenda. In this context, many activists from the 1960s onward who understood the deeply destructive nature of the dominant industrial paradigm felt they had little choice but to opt out and attempt to model the new, Gaian paradigm from outside the mainstream.

is driving a growing trend, especially among the young, towards downsizing and simplifying one's lifestyle. The failures of modern agriculture and health systems have stimulated renewed interest in organic, locally-based food and holistic therapies.

In short, we are witnessing the beginnings of what may prove to be a seismic socio-cultural revolution.

Findhorn Foundation in northern Scotland, the 45-year-old, 500-member community where I live, is a fine illustration of how a local ecovillage can affect its regional culture. While we certainly have contact with and initiate numerous

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a seismic socio-cultural revolution.***

Working "outside the system" was a key impulse in the evolution of the modern ecovillage movement. And until recently, the mainstream and alternative paradigms have run along parallel tracks, with precious few contacts between them. Few in the mainstream had either an understanding of or an interest in what ecovillages were up to.

Now, things are changing very quickly. Societies are rapidly waking up to the uncomfortable reality of being caught between the rock of Peak Oil and the hard place of global climate change. Widespread alienation from rampant consumerism

kinds of outreach to neighbouring Scottish communities in Moray County, local officials had little interest in what we were up to, until five years or so ago.

Two research studies have helped turn that around. The first was commissioned in 2002 by a local organisation to promote local enterprise, now called Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE Moray), to study how Findhorn might be affecting the local economy. They concluded that the presence of our ecovillage has created 400 jobs and injects about £5 million into the Scottish economy every year.



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Strawbale house in ecovillage section of Findhorn.



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One of Findhorn's harvest festivals.

The second study, co-financed by HIE Moray and overseen by the locally-based Sustainable Development Research Centre, found that our community had the lowest ecological footprint score ever measured in the industrialised world—at 2.71 hectares—a fraction over half the national average in the UK.

Clearly, results like these suggested that there was something happening down on the Findhorn peninsula. Mainstream people began to sit up and take notice, and links with a wide variety of organisations started to develop. For example:

- Local organizations, including Moray Against Poverty, began hiring a member-owned community-based business, Find-



Visitors to Findhorn planting trees.



The coldframes in the community's Cullerne Garden.

horn Foundation Consultancy, which teaches social technologies such as leadership skills, group-building, conflict facilitation and the like.

- The Soil Association (Britain's premier organic farming organisation) and, more recently, the Highlands and Islands Food Network, used Findhorn's EarthShare Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project as a training and demonstration centre for CSA programs of their own. EarthShare was the UK's first and largest organic CSA program.

- A local energy company, Highlands and Islands Community Energy Company (HICEC), provided expertise and a grant to help pay the costs of our environmental impact assessment for the three wind turbines we erected in early

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2006. (The four turbines we now have in place generate a 40 percent surplus relative to electricity use at the community's main campus, enabling us to export electric power to the national grid and providing us with a handsome income.)

- Links with HICEC remain active. Three Findhorn members were recently employed on a consultancy basis to design a "carbon-neutral island" for Scotland—an initiative that we hope may soon move beyond the concept stage into implementation.

- UNITAR ("United Nations Institute for Training and Research") has a program, CIFAL, to enhance the public services in cities and towns and help them become more sustainable. CIFAL (an acronym in French for "International Training Centre for Local Authorities/Actors") coordinates the efforts of and sharing knowledge among local and regional authorities, national governments, international organisations, the private sector, and civil society. So far the program has established 12 CIFAL Centres worldwide, and in 2006 Findhorn became one of them. This was made possible by substantial moral and financial support from the Moray Council and HIE (Highlands and Islands Enterprise) as well as from our local Member of Parliament and the Scottish Executive. The function of CIFAL-Findhorn is to provide sustainability training for local government officials and elected representatives, and it has provided a most important bridge between the ecovillage and that sector.

- July 2007, with substantial moral and financial support from the Moray Council and HIE, the local Moray Arts Centre was born, originated by Findhorn member and artist Randy Klinger.

- The neighbouring Royal Air Force base at Kinloss has been helped by Findhorn engineers who provided technical expertise in installing biological wetland wastewater treatment systems.

- Nearby Cairngorm National Park and Findhorn are also exploring a programme of environmental education activities.

- HIE is now funding Daniel Wahl, a community member with a PhD in sustainable design, to explore the potential for developing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in education for sustainability with Scottish universities.

- Living Routes, a study-abroad college program based in Massachusetts, is working with one of our community organizations, Findhorn College, to teach undergraduate programmes to students from US universities.

It can be easy for us, caught up as we are in the day-to-day business of running a community, to lose sight of just how rapid and dramatic has been the development of working partnerships with local organizations in the wider culture. However, I would say that it is premature to suggest that we are exercising any significant influence among local decision-makers at the policy level or in facilitating a paradigm-shift in worldviews except perhaps very slowly. What *is* in demand at present is



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Preparing compost at Findhorn's Cluny Hill College.

This coming March 22-28, I am hosting a conference at Findhorn called *Positive Energy: Creative Community Responses to Peak Oil and Climate Change*. It will bring together many of the world's leading exponents on the need for community-based, Gaian values to help us navigate the rough water ahead: Richard Heinberg, Joanna Macy, Rob Hopkins of the Transition Towns movement in the UK, Megan Quinn of The Community Solution organisation, and more.

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our expertise in wastewater treatment, environmental education, renewable energy generation, organic agriculture, leadership skills, conflict-related training, and so on.

Yet, at heart, what ecovillages have to share with the world is less about technical solutions to specific problems, important though those are, than about transformation in consciousness and values. Our roots and our power lie less in the machines and techniques that we have developed, than in the vision of a simpler, more just and caring society, organised along community lines and built on holistic values of spiritual, emotional, and ecological literacy. This is a much harder sell to the mainstream than wind turbines and eco-architecture.

And yet, we are moving into an age that will be defined by energy descent. As fossil fuel prices continue their inexorable rise, strong communities together with Gaian values and consciousness will lie at the heart of all sane transition strategies.

My hope is that this event may provide further exposure to new ways of seeing and understanding the world to more mainstream decision-makers in our own backyard, as well as to those of us who are already engaged. There is great creativity within both the activist and local government communities, but too rarely do they cross-fertilise. My deep hope is that this conference will facilitate this process for the enrichment of all.✿

Jonathan Dawson is President of Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), Executive Secretary of GEN-Europe, and author of Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability (Chelsea Green, 2006). He has worked in community economic development in Africa over the last 21 years as a project manager, researcher, and consultant. He lives at Findhorn Foundation in Scotland where he teaches courses on applied sustainability up to graduate level. Note: We preserve the spelling of our Commonwealth country authors. March 22-28, 2008 Positive Energy conference at Findhorn: www.findhorn.org/positiveenergy.