

WHOLESOME LIVING

ECOVILLAGES : JONATHAN DAWSON

The ecovillage movement explores the connections between North and South, environment and development, education and activism, spirit, culture and natural ecology.

A LONG THE PETITE Côte, just south of the Senegalese capital Dakar, the mangroves are growing back. Just three years into the re-planting programme, the villagers of Mbam are seeing their lands become more fertile as the mangroves filter the sea water, and a return of fish and other sea creatures as their marine ecosystem begins to restore itself to health. After years of silence, the air is once again filled with the sound of bird-song.

In the high hills around Kandy in the heart of Sri Lanka, the villages associated with the Buddhist non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sarvodaya are thriving: in Matale, a village-owned and -managed bank is providing micro-credit for a host of different small-scale, village-based activities such as handicrafts, milk processing, blacksmithing and organic vegetable production. Sarvodaya works with around 12,000 villages.

In the far north of Scotland, a community of 450 people — the Findhorn Foundation — is initiating a 'model' local economy using its community-owned bank, community-supported agriculture and renewable energy systems, and reusing and recycling most of its waste.

In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a town of several thousand people, Auroville, has been evolving over the last thirty-five years with the aim of becoming "a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and harmony transcending creed, politics and nationalities". To date, over two million trees have been planted to stabilise and re-fertilise the soil, hundreds of fields have been 'bunded' to prevent water

run-off, solar power is widely used for pumping and heating water, and there has been much experimentation in developing environmentally friendly building techniques.

On the hill west of the city of Ithaca, five hours' drive from New York, at the end of Rachel Carson Way stands the Ecovillage at Ithaca. On 173 acres of land, they have just finished building the second cluster of thirty homes and are planning the third. They have one community house and are planning to build a second as well as an education centre. Through various design features, including a community-supported agriculture scheme, the community has reduced its ecological footprint to 40% of the US average. Co-operation with nearby Ithaca College and Cornell University is deepening, and the community is deeply involved in another new project, Sustainable Tompkins, that has the aim of making the county the most sustainable in the USA.

Other than being good-news stories, what do these five examples have in common? Each of the five communities in question calls itself an 'ecovillage', and all are members of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). So, what is an ecovillage — and can any one word that attempts

to incorporate such a great range of social, cultural and ecological conditions retain any meaning?

"Ecovillages", asserts GEN, "are human-scale settlements, rural or



Before the mangrove restoration program at Mbam, Senegal
PHOTOGRAPHS: JONATHAN DAWSON

urban, in the North or the South, that strive to create models for sustainable living. They emerge according to the characteristics of their own bioregions and typically embrace four dimensions: the social, the ecological, the cultural and the spiritual, combined into a systemic, holistic approach that encourages community and personal development."

Communities that tread lightly on the Earth have, of course, always been with us. For much of the life of our species, this has been how we have lived, our impact limited by the scale and nature of our technologies, and our numbers kept in check by the food supply in our specific bioregions. But the progressive industrial-

isation and globalisation of our economies over the last five hundred years have shattered all such controls. Today, the North is beset by the problems of affluence and all of its associated discontents. Meanwhile, the viability of low-impact communities in the South is under threat. The transfer of food production for local needs to commodity exports is undermining food security; and the bombardment of media images glorifying life in the money-rich North denigrates traditional lifestyles.

The ecovillage concept offers a model with varied local manifestations, as a response to this crisis. At the heart of the model lies a celebration of cultural, spiritual and ecological diversity and the impulse to re-create human-scale communities in which people can rediscover healthy and sustainable relations to self, society and the Earth. It is a model in which the skills and worldview of the peasant farmer and small-scale artisan are not a problem to be solved by the development planner but an asset to be cherished.

THE GLOBAL ECOVILLAGE movement draws inspiration and traces its roots back through diverse lineages. One important thread is the ideal of self-reliance and spiritual enquiry kindled in the world's religious communities and ashrams, for example Celtic and Benedictine monasteries. This thread is most evident today in communities like the Catholic l'Arche in France and among the various Buddhist communities dotted across south and east Asia. However, the spiritual impulse is also deeply embedded in many non-monastic initiatives including the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, the Auroville community in India and among communities that form part of the New Age movement in the West. In all of these, Gandhian principles of self-reliance, decentralisation and spiritual enquiry remain of paramount importance.

Many more contemporary threads are woven into the ecovillage tapestry. The 'Back to the Land' and 'hippy' movements represented a rejection of mainstream, materialist values, a yearning for reconnection and the launch of myriad experiments in the re-creation of community in the West. The co-housing movement launched in Denmark represents an important attempt to

create human settlements that tread more lightly on the Earth while offering their residents a real sense of community and belonging.

Many who were active in the environmental and feminist movements began to see the links between the patriarchal oppression of women and the domination of the Earth. Out of that emerged small-scale, egalitarian communities which were seen as ideal laboratories for creating a new society, based on ecological principles and in which men and women co-exist as true equals.

German peace campaigners created settlements based on ecological principles (*ökodorf* is literally 'ecovillage') next to the nuclear plants against which they were protesting, in the process moving beyond rejection of nuclear weapons to being proactively ecological. Meanwhile, treading firmly in the footsteps of Gandhi, Fritz Schumacher proposed the development of intermediate technologies as key to the evolution of more human-scale and community-based societies. While his efforts and those of the organisation he created, the Intermediate Technology Development Group, were primarily geared to the context of the Third World, his ideas found a growing number of advocates in the industrialised West, and small-scale, affordable, decentralised technologies emerged as a key element of many of the new community-based experiments.

Perhaps the final major thread woven into the ecovillage tapestry is the alternative education movement. Deeply dissatisfied with a state education system primarily designed to train young people as workers and consumers within the industrial growth economy, many created their own models and systems, aiming for a more rounded and holistic approach. Radical, alternative, holistic education continues to be the

core activity and largest single source of income for many ecovillages.

Each of these diverse threads has lent its own distinctive flavour to the ecovillage movement. Indeed, a core strength of the movement is that each of the places calling themselves 'ecovillages' (and many that do not) has borrowed from most or all of these movements — monastic, Gandhian, peace activism, environmental activism, hippy, co-housing, eco-feminist, intermediate technology, alternative education — in different measure, creating a rich mosaic of diverse initiatives sharing broad core values.

THE DECISIVE MOMENT in the evolution of a worldwide ecovillage movement came with the publication of a report, 'Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities', by the editors of



Three years later, after a lot of work from the ecovillage members, the mangroves are growing back

In Context magazine, Robert and Diane Gilman, and the meeting that followed it in Denmark in September 1991. What was clear to the twenty leading thinkers in the sustainability movement who attended that meeting (including Karl-Henrik Robert, founder of *The Natural Step*, economist David Korten, the Gilmans, and Hildur and Ross Jackson of Gaia Trust) was first, that the world urgently needed good examples of what sustainable and joyful communities might look like; and second, that a wave of citizens' initiatives, North and South, exploring just this territory, was already gathering steam.

Gaia Trust decided to fund the development of linkages between

these various initiatives and, greatly supported by the emergence of the Internet as an international networking tool, community-based initiatives all over the world began to recognise each other as part of the same family, acknowledging their diversity but celebrating their shared values and objectives. A conference at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland in 1995 entitled 'Eco-villages and Sustainable Communities — Models for the 21st Century' drew 400 participants from around the world. At this conference GEN was born with the dual aims of strengthening the network from within and communicating the ecovillage experience to mainstream policymakers, planners and the general public.

Today, GEN carries the ecovillage message into all of the main governmental and civil society forums. It is a leading participant in a United Nations training programme to help local governments worldwide implement Agenda 21, has consultative status as an NGO at the United Nations, is represented at events such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the World and European Social Forums, and addresses countless conferences and seminars worldwide on sustainability-related themes. It is a significant, large and growing international movement with active networks on every continent on the planet.

TO SEE HOW the various elements that go to make up the ecovillage movement can come together in most beautiful and creative synergy, let us go back to where we began, in the village of Mbam in Senegal's Petite Côte. Mbam is one of twenty villages in the country that have been accredited as ecovillages in Senegal. At the heart of the network in Senegal is an alliance of six NGOs that have been inspired by the potential offered by the ecovillage movement for a more holistic, integrated and values-based approach to development. Between them, they have expertise in mangrove restoration, reforestation, permaculture, micro-credit, mother and child health care, renewable ener-

gy and water management. Villagers are also trained as trainers and there is an active programme for sharing their newly acquired skills with neighbouring villages. GEN Senegal plans to have Mbam as one of its four regional centres for research, training and demonstration of intermediate technologies and sustainable lifestyles.

Senegal is also one of the hubs of GEN's international education effort. Undergraduates come to Senegal from Europe and North America — some independently and some through the Living Routes programme which provides accredited semesters for students from US universities in ecovillages in India, Scotland, Brazil, Australia and the US as well as in Senegal. Over 200 students have passed through GEN Senegal over the last five years. Before these students arrive in the country, they are helped to identify a research project, and a counterpart Senegalese student with the same interests is assigned to each. The foreign students live in host families and, where appropriate for their research project, also travel with their Senegalese counterparts to spend time in the villages.

The potential here for rich, mutual learning and multicultural appreciation is great indeed. In a country where mass tourism often undermines indigenous culture, this is a contact based on respect and the building of real international solidarity. The education is radical and empowering, knowledge and intermediate technology are geared towards meeting the needs of the people, and traditional beliefs and cultures are respected and validated.

This is the ecovillage movement at its best: exploring the fertile edges between North and South, environment and development, education and activism, spirit, culture and natural ecology. The movement is still young and in need of pioneers. It represents a vehicle for people and communities to realise their highest dreams. Empower yourselves — join us! ●

For further information visit
<www.cresp.sn/>
or <www.livingroutes.org>.