

The Ecovillage Dream Takes Shape

Along the Petite Côte, just south of the Senegalese capital Dakar, the mangroves are growing back. Already, just three years into their re-planting programme, the villagers of Mbam are seeing their lands become more fertile as the mangroves filter out the saltiness of the sea-water and a return of fish and other sea food 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 very heart of Sri Lanka, the villages associated with the Buddhist 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 – handicraft production, milk-processing, blacksmithing, organic vegetable production. Sarvodaya now works with around 17,000 villages nationwide.

In the far north of Scotland, a community of 450 people, the Findhorn Foundation community, is birthing a new model for vibrant local economy in the European context: using its own community-owned bank and money system, developing a community-supported agriculture scheme to reduce food-miles, generating much of its own power, re-using and recycling most of its own waste.

In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a town of several thousand people, Auroville, has been growing up over the last 35 years with the aim of becoming “a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities”. To date, over two million trees have been planted to stabilize and refertilize the soil, canyons have been dammed and hundreds of fields bunded to prevent water run-off. There has also been much experimentation in developing environmentally-friendly building techniques and in recycling waste water, while solar power is widely used for pumping and heating water and providing electricity.

****Something here from North America****

Other than being great good-news stories, what do these five vignettes 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 value? “Ecovillages”, asserts GEN, “are human-scale settlements, rural or urban, in the North or in the South, that strive to create models for sustainable living. They emerge according to the characteristics of their own bio-regions 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 have 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. The progressive globalisation of our economies over the last five hundred years, however, has shattered all such controls. Today, in the North, we are beset by the disease of affluence and all of its associated discontents –

isolation from others and from the very land and food that sustain us, loss of community and of identity, disempowerment in the face of all-powerful business and government.

Meanwhile, the viability of low-impact communities in the South is under threat both from the transfer of much of the most productive land from food production for local needs to export for consumption by the global consumer class; and from a bombardment of media and advertising images glorifying life in the money-rich North and denigrating that elsewhere. As life in the villages becomes harder, the young lose cultural self-confidence and seek to escape to the consumerist Eldorado promised to them nightly on their television screens. And everywhere, human numbers grow.

Just one system – the neo-liberal, globalised economy – can be seen to be underlying both the alienation and disempowerment of the spiritually-deprived North and the erosion of the cultural and economic integrity of low-impact communities in the South. Similarly, the ecovillage concept offers a single model, albeit with manifold local manifestations, as a response to this crisis. At the heart of the model lie 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 relation 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. It is a model that offers citizens and communities worldwide the opportunity to ground our visions for more sustainable and joyful ways of living in our own places.

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 over the millennia. When asked recently what was the earliest genuine ecovillage I could think of, my mind drifted back to the small, democratic, decentralised Celtic monasteries of sixth century Ireland that kept alive the flame of literacy and learning during the European Dark Ages.

This thread is most evident today in communities like the Catholic l'Arche in France and among the various Buddhist ecovillages 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. Among all of these, Gandhian principles of self-reliance, decentralisation and spiritual enquiry remain of paramount importance.

The first widespread usage of the term 'ecovillage' in the modern era was among German peace activists who created settlements based on ecological principles (*ökodorf* – literally *ecovillage*) next to the nuclear plants against which they were protesting. The magazine *Ökodorf Informationen* began publishing in 1985 and later evolved into the current journal, *Eurotopia*. Following German re-unification, the movement coalesced into the wider ecovillage movement.

In parallel, following on from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972, rumours grew that all was not well in Paradise and that technological development might not, after all, hold the key to human happiness. The *Back to the Land* and hippie movements represented a rejection by youth 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 but spreading rapidly internationally, represented a less radical but no less important attempt to create human settlements that tread more lightly on the Earth while offering to their residents a real sense of community and belonging.

Meanwhile, treading firmly in the footsteps of Ghandi, 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 emerging in all corners of the Earth.

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.

Each of these diverse threads have lent their 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) have borrowed from each of these movements – monastic, Gandian, peace activism, environmental activism, hippie, co-housing, intermediate technology, alternative education – in different measure, creating a rich mosaic of diverse initiatives sharing broad core values.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Robert and Diane Gilman in Seattle used their magazine *In Context*, to publish stories and interviews describing ecovillages as a strategy for creating a more sustainable culture. In 1990, the newly-formed Gaia Trust, funded and driven by Ross and Hildur Jackson, invited *In Context* to produce a report, *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, to catalogue the scattered efforts under way across the world and to describe the emerging philosophy and principles in greater detail.

From this point, the movement was greatly aided by the emergence of the Internet as an international networking tool and, ironically for a movement so strongly based on an ethic of small-scale technology and self-reliance, it was the computer that enabled the movement to discover its true strength and diversity. A conference at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland in 1995 entitled 'Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities – Models for the 21st Century' drew 400 participants from around the world with a further 300 turned away. At this conference, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was born with the dual aims of strengthening the network from within and communicating the ecovillage experience to mainstream policy-makers, 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 world-wide on sustainability-related themes.

To reach a global figure for the number of ecovillages in existence very much depends on how and what you count. Sarvodaya, for example, a member of GEN, works with around 17,000 villages throughout Sri Lanka; does that count as one member or 17,000? One member of the network in Senegal in turn, works with 350 villages. Similarly, 13 of the European members are national ecovillage networks. So, does that make 13 members, or do we also count in the many initiatives affiliated to these national networking organisations? What is beyond dispute is that this is a significant, large and growing movement.

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 on Senegal's Petite Côte. Mbam is one of 20 villages in the country that have been accredited as ecovillages in Senegal (twenty more are currently awaiting accreditation). At the heart of the network in Senegal is an alliance of six sector-specific 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 energy and water management.

Already, villagers from Mbam have received training in mangrove restoration, reforestation and permaculture and there are plans to introduce more new skills and technologies. Village trainees 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 that provides accredited semesters for students from US universities in ecovillages in India, Scotland and the US as well as Senegal. Over 200 such students have passed through 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 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 multi-cultural appreciation is great indeed. In a country where mass tourism brings its usual sad baggage of child sex abuse and an undermining of indigenous culture, it is truly inspiring to witness such rich and mutually-beneficial human contacts. The education is radical and empowering, knowledge and intermediate technology are geared towards meeting the needs of the people, traditional beliefs and cultures are respected and validated, healthy relations between communities and their eco-systems are restored and the world is quite simply a better place.

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!

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