



In the first decades of the twenty-first century, growing environmental, social, and economic crises compel societies to seek more sustainable ways of living. A global movement of experimental communities that refer to themselves as ecovillages has taken up this formidable challenge. Although the impact of this movement has been small, its efforts provide an entry point for considering and moving toward greater sustainability.

Ecovillages are intentional human communities that use integrative design, local economic networking, cooperative and common property structures, and participatory decision making to minimize members' ecological footprint and provide as many of life's basic needs as possible in a sustainable manner. Ecovillages are often rooted in a bioregional approach and use permaculture design to achieve their sustainability goals. Permaculture (a global grassroots sustainable development philosophy and movement that encompasses a set of ethical principles and design guidelines and techniques for creating sustainable, permanent culture and agriculture); agroecology and organic agriculture; alternative energy systems such as solar, wind, and microhydro; and natural and green building methods are common features of ecovillages. Some ecovillages have their roots in the communes and intentional communities of the 1960s, but most came into being during and after the 1990s as the ecovillage model became a worldwide phenomenon. The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) is currently tracking 522 ecovillages around the world, including 234 in the Americas (114 in the United States) and 40 in Oceania (21 in Australia) (GEN 2011). Hundreds of other ecovillages are either forming or exist that are not documented by GEN. The ecovillage movement is largely centered in the United States and western Europe, but it has spread to seventy-two countries around the world. The

government of Senegal in Africa, for example, has recently instituted a Minister of Ecovillages and plans to convert all of its fourteen thousand traditional villages into ecovillages. In the global North in recent years, the ecovillage trend has started slowing down due to difficulties such as high land prices, prohibitive zoning and building codes, and an economic system in recession in which control of life's basic necessities (land, water, food, and air) is increasingly in the hands of private corporations and financial institutions. At the same time, decreasing jobs and access to economic resources for nonelites has made the formation of additional ecovillages and the expansion of those already existing increasingly difficult. Numerous ecovillages have transformed themselves into local and regional hubs and educational centers in the transition movement, which focuses on turning communities, towns, and cities into sustainable human habitations that are resilient to global crises such as peak oil, climate change, and economic recession and collapse.

The ecovillage movement represents an attempt to move beyond the widespread Western worldview that not only separates nature from culture but implicitly holds that humans can control nature and continue to use it to meet their growing needs and desires without consequence. Ecovillagers attempt to live in ways that reduce the patterns of social and environmental injustice resulting from uneven distribution of resources and resource use among rich and poor on both local and global levels. Ecovillagers are essentially attempting to internalize what economists refer to as externalities; they recognize that in a global economy the processes of production and consumption produce far-flung social and environmental consequences that are not accounted for in the costs of things they consume. They are attempting to make these costs more visible by bringing production and consumption processes within a more local sphere. At a

fundamental level, ecovillagers are trying to put environmental and social justice ethics into action by creating communities that are more locally self-reliant and premised on the notion that each person and each community must take responsibility for the social and ecological impacts of fulfilling their economic and subsistence needs.

Ecovillages in Practice

Examples of well-known and established ecovillages in North America and Oceania illustrate concrete ways in which ecovillagers attempt to put environmental and social justice ethics into action. Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is a community of approximately fifty members located on 280 acres of degraded farmland in northeastern Missouri. Their stated goal is “to live ecologically sustainable and socially rewarding lives, and to share the skills and ideas behind that lifestyle” (Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage 2012). The members of Dancing Rabbit have agreed to organize their lives around defined lists of ecological covenants and sustainability guidelines. Because they recognize the impacts of fossil fuel extraction on ecosystems and communities and the implications of high levels of fossil fuel use for global climate change, they have agreed not to use fossil fuels to power vehicles, heat or cool homes, provide refrigeration, or heat domestic water supplies. The members of Dancing Rabbit have put in place renewable energy systems that use locally produced biofuels, passive building design (using solar energy to heat and cool buildings), renewable and community-scale energy sources, and decreased energy demand in order to lessen their dependence on fossil fuels and, by extension, their contributions to further ecological degradation and social and environmental injustice.

In addition to addressing energy use, Dancing Rabbit has policies in place that specify the sourcing of lumber used in constructing their buildings. Ecovillage members agree to use only lumber harvested within their own bio-region for use in building projects. Recognizing that this is difficult in the rolling prairies of northeastern Missouri, they allow exceptions for recycled and reclaimed lumber. As a result, Dancing Rabbit members frequently

participate in building demolitions in their local area and harvest the reclaimed lumber for use in the growing number of residential and community buildings in their village. In addition to seeking more sustainable patterns of energy and material consumption, the members of Dancing Rabbit address ways to deal with their waste as well. Another of their ecological covenants states that all organic and recyclable material used in the village will be reclaimed for use by the community. One manifestation of this is the extensive food-waste composting Dancing Rabbit practices. They use compost to build soils, thus contributing to their goals of becoming more food self-reliant while also restoring the fertility of the degraded farmland that they inherited from previous generations. Numerous other ecovillages exist throughout the Americas. Some of the most well-known among them include Ecovillage at Ithaca (United States), Earthaven Ecovillage (United States), Los Angeles Ecovillage (United States), Ecoaldea Huehucoyotl (Mexico), Nashira Ecovillage and Sasardi Ecovillage (Colombia), O.U.R. Ecovillage (Canada), and Whole Village (Canada).

Many similar attributes characterize Crystal Waters Ecovillage in Queensland, Australia. Crystal Waters is a community of approximately two hundred residents established in 1988 on 650 acres of degraded pasture land. Sustainable development at Crystal Waters is based on permaculture design principles: residents agree to live in ecologically sustainable ways that make the connections between consumption, waste, and ecological degradation readily visible. Most resident dwellings are owner designed, built using non-toxic and sustainably harvested building

materials, and rely upon good design and small-scale sustainable technologies for producing electricity. Clean and fair food is a priority, and some members produce all of their own food. Members harvest water for household needs and agriculture on-site using rainwater catchment systems and small-scale earthen storage dams. Much like Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, the members of Crystal Waters have created a number of small businesses that serve as a base for local economic networking both within the community and with local neighbors. Crystal Waters has created facilities to host visitors from around the world. These facilities are designed to demonstrate ecovillage and permaculture values, principles, and practice through tours and by offering educational courses



and consultancies in sustainable agriculture, ecovillage design, and conflict resolution, among other topics. In 1996, Crystal Waters received the United Nations World Habitat Award in recognition of its pioneering work in demonstrating new practices of low-impact living and has been listed on the United Nations' Best Practices database. Few ecovillages in the Oceania region are as well established and well-known as Crystal Waters, but the website of the Global Ecovillage Network hosts a growing list (GEN 2011).

The ecovillage and associated permaculture movements in the Americas and Oceania have engaged in mutual cross-fertilization. For example, the Australian biologist Bill Mollison and his student David Holmgren first developed the philosophy and practice of permaculture, which is foundational to many ecovillages, in Tasmania in the 1960s and 1970s. In subsequent years, Mollison and Holmgren toured the United States and other parts of the world, sharing their philosophy and design practices with interested audiences. A number of people from these audiences went on to found prominent ecovillages throughout the Americas. The Global Ecovillage Network was founded by ecovillagers in the Americas and Europe as a way to share and coordinate efforts around the world. Soon after, Asia and Oceania was added as a third region in the Global Ecovillage Network and, in recent years, the number of ecovillages in Oceania has grown considerably, sometimes drawing inspiration from existing ecovillages in the other regions. Crystal Waters Ecovillage has hosted the Oceania office of the Global Ecovillage Network for many years and serves as a regional networking hub for the broader global ecovillage movement.

Ecovillage Futures

Outside academic analysts and participants in the ecovillage movement itself have debated the effectiveness of the ecovillage movement in creating changes in the broader society. A running debate between the Greek political philosopher and economist Takis Fotopoulos (2000, 2002) and the US sociologist Ted Trainer (2000, 2002) in the journal *Democracy and Nature* illustrates the different perspectives adopted by outside analysts. Both scholars recognized the need for broad-scale social change in order to move toward greater sustainability. Trainer argued that the ecovillage movement provided a foundation upon which to build such changes. Fotopoulos argued that the ecovillage movement was too small in scale and limited in its political vision to serve as a catalyst for broader change. In recent years, leading members of the global ecovillage movement have recognized the

limited impact twenty years of ecovillage building has had on the broader society. They have sought to reorient the philosophy and goals of the movement in turn. Prominent members of the movement have indicated that their current goal is not to encourage a proliferation of ecovillages, but rather to use existing ecovillages as research, training, and demonstration centers for citizens around the world as they seek to transform existing communities toward more sustainable entities (Christian 2008). This work continues today, in part, through international offerings of Ecovillage Design Education courses and through Gaia University, whose courses are often located at existing ecovillages.

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, developments in the ecovillage movement give cause for both hope and caution. The existence of a growing, globally aware, ethically motivated, and international movement of people who are voluntarily engaged in fundamentally changing the way they go about their lives in order to bring about a more just and sustainable world is an encouraging development. On the other hand, in the broader society, consumption patterns continue in unsustainable directions—ecological degradation continues unabated, the divide between the rich and the poor continues to grow, and continuing ecological, economic, and humanitarian crises suggest that the world faces a situation too dire for a relatively small number of well-meaning ecovillagers to solve. It will be telling to observe the degree to which broader publics and, perhaps more importantly, governments take advantage of the opportunity to learn from and scale up the natural experiments in sustainable living being offered by existing ecovillagers. Initiatives by a number of governments in countries like Senegal and Canada are encouraging, but missed opportunities remain in both the poorest and richest countries of the world.

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See also Architecture; Australia; Canada; Ecotourism (the Americas); Energy Efficiency; Fair Trade; Labor; Mobility; Oceania; Pacific Island Environmental Philosophy; Public Transportation; Rural Development (the Americas); United States; Urbanization

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