2010

STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE

2010 STATE OF THE WORLD

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From Consumerism to Sustainability

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Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth's ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

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Ecovillages and the Transformation of Values

Jonathan Dawson

Tsewang Lden and Dolma Tsering, elderly Ladakhi women, are caught on film in an old people's home in London, incongruous in their fine and colorful traditional costume. They look on in shock at an old English woman, alone in a sterile white-painted room and so absorbed in watching television that she barely noticed the other women's entry. The Ladakhi women had never seen anything like this before. In the north Indian province that is their home, old people are integrated into the family, considered wise elders and honored.[1]

Lden and Tsering were participating in a "Reality Tour" organized by the Ladakh Project to enable small groups of Ladakhi women to visit western countries, where they see for themselves the reality of life in the West—good and bad—including community breakdown, loneliness, and violence. The organizers hope this will reinforce cultural self-confidence, help Ladakhis appreciate the many positive features of their culture, and show the dark side of today's globally dominant cultural orientation—consumerism—that is so rarely presented in the global media.

What is happening here is one small example of a much wider questioning of the values base underlying the consumerist culture and an exploration of what could replace it. The Ladakh Project is a founding member of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), an umbrella organization for ecovillages that includes some of the innovative experiments in post-consumerist, community-based living that are at the forefront of this wave of exploration.[2]

The commonly accepted definition of ecovillages, provided in 1991 by *In Context* editor Robert Gilman, is "human-scale, full-featured settlements 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."[3]

Today this global network contains an interesting and innovative alliance between intentional communities with a strong focus on sustainability (generally though not exclusively located in the industrial world) and networks of traditional communities in developing countries. Intentional communities are ones that have been formed consciously around specific values and objectives, most of which today have a strong focus on some dimension of sustainability and call themselves ecovillages. The communities in developing countries that are members of GEN seek to maintain their

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traditional values and cultural distinctiveness and to win back greater control of their economic destinies in the face of pressures unleashed by economic globalization.

The most visible and tangible projects within ecovillages tend to be those related to technology and the development of alternative systems of various kinds. Most first-time visitors to ecovillages are there to find out about ecological housing, biological wastewater treatment systems, renewable energy technologies, community currencies, and the like.

Less immediately obvious, but arguably even more significant, is the contribution of ecovillages to a radical transformation of values and consciousness. Ecovillages are engaged in the transformation of values in four ways that may make the transition to sustainability easier and more graceful:

- delinking growth from well-being,
- reconnecting people with the place where they live,
- affirming indigenous values and practices, and
- offering a holistic and experiential educational ethic.

Delinking Growth from Well-being

There has been growing awareness in recent years of the inadequacy of gross domestic product as a measure of true wealth, with its exclusive focus on economic capital formation but with no reference to other forms of capital—the health and biodiversity of the natural environs, the strength of communities, the well-being and happiness of people. What would a society look like that consciously developed its various forms of capital in a more balanced and integrated way? Could communities—indeed, whole societies—learn to substitute other forms of capital for economic wealth, demonstrating how quality of life could be maintained or even enhanced while significantly reducing consumption and material throughput? Ecovillages serve as research, training, and demonstration sites for such a proposition.

The attempt to delink growth and the accumulation of material goods from well-being lies at the heart of the ecovillage concept. The low levels of consumption that typically prevail within ecovillages result partly from the design of their systems so as to reduce energy and materials intensity and partly because, by opting out of the global economy to varying degrees, they forgo opportunities to maximize income.

Several recent studies confirm that the ecological impact of ecovillages is markedly lower than for average conventional communities. A 2003 study by the University of Kassel looked at carbon dioxide emissions associated with two ecovillages in Germany. It found that per capita emissions in the Sieben Linden and Kommune Niederkufungen ecovillages were 28 and 42 percent, respectively, of the German average. Sieben Linden scored especially well in the fields of heating and housing: as a result of renewable energy generation and the use of highly energy-efficient building materials and insulation, the community recorded emission levels just 10 and 6 percent, respectively, of the national average.[4]

Two studies of energy consumption at Ecovillage at Ithaca in upstate New York—one by Cornell University, another by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—found that the community's consumption was more than 40 percent lower than the U.S. average. And a study undertaken by the Stockholm Environment Institute found that the Findhorn ecovillage in Scotland has a per person ecological footprint a bit over half of the U.K. average, the lowest footprint recorded for any settlement in the industrial world. Findhorn residents achieved an especially low footprint in the areas of home heating and food—21.5 and 37 percent per person, respectively, of the national average.[5]

There is substantial anecdotal evidence that the quality of life within ecovillages is generally high—certainly much higher than would be expected for communities that operate on low levels of income. The anecdotal evidence has been reinforced by a 2006 study comparing the contribution of built (economic), human, social, and natural capital to quality of life in 30 intentional communities with that in the town of Burlington, Vermont. The study found that the quality of life was slightly higher in the intentional communities despite the fact that average incomes were significantly lower because of a greater cultivation and appreciation of other forms of capital, especially social capital. Of special importance in determining quality of life, the study identified the strong social bonds that develop within intentional communities, their "ownership provisions as well as…process for allocating work and rewarding contributions," and the "emphasis the community placed upon the preservation of natural areas."[6]

The authors concluded: "Results of this study represent an existence proof: it is possible to achieve a high (and probably more sustainable) quality of life while consuming at rates much less than the U.S. average.… We have much to learn from intentional communities around the world that have been actively experimenting with issues related to quality of life and sustainability."[7]

It is especially interesting that many of the activities and design features that are responsible for low energy and resource use within ecovillages are also among the most important in contributing to a better quality of life. The decision by many ecovillages to grow a significant amount of their own food, for example, involves community members working cooperatively together in a way that strengthens relationships and builds a strong and nurturing sense of connection with the land.

Many of the other footprint-shrinking design features—preparing and eating meals together, car clubs, community-owned renewable energy facilities, community currencies and investment, and so on—similarly engender a spirit of cooperation that builds community and contributes to strong feelings of well-being.

Courtesy Findhorn Foundation

Harvesting organic vegetables at Findhorn ecovillage, Scotland.

This ethic extends into the economic life of ecovillages, where cooperation and solidarity are promoted and the relationship to work is transformed. The Twin Oaks ecovillage in the state of Virginia declares: "We use a trust-based labor system in which all work is valued equally. Its purpose is to organize work and share it equitably, giving each member as much flexibility and choice as possible. Work is not seen as just a means to an end; we try to make it an enjoyable part of our lives."[8]

Reconnecting People with the Place Where They Live

One of the more pernicious impacts of today's globalized economy is the weaker connections that people feel to the place where they live.

There has been a progressive homogenization across the world over the last 50 years or so of foodstuffs, clothing, farming technologies, building materials, styles, and so on. As a part of this trend, increasingly diets no longer reflect the changing seasons.

This disconnect is enormously important in providing a seed bed for alienation and consumerism. When resources are pulled in from all over the world, people lose all sense of the carrying capacity of the bioregions they live in—and thus of any obligation to attempt to live within such limits. People's natural propensity to love the web of life that all humans are part of becomes lost in a fog of ignorance of what that web looks and feels like in specific places.

Reestablishing a keener appreciation of the qualities, patterns, and rhythms of home places and what they can sustainably yield is fundamental to refinding a balanced and respectful place within them. Nurturing just such an enhanced appreciation is of central importance to the ecovillage ethic.

In part, this manifests in attempts to increase levels of self-sufficiency. Ecovillages typically seek to develop an enhanced understanding of ecological building techniques using local materials, local medicinal herbs, wild food foraging, organic food production and processing, energy generation with locally available renewable resources, and so on. They are seeking to deepen their connections in their own bioregions, to increase resilience in a period of energy transition, and to reduce dependence on money and the global economy.

Similarly, many ecovillages are engaged in initiatives to restore the health of their surrounding ecosystems. Over the last 40 years, to cite but one example, the Auroville ecovillage in southern India has planted nearly 3 million trees and engaged in widespread earth restoration projects that have simultaneously enriched the diversity of local natural systems and woven people more deeply into the web of life. Moreover, the way in which this was done—early efforts involved the planting of non-native species that created other environmental hazards, but these were progressively replaced with more diverse and native species—demonstrates how ecovillages are able to learn and be flexible with their efforts, catering to the needs of the environment as discovered along the way. Similar efforts at large-scale tree planting and earth restoration can be found at Sólheimar in Iceland, The Farm in Tennessee, and many other ecovillages.[9]

The journey toward being more rooted in bioregions is also a cultural one. Many ecovillages engage in rituals to mark and celebrate the turning of the seasons—building on, though generally not slavishly adhering to, traditional practices. Grishino ecovillage in Russia, for instance, has become an important center for the celebration of and training in traditional Russian song, dance, arts, and storytelling. In Findhorn, the turning of the year is marked through celebration of the Celtic festivals in song, dance, storytelling, and bonfires.[10]

Affirmation of Indigenous Values and Practices

The corporate marketing and advertising industries have played a central role in shaping the values underlying today's consumerist culture. They have played an especially devastating role in undermining the cultural self-confidence of groups falling outside of the global consumer class. Consequently, an important dimension of the value shift required in the transition to a sustainable global society lies in celebration of the diversity of human cultures, encouraging each to value and take pride in their distinctiveness.

Ecovillage networks in developing countries tend to be very active on this front. Activities with new groups generally focus on building

cultural self-confidence and celebrating the communities' strengths and achievements.

The Sri Lankan nongovernmental group Sarvodaya, a founding member of GEN, works with over 15,000 communities island-wide. It has developed a methodology for community assistance that begins with an empowerment program. This includes a strong element of social and spiritual empowerment, including meditation, cultural validation, peacemaking, and conflict facilitation. Only when this foundation has been built does the more tangible work of economic empowerment and physical infrastructure development begin.[11]

The Ladakh Project in India similarly places great weight on building cultural self-confidence. It has helped to establish the Women's Alliance of Ladakh (WAL), a network of over 6,000 women from almost 100 different villages, with the twin goals of raising the status of rural women and strengthening local culture and agriculture. Some of the more creative programs initiated by WAL are No TV weeks, aimed at encouraging people to resist the consumerist ethic; annual festivals celebrating local knowledge and skills, including traditional spinning, weaving, and dyeing and the preparation of indigenous food; and the Reality Tours that brought Tsewang Lden and Dolma Tsering face to face with the reality of old people's lives in an industrial country.[12]

A Holistic and Experiential Educational Ethic

Something extraordinary has happened over the last decade or so in the relationship between ecovillages and the mainstream society that they were created to be an alternative to. As interlocking economic, ecological, and social crises have deepened, the various experiments that ecovillages have been engaged in are becoming recognized as of growing relevance far beyond the ranks of radical outsiders. One of the principal ways that the values and models they have developed are being shared more widely is through education.

Courtesy Kibbutz Lotan

Straw-bale, earth-plastered domes being built on geodesic frames will become student housing at Kibbutz Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology, Israel.

The various educational packages developed within ecovillages reflect the core ethics of the communities themselves in that they are holistic—exploring interdependence and the relationships between issues and subjects that are generally considered independently in more conventional settings—and experiential, in that they engage all of the learner's faculties—head, heart, and hands.

In this regard, ecovillage education can be seen as part of the wider trend toward environmental education based on systems thinking. What is distinctive in the ecovillage educational model is that the learning experience unfolds in the context of a live experiment in the translation of post-consumerist values into the fabric of a sustainable community. Immersion in such living laboratories can be a profound transformation for students as they experience in a very tangible way the dynamic

relationship between values, lifestyle, and community structures.[13]

A number of ecovillage-based educational initiatives have sprung up over the last decade or so. The Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee, the Center for Creative Ecology at Kibbutz Lotan in Israel, and Ecological Solutions at Crystal Waters in Australia are three among many centers worldwide whose courses in the various dimensions of sustainability now attract participants from across the social spectrum.[14]

Numerous educational partnerships have also developed between ecovillages and more mainstream institutions that aid the diffusion of ecovillage values and models into wider society. A United Nations CIFAL training center, one in a network of 11 centers worldwide that provide training in sustainability to local authorities and other local actors, opened in 2007 at Findhorn in Scotland. This draws on expertise developed within and beyond ecovillages to build the planning and implementation capacity of local agencies in Scotland and, increasingly, in northern Europe.[15]

Meanwhile, the Findhorn College, an educational institution within the ecovillage, regularly hosts the University of St. Andrews undergraduate program in sustainable development. And as of September 2009, Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh offers the first Master of Science degree in Sustainable Community Design—with two compulsory sections on Ecovillage Practice and Community Design Practice taught by Findhorn College staff at the ecovillage.[16]

A major new ecovillage-based educational initiative, Gaia Education, has developed a curriculum derived from good practice within ecovillages that has been endorsed by UNITAR and welcomed as a valuable contribution to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The curriculum is now being taught in ecovillages and universities on every continent.[17]

An undergraduate study-abroad program, Living Routes, offers students at U.S. universities the opportunity to do formally accredited semesters at ecovillages on every continent, while Ecovillage at Ithaca, in New York, is engaged in an ambitious alliance with Cornell University and Ithaca College to enhance university-based sustainability curricula in the United States.[18]

These developments on the educational front represent an opportunity to spread ecovillage values and models into the wider society. As the world seeks to make the transition to a rich, diverse, and sustainable global society, the lessons learned by ecovillages are likely to be an important source of information and inspiration.

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