

The eco-village movement: Divorced from reality

MARY GARDEN

Further to my article “Leaving Utopia” and in response to Ted Trainer’s contribution in this issue, a clarification of the history of the Eco-village movement is needed. Eco-villages are not synonymous with either alternative communities or what Ted calls the “Simpler Way”.

The so-called Global Eco-village Movement (GEN) had its beginnings in the early 1990s. Ross and Hildur Jackson, the founders of Gaia Trust (an ecologically focused charitable entity based in Denmark), concluded that to further the “movement towards sustainability” the world needed “good examples of what it means to live in harmony with nature in a sustainable and spiritually-satisfying way in a technologically-advanced society”. These good examples they decided would be called “eco-villages”.^[1]

They commissioned Robert and Diane Gilman of Seattle, editors of *In Context* magazine, to conduct a survey to identify the best examples of eco-villages around the world. Gilman’s report (1991) showed that although many exciting and vastly different communities existed the “full-scale ideal eco-village” did not yet exist!^[2] Ironically, the literal meaning of utopia is “no-place”.

In 1994 the Global Eco-village Network (GEN) was established – a network which was to be co-ordinated by the Gaia Trust. The aims of GEN were to “support the development of sustainable human settlements; assist in the exchange of information amongst the settlements; make information widely available about eco-village concepts and demonstration sites”. The group of people attending the inaugural meeting in Denmark included representatives from eight communities including Crystal Waters Permaculture Village (Australia), Findhorn (Scotland), The Farm (Tennessee) and Lebensgarten (Germany).

It was decided to have three regional networks to cover the globe geographically with administrative centres at The Farm, Lebensgarten and Crystal Waters. Crystal Waters, thus, became the centre of GEN Oceania/Asia or GENOA for short. I was living at Crystal Waters at this time. For years the community had been considering whether to keep the term “permaculture” in their title, as there were ongoing arguments over what this term meant. Some members were appalled to hear that the community was going to have another label – eco-village – and began to use the word ego-village instead. (A few years later, residents at Kookaburra Park Eco-village also resorted to using ego-village from time to time, though Cuckoo Land was occasionally heard as well!)

Various definitions of eco-villages were adopted by GEN. For example, “a group of people

who strive to live a sustainable, satisfying lifestyle in harmony with each other, all other living beings and the Earth". Another that is often used was coined by Robert Gilman: "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] This may sound impressive but what does it mean? How do we determine "harmless, full-featured, healthy and successful" and who is to decide which communities qualify or not?

For a group to join GEN they need to contact the secretariat for their region and complete an audit form to establish whether their practices are in line with "qualified eco-villages". Only those that meet the criteria can attain full membership and have voting rights. GENOA's website lists a number of requirements including: one "must live in an eco-village recognised as such by the Management Committee" and one "must be approved by the Management Committee".^[4]

Robin Francis, permaculture teacher and designer of Jarlanbah Permaculture Hamlet in New South Wales (Australia) claims that GENOA advised her that Jarlanbah could not qualify as an eco-village because they were too small (there are 43 household lots) but she decided to use the word regardless.^[5]

In a booklet produced by GENOA, Moora Moora co-operative (Victoria) is listed as an eco-community rather than eco-village even though it was established in 1974 and is a model on which others have been based. Dr Bob Rich wrote to me: "I would like to think that we are an 'eco-village' but am not sure that we qualify! We are a community: a group of people with strong environmental interest who choose to live together on the one property."^[6]

So while Takis Fotopoulos quite rightly pointed out that the GEN movement is a continuation of the goals and practices of the old green communes but with the help of the Internet has taken "the form of a world-wide movement"^[7], it also excludes some of the communities that survived the sixties and even more recent developments. Rather than a movement it would be more appropriate to describe it as an elitist exclusive club (controlled by a self-appointed central group), which has capitalised on the growing interest in sustainability in society at large. GEN quite brazenly proclaims they have the solution to the world's problems. Their website states, "the motivation for eco-villages is the need to reverse the gradual disintegration of supportive social and cultural structures and the upsurge of destructive environmental practices around the world," and "the eco-village movement ... has the power to change the world". "Because of the speed of the ecological breakdown on planet Earth, it is essential that we make eco-villages more than a good idea – they must be inevitable, irresistible and unstoppable and their proliferation must solve many of humanities most intractable problems at the same time."^[8]

But the GEN movement does little to directly address ecological or environmental crises. It does not lobby governments or try to change the actions of corporations. Ross Jackson argues that we shouldn't be looking to governments and other powerful institutions to implement solutions. He states that the problems involved in living sustainably are too complex and too diverse to be solved from a traditional top-down perspective. He writes in his book *And we ARE doing it* that what is special about eco-villagers is that they are not writing papers for the next conference, or philosophising over the back fence about what should be done about the global crisis, "they ARE doing it".^[9]

My objection to the GEN movement and their eco-villages is that it implies that ecological living is not possible in mainstream society. The people who adopt it are appropriating the word eco to one particular lifestyle. But people all over the world incorporate and integrate aspects that could be called “ecological”. Here in Australia in mainstream society, energy efficient houses are encouraged and in some areas the installation of solar hot water systems and rainwater tanks on new homes is mandatory. Local councils provide for the recycling of waste. People grow their own vegetables and fruit trees and some choose to live “simple” lifestyles wherever they are, in the bush, the country or the city. Living “lightly” does not necessarily involve a move to an intentional community. Furthermore intentional communities depend on the outside world on all sorts of services provided by local government and councils and also medical, educational, welfare systems etc.

As for eco-villagers living more harmoniously than people in mainstream society, I have not found this to be the case at all. Indeed while I was living at Kookaburra Park, after a spate of vexatious and trivial applications by several residents to the Queensland Government’s Commissioner for Body Corporate and Community Management, an adjudicator chastened us: “For a scheme that has been established to develop an alternative community lifestyle, free from many of the social problems and behaviours which characterise “normal” western society, ‘Kookaburra Park’ has not even be a partial success. Each of you needs to re-read the founding statement that first drew you to this scheme and negotiate a way of living together under those principles, otherwise you are no more than another slice of society on a bush block.” Since that time, the conflict at Kookaburra Park has escalated and most of the original residents have sold up and left. Most of the new residents are retirees who have very little interest in things ecological and see the Park as simply an outer suburb of Gin Gin.

Kookaburra Park resident, Peter, who I quoted in the last issue, says more recently: “In Eco-villages there is just as much consumerism, use of petrol and waste as anywhere else. There is more ideological blindness, more conflict, more pretence and less critical review of what is being done and less tolerance than “outside”. There are some benefits, but they only become visible once the illusions have been done away with. They are at the personal interaction level and in physical safety. Plus the fact that there is extra space, open areas to walk etc. We have people in the Park who are so dysfunctional in themselves and in their relationships that they have to suck every bit of happiness out of other people. The place for this is at the compulsory Body Corporate level. At the other levels they simply get left out. I fully expect that the present committee will slowly sag under the weight of sociopathic behaviour, as did most other committees. So I am waiting until either the health, the relationships (e.g. family) or the job of the present officeholders will suffer too much and people will quit.”

From my discussions with scores of other eco-village residents it is clear that views such as Peter’s are not just isolated grumbings of the aggrieved few. However each eco-village is different and some less dysfunctional than others. A member of the new Currumbin Eco-village here on the Gold Coast hinterland has invited me to go and have a look as he claims they have got around a lot of the Eco-village failings that I raised in “Leaving Utopia”. Their approach, he says, is “to create a new animal that is developer driven but prioritises community and social ecology along with economic and environmental sustainability on an equal basis standard development assets”.

What also concerns me about GEN is the spiritual overtones of the movement. In a recent interview, when asked which were the first eco-villages Hildur Jackson replied, “It is a difficult question because many of the current members of GEN were founded before this word existed. In the 1960’s several spiritually based projects were initiated in different parts of the globe: Findhorn in Scotland, Auroville in India, The Farm in Tennessee, USA. It may have been the impulse from the Indian philosopher and sage: Sri Aurobindo and his French counterpart the Mother – we will never know for sure”.^[10]

I’m sure some residents of various communities that have been labelled “eco-villages” would balk at the suggestion that the places where they live have evolved from the teachings of a Hindu guru and religious group. Others have been surprised if not insulted to see that they are linked with groups such as the Hare Krishnas and Rajneeshees in GENOA’s directory of eco-villages and communities. I believe that what attracts most residents to alternative communities is the chance to live more simply and to be part of a supportive community. While they may have their own private religious beliefs and practises, organised religion plays no part at all in their “communal” dream or vision. Otherwise they would have joined an ashram, monastery or a specific religious community. Lee Flier probably speaks for many community members in his Internet posting where he says “each person should figure out the spiritual stuff for their self”. He goes on to say that he is beginning to feel extremely turned off by the accompanying “spiritual” overtones of the GEN movement. Ross Jackson even devotes an entire chapter in his book *And We ARE Doing It: Building an Ecovillage Future* to his so-called “spiritual awakening” while at Ganeshpuri, India.^[11]

I, myself, believe in living simply though that may be because I am half-Scot! My home has water tanks, a solar hot water system, an on-site sewerage treatment system, a wide range of fruit trees etc. I live frugally by average standards. But this is my choice, the way I like to live. I also choose to have a pet dog, a Maltese, something I was not able to do when I lived on eco-villages. Eco-villages worldwide generally have a blanket ban on the keeping of dogs and cats as pets, a ruling which I regard as totally lacking in common sense. This is a topic I have addressed in a number of articles published in Australian and U.K. magazines.

I cannot see how the eco-village movement will ever be regarded as the most significant movement in the twentieth century. The majority of people in the world have never heard of it. Those that have are more likely to dismiss it as another New Age rainbow or even find it objectionable like John in a blog on LiveJournal.com. He writes: “It smacks of retreatism: the world can go to hell, but we’ll be okay!” He points out that people in the world are extricated in a complicated, mostly invisible net of dependencies with it. But the problem doesn’t exist at the level of individual choice. An eco-village situated within the borders of the U.S. or Italy is not sovereign; its precondition of existence is the existence of the American or the Italian state and all that it entails. There is no escape in this way; the structure must be altered or nothing else matters.” ^[12]

^[1] <http://gen.ecovillage.org/about/index.html>

^[2] Robert and Diane Gilman, *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities: A Report for Gaia Trust*,

(Gaia Trust, 1991).

[3] Robert Gilman, 'The Ecovillage Challenge', *In Context*, no 29, p. 10.

[4] <http://genoa.ecovillage.org/genoecania/membership/classes.html>

[5] interview by author at Jarlanbah, February 2002.

[6] by email, March 2002.

[7] Takis Fotopoulos, '[The transition to an alternative society: the Ecovillage movement the Simpler Way and the Inclusive Democracy Project](#)', *Democracy and Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002).

[8] <http://gen.ecovillage.org/>

[9] Ross Jackson, *And We ARE Doing It; Building an Ecovillage Future* (Robert D. Reed Publishers, San Francisco, 2000).

[10] http://www.gaia.org/resources/HJackson_GEN-History.pdf.

[11] http://www.ross-jackson.com/copy_of_books/the1.htm

[12] <http://commonplacebook.livejournal.com/96406.html>