

*A Concise History of the  
Global Ecovillage Movement*



*by E.C. Mare*

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The “ecovillage” is the latest conceptualization in a long history of utopian visions: model living situations that have the potential for bringing out the best in human nature. It seems that every age has its own version of Utopia, which literally means ‘no place.’ Sir Thomas More set the stage in 1518 by publishing the first *Utopia*, an ironic satire of Elizabethan England at the dawning of the Age of Colonialism. His story subtly ridiculed the pretentiousness, avariciousness, and pompousness of the colonial gentry and noble classes by depicting an ideal society in a fictional new land that achieved social stability, peace and justice by adopting values of simplicity and egalitarianism. In *Utopia*, captured military intruders were paraded around in gaudy gold jewelry and elaborate clothing while the native population were unadorned and wore unassuming plain linen cloth.<sup>1</sup>

Many more utopian visions were practiced, preached, or experimented on in Europe – and especially in the new land of America – in the next several hundred years: the Puritans, the Luddites, the Zionists, the Amish, the Quakers, the Mormons, Amana, Walden and Walden Two, etc....the list is quite long, and includes varied backgrounds – religious, secular, social co-operative, political. All of these groups were revolutionaries or reactionaries of some kind that sought to address the excesses and problems of their respective times by setting themselves apart somewhat from the mainstream and adopting and following creeds and values believed to be qualitatively superior to the status quo, often creeds and values of a spiritual nature that framed human potential in a higher, more resplendent light.

The 1960s and ‘70s saw a resurgence of utopian ideals. Sparked by a deep dissatisfaction with the prevailing institutions of economic materialism and global domination, responsive people relocated to the refuge of the countryside in droves to create a better, purer lifestyle for themselves. This ‘back-to-the-land’ movement was a crude predecessor to the current ecovillage response; yet, rebellious idealism is not enough in itself to form a secure foundation for sustainable living situations, and so most of these early experiments failed, primarily because of inattention to establishing a viable economic base. The lesson: Any utopian attempt to improve upon the status quo must recognize the reality that it is occurring within a larger context, and so must find a

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<sup>1</sup> “Utopia” – no place – was a play on words: Inserting the Greek prefix ‘eu-‘ – good – in front of ‘topia’ – place – would have produced Eutopia, or *good* place.

way to integrate an internal economy with the larger economic process, or be short-lived.

One of the most long-lasting and successful of this '60s genre of intentional community is The Farm, in Tennessee. The people that would grow into The Farm originated as participants in a series of political activism, free love, and consciousness expanding lectures at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s. Affectionately called the "Tuesday Night Class," hosted by the legendary Stephen Gaskin, this lecture series eventually attracted up to several hundred dissenters at a time. Reaching a critical mass, the people soon realized that in order to see their vision manifest they would need to escape the city and find a land base of their own. Eventually they accumulated a fleet of converted school buses, painted them white, and took off in a caravan to scour the nation in search of a site to ground their community. After a year of travel, 320 "hippies" finally procured land in the highlands of southern Tennessee<sup>2</sup> - but it was not easy! Because they were considered the highest concentration of 'communists' in the country at the time, they were doggedly pursued by J. Edgar Hoover and The F.B.I. who repeatedly intervened to try to thwart their efforts to purchase property.<sup>3</sup> But they are still there after three decades.

They succeeded where others failed, not only from their undaunted spirit, but because they established as community policy to not seek or accept help or welfare from the government. Thus they compelled themselves to be self-reliant, to take matters into their own hands and accept responsibility for their actions.<sup>4</sup> The situation was very difficult at first – seeking productivity from land being tilled for the first time – but they endured. They were held together by the strong community glue of a common spiritual focus and the belief that they were doing something worthwhile for the world by setting an example others could follow. Today The Farm boasts some 40 businesses, half of them non-profits, with over 85% of wage earners working for businesses inside The Farm.<sup>5</sup> The Farm is also home to the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA) and the world's first Ecovillage Training Center (ETC).

That consciousness surge from the 60s that produced The Farm was a broad swell of alternative ideas that went way beyond just envisioning cooperative, intentional communities; it also included and was informed by topics such as ecology and environmentalism, ecofeminism, organic farming, renewable energy sources, the integration of traditional cultures, the concept of sustainability, etc. In the coming decades the idealists and visionaries educated themselves and began to write,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, p.21

<sup>3</sup> As transmitted by Albert Bates at a "Village Design" course at The Farm, April 1997

<sup>4</sup> As transmitted by Stephen Gaskin at the "Sustainable Community Conference" held at Fairhaven College, Spring 1998

<sup>5</sup> *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, p.24

expanding on their ideas and articulating strategies for cultural change, touching on all aspects of life. Eventually there were so many new ideas floating around from such diverse sources that a clearinghouse was needed to collate and integrate all the emerging visions.

In the Spring of 1983, the first issue of the journal *In Context* appeared, calling itself “A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture.” Editor Robert Gilman, an astrophysicist by trade, stepped forward to accomplish the formidable synthesis. That first issue preordained its eventual climax, sporting the subtitle “Being a Planetary Villager.” *In Context* lasted for 13 years before evolving into *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures* in the Spring of 1996. All through that time, Robert Gilman provided a sounding board and gave a voice for the growing sustainability movement and its multitudinous dimensions. By issue #29, in the Summer of 1991, the term “eco-village” was first introduced. The ecovillage concept was the ultimate synthesis and came with a definition:

- a human scale
- full-featured settlement
- in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world
- in a way that is supportive of healthy human development
- and can be continued into the indefinite future

After eight years as editor of the world’s first sustainability journal, Mr. Gilman produced the elegant and comprehensive title that could contain all the brilliant emerging concepts – the ‘ecovillage.’

Concurrently, in 1990, Ross and Hildur Jackson created Gaia Trust in Denmark, an association devoted to furthering the growing movement toward sustainability. Ross had achieved success as an international money manager, and after a reported “spiritual awakening” decided to invest his resources in a planetary cause.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that “more than anything else, 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.”<sup>7</sup> And so, Gaia Trust commissioned the sustainability experts at Context Institute to “survey the field” and produce a report identifying the world’s best examples of ecovillage models. Their precedent-setting Report, *Eco-villages and Sustainable Communities*, appeared in May of 1991. The Report concluded that there was a vast array of different kinds of sustainable communities but that there did not yet exist anywhere a fully functioning “ecovillage.” Perhaps more important than gathering a directory of potential communities and their characteristics, the Report was also an

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<sup>6</sup> *Ecovillage Millennium: News from the Global Ecovillage Network*, p.5

<sup>7</sup> [www.gaia.org/about/history.asp](http://www.gaia.org/about/history.asp), p.2

intellectual effort that included some theorizing on the nature and characteristics of the as yet unrealized, ideal sustainable community – the ecovillage.

By September 1991, enough momentum was building to convene the first gathering devoted to discussing a strategy for developing and spreading the ecovillage vision. This first meeting was small, just twenty people, but included some of the most brilliant social and environmental thinkers in the world. Hosted by Gaia Trust in Denmark, with the Gilman's in attendance, this meeting set the stage for the forging of links between people of seemingly diverse backgrounds that found they could enthusiastically come together on common ground.<sup>8</sup>

In 1994, a similar but larger meeting was held in Denmark that solidified this growing momentum with the formal establishment of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Funded by Gaia Trust, with a full-time secretariat, the ecovillage movement now had a central office and a staff with daily business to attend to. That initial organization of GEN, the network of sustainable communities reaching for the ecovillage ideal, consisted of a seed group of nine members: the Findhorn Community, Scotland; The Farm, Tennessee; Lebensgarten, Germany; Crystal Waters, Australia; Ecoville, St. Petersburg, Russia; Gyurufu, Hungary; The Ladakh Project, India; The Manitou Institute, Colorado; and the Danish Association of Sustainable Communities.<sup>9</sup>

From 7-13 October 1995, the global ecovillage movement took a major leap forward with the convening of the conference “Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities: Models for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Living” at Findhorn. Sincere growing interest in the ecovillage vision was attested to by the fact that 400 people were in attendance, with some 300 interested others needing to be turned away. For a solid week, in typical Findhorn style, there was a continuous procession of speakers, presentations, activities, meditation, music and good food. Some of the sustainability luminaries to give keynote addresses were: Robert Gilman of Context Institute (of course), Max Lindegger of Crystal Waters, Albert Bates from the Farm, Margrit Kennedy of Lebensgarten, Helena Norberg-Hodge of The Ladakh Project, John and Nancy Jack Todd from New Alchemy Institute, Rashmi Mayur from the United Nations’ International Institute for a Sustainable Future, and the environmental minister from the U.K.<sup>10</sup> The utopian ecovillage vision had grown into more than just a good idea – it was now an internationally respected, credible intellectual response to addressing real social and environmental concerns at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Behind the scenes at the Findhorn conference, GEN was officially organized into three regional sub-networks to cover the globe, with administrative centers at The Farm

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.2

<sup>9</sup> [www.gaia.org/about/history.asp](http://www.gaia.org/about/history.asp), p.3

<sup>10</sup> From the video “Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities Conference” purchased at Findhorn, February 1996

(the Americas), Lebensgarten (Europe and Africa), and Crystal Waters (Asia and Oceania), with the head office still based in Denmark. The regional secretariats got right to work fulfilling the larger mission of GEN – to promote and support models of sustainable living.

In the aftermath of the Findhorn conference, the ecovillage movement was inflated with a burst of new enthusiasm; it was like a potent seed had been planted in the global noosphere. The melding of so many minds working on so many different aspects of sustainability – with the associated brainstorming, the setting of agendas, the networking, and the sharing of stories and information – all provided a powerful impetus taking the collective work to a new level.

Many lessons came out of the conference. For one, an understanding that sustainable communities – ecovillages – are the appropriate scale from which to bring forth the new culture; it can't be done as solitary individuals or at the abstract level of 'societies.' Another was the realization that in order to be successful, ecovillages must not become insular, exclusive, or sheltered but must interact with and integrate wholeheartedly with the surrounding culture. Another was the affirmation that ecovillages, and sustainable communities in general, must be the "necessary yes," a positive *solution* to mounting global problems, in contrast to organizations like Greenpeace which are the "necessary no."<sup>11</sup> The ecovillage movement was seen as taking all the no's and turning them into yes's. Another important realization was that sustainability is not enough in itself – sustainability is only about stabilizing the global phenomenon through applied negative feedback. The ecovillage was envisioned as the setting from which human potential could leap to new heights unforeseen, with abundant love, cooperation, and creativity – a leap in *quality* of life. Another important lesson to come out of the conference was the need to include the 'South,' still the home of many, many traditional villages. It is not enough for rich northerners to go on talking about and experimenting with 'ideal' communities if they are isolated from the vast majority of the rest of the human population. It was realized that this was a *global* solution, answering *global* problems, requiring a truly *global* perspective, with a participative unification of the efforts of the North and South.<sup>12</sup>

Much activity also was initiated as a result of the increased energy and visibility generated from the conference. In June of 1996, GEN was invited to the UN "Conference on Human Settlements" in Istanbul. In 1998 the first ecovillages were officially named among the United Nations' top 100 listing of "Best Practices," as excellent models of sustainable living. "Village Design" courses began to be offered at the Network's best models, and the Ecovillage Training Center was set up at The Farm. A

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<sup>11</sup> As transmitted by Robert Gilman in the video "Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities"

<sup>12</sup> From the video "Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities," a compendium of the Findhorn conference

“Community Sustainability Assessment” self-audit was created (available on the GEN website). The audit was created to ensure that the power in the movement would remain with the qualified communities by explicitly stating the definition of the elements of an ‘ecovillage.’ It was discovered that some people were using and profiting from the ecovillage name because of its semantic appeal without first investigating fundamental principles. Finally, an energetic effort was launched to form partnerships with villages in the South; and this effort continues to strengthen to this day.

All of the preliminary planning and conceptualizing by so many competent, qualified, informed people has begun to blossom. Today the Global Ecovillage Network is comprised of 100 members (individuals, communities, and organizations) in GEN Europe and Africa, 80 members in GEN Oceania, and hundreds of identified ecovillages in the Americas (although, admittedly, most of these are ‘intentional communities’ that have not yet reached ‘village’ scale). GEN has sprouted a new sub-regional office in South Asia that is currently communicating with 40 ecovillages, and has included the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka with 10,000 member villages.<sup>13</sup> And to think, all this growth has occurred in less than a decade since that first meeting of just twenty people in September 1991! It can be stated affirmatively: GEN is capably fulfilling its mission to support and promote models of sustainable living.

A key thrust of interest in GEN now, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is in the arena of education. All ecovillages are, in essence, research, training, and demonstration sites of sustainable living in community. Education is a real potential source of income for these often economically struggling communities; so, some of the projects currently being conceptualized are: a curriculum for a new style of education to be taken in modules at different ecovillages, the vision to create a common university – Gaia University – and the development of “Living and Learning Centers” in the South. Earlier in this year 2000, GEN sponsored the launch of “Living Routes,” based out of the ecovillage Sirius in Massachusetts, whose purpose is to bring American university students into ecovillages as part of their formal education. Other initiatives currently in the works are: ecovillage tourism, an ecovillage design consultancy, complementary money systems, and ecovillage e-trade.<sup>14</sup>

The global ecovillage momentum now stands poised to make a noticeable difference in the world. It is a utopian vision, perhaps, but it is realizable – it *is* being realized (that is, it is not simply ‘no place!’). It grew as a direct response and solution to the accumulated problems confronting humanity as we approach the “limits to growth” on a finite planet. Many highly educated, experienced, informed and concerned minds contributed to and nurtured its gestation and birth – and now infancy. It is a highly

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<sup>13</sup> [www.gaia.org](http://www.gaia.org) – What is GEN?

<sup>14</sup> [www.gaia.org/about/history.asp](http://www.gaia.org/about/history.asp), p.4

decentralized, grass-roots movement that is encouraging and supporting fundamental change with a broad base of increasingly popular support. By its very nature, this support is based locally with people committed to living in a place; yet, it is truly global in scope, and the solutions it posits are appropriate and workable in any current living situation: urban, suburban, rural, North *and* South. It is indeed the seed base for the emergence of a new planetary culture. As Ross Jackson, founder of Gaia Trust, points out: the ecovillage movement “unites North and South in a common agenda that cuts across all cultural, racial, and religious differences. It is a remarkable fact that the builders of ecovillages often have more in common with each other than with their respective local cultures, no matter where they come from. A common, global vision is emerging that has the power to change the world.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [www.gaia.org/about/history.asp](http://www.gaia.org/about/history.asp)

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