To: Global Ecovillage Educators for a Sustainable Earth
   (a.k.a. Gaia Education Educators for a Sustainable Earth)
From: E. Christopher Mare, M.A.
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Subject: Five-year Evaluation
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Beloved GEESE,

On occasion of the Bonn Report and its coincidence with the 5-year anniversary of the initiation of Gaia Education at Newbold House in May of 2004, I am inspired to post a selected evaluation of our progress to date. This is not so special really: in the course of my education I've written dozens of evaluations: one after each particular study or project, others following completion of segments of the journey, and still others for students. These evaluations are a way of capturing the learning process at graded stages, turning a critical eye toward what was actually accomplished compared to what was planned, and then proposing future courses of action to guide the ongoing learning process toward an ultimate fulfillment. In that spirit, then, as a measure of contemplative feedback, please allow me to introduce the following observations:

The Bonn Report is quite impressive – I wish I had a budget that could produce such scintillating, multi-hued presentations! We see smiling ladies standing beside a colorful booth full of glittery wares, and a convention center full of important delegates happily milling about or taking notes. It must have been a surge of inspiration to be there; and in that I can speak from experience, having had a chance to attend as a delegate the UN's World Urban Forum 3 (WUF3) in Vancouver, B.C. in 2006.

As I reflect further on the Bonn interlude, however, I start looking beneath the surface appearance wondering how much genuine substance can be found there. For example, I remember a speaker at WUF3 who had been at the first World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 1976. He described the electrified enlightened atmosphere, and how excited everybody was to go out into the world and busily implement the goals of the WUF. From his 30-year reflection point of view, however, this speaker seemed sad to report that nothing ever got done. His opinion was that the UN is an organization good at holding conferences and publishing reports but not so good at actually accomplishing anything on the ground, in the communities and for the people that all the high-minded pronouncements are supposed to be about.

When thinking about Gaia Education and substance, I am remembering feedback we got from the UNITAR representative who endorsed the EDE curriculum, something to the effect that "we really like your curriculum, yet we would like to see it more relevant or applicable to

urban situations, wherein lie our most serious problems." So I'm looking at a picture of the Gaia Education booth and I'm wondering how much of the material there is relevant or applicable to urban situations. And then I'm scanning my memory banks for news from the whole ecovillage universe that can give an indication of how many new urban ecovillage projects have been launched since the meeting at Newbold House, and I come up virtually blank – I have to say "virtually" because I do remember seeing a concept plan for a project in Sao Paulo that was calling itself an "ecovillage." What can we interpret from all this? Here I offer my humble opinion – and it can only be an opinion for there is no "objective reality" in these matters, only various ways of interpreting from a multitude of possible life-views:

My opinion is that we are not hearing about a surge of new urban ecovillage projects because the prevailing model of the ecovillage does not lend itself easily to the urban milieu. Here are a few of my concerns:

1) Ecovillage Design generally is presented as being initiated by the people who will be living there, the residents themselves; yet, in an urban context, self-initiated design is problematic, even in the most liberal jurisdictions, due to the plethora of codes, ordinances, zoning, regulations, etc. Thus, a new idea like the 'ecovillage,' which doesn't fit into any of the pre-delineated categories, will need to be walked through step-by-step with local planning authorities, adding great expense to the project, with the ideal vision inevitably being compromised along the way.

2) The ecovillage generally is perceived as an abode for "alternative" types – social activists, spiritual seekers, healers, artists, intellectuals, permaculturists, etc. – who by their very choice of lifestyle usually (but not always) have tangible issues with money flow. Land values, construction costs, permitting, etc. are considerably more expensive in urban areas, thus providing additional challenges to would-be urban ecovillagers. Given the choice, a start-up group with limited funding would make much more progress in a rural situation.

3) There is also an issue of scale. The most successful ecovillages tend to max out at the 250-300 person range, with a theoretical upper limit of 500. This limit comes from the inherent interpersonal sociability and accountability – the ideals of consensus decision-making, conflict resolution, non-violent communication, shared meals, etc. – that makes the ecovillage so appealing to some. People choose the ecovillage so they can be more intimate with others. With urban theorists, however, the recurring magic number to design/plan around is 5000. This scale presents a whole different conceptual outlook and design scenario; in fact, when considering economies of scale, I'm convinced that it takes a social grouping of around 5000 to become truly "sustainable" (i.e. self-reliant). Using this standard, then, the urban landscape is subdivided into sustainable urban

villages of 5000, while each urban village could be further subdivided into more intimate ecovillage-scale groupings of 500, with the ecovillages being further subdivided into clan-scale groupings of up to 50. This is whole systems design.

4) There is also city-scale infrastructure – highways, sewers, utilities, telecommunications, disaster relief, etc. – for which a group of grassroots enthusiasts simply does not have the technical expertise to comprehend, let alone plan around; therefore, conceptualizing urban sustainability – as in the case of offering to the UN workable solutions or "relevant or applicable" models – must include the learned perspectives of professionals.

Taking a look around the world, there are not a lot of pre-existing urban ecovillages to choose from. The two I know best are on the West Coast of North America: L.A. Ecovillage (an old converted apartment block) and Maitreya Ecovillage (two adjoined city lots) in Eugene, Oregon. As I understand it, both of these are in perpetual conflict with authorities. L.A. Ecovillage routinely sends out appeals to rally community support because the city wants to bulldoze the place to provide facilities for the school district. Maitryea is always on the verge of being shut down for violation of ordinances in this, one of the most liberal jurisdictions in the country. L.A. Ecovillage always has more repair work needed than funds available, thus it appears to the visitor as being 'run down.' Maitreya managed to get a couple of interesting cob buildings constructed; yet these stand in contrast to the platform where 8 tents have been set up for peripatetic activist residents. Where do all these people use the bathroom? That's one of the concerns of the city. I heard a representative from L.A. Ecovillage speak at the Ecocity conference a year ago. Such dynamic spirit; yet they're still using the 'us and them' vocabulary as if they still see part of their job as being fighting those horrible 'mainstream' authorities. You can be sure, in both of these cities, Los Angeles and Eugene, next time a group comes along saying they want to build an 'ecovillage,' while going through the appropriate permitting process, there's going to be stiff resistance from staff.

The situation is similar up here in the Seattle area: we really don't have any urban ecovillages to speak of – unless you want to include some of the student group households or land trust house-holdings that *call* themselves ecovillages. For example, for a while I lived at an urban community permaculture experiment in Bellingham: six individuals living in a house built for a nuclear family, plus two others living in school buses parked out front, and because of a favorable location one person had a yurt set up out back. The owner of the property was happy to exclaim, "This can be our own ecovillage!" Can 9 people, most of them transitory students, comprise an ecovillage? Even if it were true, that was not such a worthy model to emulate and show the UN – there was often a line at the bathroom! This is just an example of grassroots urban living, as I have experienced it.

My point is that the settlement pattern that's come to be called the 'ecovillage' – even the very best examples in the world – is not a pattern that's easily replicated or reproduced in the urban milieu, at the urban scale. If devoted grassroots enthusiasts in the rich, post-industrial countries have been unable to produce a replicable model, then how can we possibly expect their counterparts in Lagos, Djakarta, or Tijuana to do so?

As Gaia Education crosses the hump and enters the second half of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, it is pertinent to ask: 1) will Gaia Education move to articulate a relevant or applicable conceptual model of sustainable urban design and development? 2) will this model be called an "ecovillage?" and 3) will there be an attempt to implement this model somewhere in the world?

I am aware of several worthy parallel initiatives: new urbanism, urban villages, the suburban retrofit conceptualizations of Bane and Holmgren, transition towns (though I understand this to be more about community organizing), and the LEED standards for green neighborhood development. There must be more. I think the biggest question surrounds intent: Do we want all these other initiatives to ultimately reference back to the ideal ecovillage as the standard to emulate? Do we walk hand-in-hand with them by producing a viable urban version of the ideal ecovillage? Or do we – as an international educational organization designing curricula for sustainable community design and development – diversify our portfolio of offerings and position the ideal ecovillage model as just one among many context-dependent possible solutions?

My favorite choice has yet to be included because I have not yet worked it out: What if, instead of holding up an example like Maitreya Ecovillage as the highest possible attainment, we instead chose Firenze in the 1490s? Now there was a luminous model of sustainable urban design and development – in fact, I would say they went way *beyond* sustainability, into the realm of thriving and maximizing human potential. How do you get so much brilliance in one location? Did it have something to do with the design of the place – the layout of the plazas and markets and public buildings? Did it have something to do with the communal social fabric – the guilds and clans and politicos? Did it have something to do with the elegant beauty with which the people surrounded themselves – the art and architecture and attire? Maybe it had something to do with the way they organized regionally? Whatever combination of factors contributed, this was a crowning moment in human achievement; I'm sure that, when conceptualizing models of sustainable community design and development for the 21st century, there are valuable lessons to learn from 15th century Florence.

Perhaps Gaia Education could position itself as heralding a new Renaissance of the human spirit, cultivated and nurtured within the masterfully well-designed, integrated habitats first inspired by the pioneering ecovillages, and later given broader expression through a

revived art and science of settlement design – *beyond* sustainability? That could be something to show the UN…

All the best - Chris Mare