

Educating for the Ecovillage Millennium an Article for “Communities” Magazine by E. Christopher Mare – Autumn 2000

Ideally, education is a life-long adventure – ongoing, alternating periods of deep investigation, wild experimentation, practical application, and play, with interludes of sustained work to bring the new learning to fruition. An ideal education is very multi-disciplinary, broadly multi-cultural, and highly diversified in skill development, with an emphasis on ‘learning how to learn’ and effectively communicating what has been learned. The ideal education has as its purpose realizing and enhancing people’s innate creative potential – body, mind and soul – so that they may enjoy meaningful, satisfying, well-rounded, high quality lives.

And in this Age of Sustainability, the most importantly helpful education of all may be one that focuses on developing the skills and understanding necessary for collaboratively growing viable, healthy communities in symbiotic attunement with the evolutionary processes of Earth – in short, an education in sustainable community design. Since there does not yet exist an accredited institution devoted to this mission, we must create it ourselves. Gratefully, Living Routes is establishing itself, Gaia University is being conceptualized, and the Global Ecovillage Network will soon embark on its educational initiative, and in time these will grow into the institutions we need. But for now, the current student of sustainable community design must enterprisingly piece together various existing programs and activities in order to arrive at a competent, comprehensive education that will be a real contribution to the field.

By good fortune, I was able to design and complete an education with all the above elements, having graduated in the Spring of 1999 with a B.A. degree entitled “Village Design: Ekistics for the 21st Century,” essentially a prototype for an undergraduate curriculum in Ecovillage Design. Vital factors contributing to the successful manifestation of this fully accredited degree included:

- 1) Prior graduation from a Permaculture Design Course (PDC); eventually I would go on to complete three. The PDC was the foundation, and all subsequent work at the university was a matter of deeply exploring and elaborating upon fundamental principles. From one perspective, Ecovillage Design can be regarded as Advanced Permaculture Design, and both can be subsumed under the more academic sounding heading “Applied Human Ecology.”

2) Enrollment at a college that provided the opportunity for self-designed majors. Unfortunately, this concept is still too fresh and visionary to be an established program throughout Academia. I was very fortunate to be led to a remarkable Liberal Arts school called Fairhaven College, part of Western Washington University, in Bellingham, Ecotopia. My degree was an amalgamation of traditional courses at WWU, alternatively toned courses at Fairhaven, and Independent Study Projects of my own design. The major I conceived was divided into numerous categories: Natural Sciences, Natural Processes, Psychology, Anthropology, The Arts, Spirituality and Religion, Human Relationships, Economics, and Permaculture, with several classes or more in each category. These subtitles were meant to provide a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary overview of the complex and many-faceted considerations involved in designing and establishing a 21st century ecovillage.

3) Getting out to experience the world's premier ecovillage models in person – *there is no substitute for actually being there*. The flexibility and self-motivation offered at Fairhaven allowed me to travel extensively, and this was perhaps the most valuable and unique component of this degree: attending courses and workshops at Findhorn, The Farm's Ecovillage Training Center, and Crystal Waters, meeting and learning from the worldwide network of innovators that are actually making it happen. It was absolutely invaluable to go and get a feel for what these special places are like, mingling with the residents in their daily activities and hobnobbing with a variegated international cast of students. The kind of tactile understanding that results from this exposure cannot come from classrooms or books. I also managed to work on a sustainable ecological model in France, and studied traditional villages in Guatemala and Mexico, all as accredited Independent Study.

4) Becoming immersed in community on many different levels: I lived on a cooperative farm where we hosted many gatherings; Fairhaven College was intimate enough to be a community; Bellingham itself is community-minded with many overlapping sub-communities; then there is the greater bioregional Cascadian community and ultimately the Global Ecovillage Network. Active participation and identification with projects and people at each of these community levels was the supra-curricular nourishment that gave the intensive academic work its meaning and context. For those of us raised in a culture aggrandizing avaricious competition and predatory individualism, learning how to synergize with others may be the crucial crux of an education devoted to sustainable community design.

5) Gardening! At its best, the ecovillage is a lush garden within which people actually live. Ecological design, permaculture design, sustainable community design, ecovillage design – these are all labels for the one, primary, underlying theme: learning how to work *with* Nature to shape our living situations and provide all our needs. The

extended garden is the setting where these principles can be practiced, where theory can be instantly applied, and where natural processes can be observed, comprehended, and utilized. At Fairhaven College, we are lucky to have a large Outdoor Experiential Learning Site, our Outback Farm, where students engage in multifarious projects working with Nature. How could one attempt to comprehend growing an ecovillage (or other sustainable community), without first being able to grow a flourishing garden? The only difference is complexity of scale.

Educating for the Ecovillage Millennium means preparing students for the complex, multi-faceted task of designing and guiding the emergence of models of full-featured, ecologically embedded human settlement that can be continued into the indefinite future. Such an education is necessarily a full immersion, influencing all aspects of life – an initiation of sorts into a most sacred work: consciously participating in planetary evolution. The schools that are being conceptualized to foster and accredit this education will be very special places with a very visionary form of curricular agenda. Until these learning centers become fully established, the current student will need to creatively weave together the many existing programs and opportunities in order to arrive at the depth of understanding they seek.