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Ideals and Practices of European Ecovillages

In the context of the current global economic crisis, it seems that people are increasingly looking for more sustainable ways of living.[1] Ecovillages provide people with a way to pursue a more sustainable lifestyle. In this paper, I aim to introduce the sustainability ideals and practices of ecovillages.[2] I begin with an introduction to intentional communities in Europe in general, and ecovillages more specifically. Then, I introduce three ecovillages in more detail, and discuss the sustainability ideals and practices that these communities have adopted. I end the paper with a brief discussion in which I place the findings of my research in a broader perspective.

Intentional Communities in Europe

When I started my PhD research in 2002, an overview of intentional communities in Europe did not exist. Therefore, in 2003, I created a database of 473 intentional communities located in Europe at the time.[3] Although I attempted to locate as many intentional communities as possible, it is likely that the most secluded communities have not been included in the database, as they would prefer to remain unknown to outsiders. The spatial distribution of the European communities in the database is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of intentional communities in Europe.

1 R. Jackson, "Economics in an Ecovillage Future" (keynote, 3rd International Ecovillage Conference, Tokyo, 2009).
2 This paper is based on Chapters 2 and 5 of my PhD thesis, which are called "Data and Methods" and "Ecological and Communal Groups: Organic Examples," respectively. Parts of the paper have been taken verbatim from these chapters. See L. Meijering, "Making a Place of Their Own: Rural Intentional Communities in Northwest Europe." (PhD diss., Royal Dutch Geographical Society/University of Groningen, 2006).
3 For a more detailed account of how I collected the data, see my PhD thesis (footnote 2) and Meijering et al, "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 42–52.

When comparing the distribution of communities within Europe, it is striking that the communities are highly concentrated in the Northwest. Relatively few communities—in both number and proportion with the regional population—were found in southern and, especially, eastern Europe (see Table 1). It is possible that I overlooked communities in the South and the East, which could have been related to factors such as a linguistic barrier (I do not speak or read eastern European languages). However, it is also possible that there are only a few communities in these parts of Europe. This could be due to lower involvement in civic activity in general, as described by Lewicka.[4] Furthermore, in the former Eastern Bloc countries, the low incidence can be attributed to the legacy of the formerly prevalent communist/socialist political ideology, which did not allow intentional communities. As it takes time to develop an awareness of the possibility of creating intentional communities, this legacy may be an inhibiting factor. Because of the strong concentration of intentional communities in northwest Europe, I decided to focus on that area in the rest of my research.

Table 1: Number of intentional communities per region in Europe.[5]

	Population *(in millions)*	**Number of intentional communities**	**Intentional communities per million**
Europe*	**729.90**	**473**	**0.648**
Northwest	275.07	395	1.436
East	304.30	14	0.046
South	150.53	64	0.425

*** The three regions consist of the following countries:**

- Northwest: Austria, Belgium, Channel Islands, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom;
- East: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine;
- South: Albania, Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, San Marino, Serbia, Slovenia, and Spain.

4 M. Lewicka, "Ways to Make People Active: The Role of Place Attachment, Cultural Capital, and Neighborhood Ties," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 25 (2005): 381–95.

5 Source: Population Reference Bureau, *2005 World Population Data Sheet*, 2005.

When analyzing the data I had gathered on intentional communities, I identified "ecological communities"[6] as a distinct type.[7] Ecovillages largely define themselves in terms of environmental ideals, such as sustainable lifestyles, and are predominantly located in remote areas. They often remain involved in the wider society by organizing courses for interested outsiders, for example on organic farming, or through participating in the efforts of environmental organizations, such as Friends of the Earth.

Three Examples: Toustrup Mark, Chickenshack, and Tweed Valley

In this paper, I discuss three examples of rural ecovillages: Toustrup Mark on Jutland in Denmark, the Chickenshack Housing Cooperative near Tywyn in Wales, and Tweed Valley Ecovillage, a project in the Scottish Border region that has not yet secured land.

Figure 2: View of Toustrup Mark's kindergarten.

Toustrup Mark was founded in 1971 as a rural hippie commune. Originally, its main aims were to live and work together, to share resources and be self-sufficient, and to be involved in politics, the environmental movement, and cultural activities, such as

6 These communities should not be confused with the ecological communities as studied in ecology. In the rest of the paper, I will use the term ecovillages to avoid confusion.

7 See also Meijering et al., "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces," 42–52.

concerts. Over time, however, these ideals diminished. The houses continue to be commonly owned, however. Furthermore, communal dinners are organized on weekdays, for which every member has to cook or do the dishes once a week. In the preparation of the meals, they use predominantly organic ingredients. Currently, the community is an attractive place for young families who want to raise their children in a protected, rural environment (see fig. 2). At the time of the fieldwork, in October 2005, the community had 80 adult members, most of who were aged between 30 and 65 years.

Figure 3: Chickenshack's main building.

Chickenshack was established in 1995 and is located in a remote area in North Wales. At the time of my research, in August 2005, the community had six adult members. The community is a housing cooperative, which functions as a company with several shareholders. An important goal is to provide affordable housing through the cooperative structure (fig. 3). In addition, the members want to live in harmony with nature and to exert as little damage on the environment as possible, goals they pursue through efforts such as organic gardening and the use of solar panels. The community wants to develop into a model for eco-friendly building and living and to run a visitor center that will enable visitors to see how a truly sustainable lifestyle can be pursued in practice (see below).

The ideas of Chickenshack resemble those of Tweed Valley Eco-Village, the initiative for which arose in 1996. A core group of around eight people tried to buy land to build an ecovillage near Innerleithen in the Scottish Border region. Their intention was to create a community with a low environmental impact through building their own low-cost houses, sharing vehicles, and generating energy on-site. Ideally, the community would become a prototype of a sustainable housing project, with an information center for visitors. However, at the time of writing (October 2012), I could not find proof

that Tweed Valley has been realized, so it seems the efforts to build the community have either not yet been successful or been abandoned.

Ecovillage Ideals

The sharing of values around environmental sustainability maintains the commitment of these ecovillages' members to their communities. The values are translated into practice through, for instance, generating and using energy from renewable sources, self-sufficiency in nutrition, organic agriculture, organic gardening, and permaculture.[8]

Besides environmental sustainability, ecovillages typically also attempt to practice communal sustainability, which can be phrased as living together in harmony. One respondent from Tweed Valley described this as follows:

> To be able to grow with other families. Besides the frustrations, it will mostly provide security, a sense of belonging, and a feeling that you're cared about, and [that you care about] other people. Distancing oneself from the meaningless, Western, capitalist way of life through creating a home with a sense of place and belonging. (Tweed Valley, female member, 40s)

Similarly, Van Schyndel Kasper has argued for the inclusion of the element of community into the definition of a sustainable lifestyle in ecovillages.[9] She goes even further by suggesting that a community ethic is a necessary characteristic of not only ecovillages, but also of a sustainable society.

Early members of Toustrup Mark felt connected to the broader hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was politically committed to pacifism and equality between poor and rich. Chickenshack and Tweed Valley also underline this last point through their goal of providing affordable housing for everyone. The most characteristic aspect of the ideologies of ecovillages is that they are often not restricted to only political, environmental, or communal ideals, but rather embrace a combination of all three.

8 A term that contracts the words "permanent" and "agriculture" and can be defined as "the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems, which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way." See B. Mollison, *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual* (Tyalgum: Tagari, 1988), ix.

9 D. Van Schyndel Kasper, "Redefining Community in the Ecovillage," *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 12–24.

The ideals of sustainability identified above largely resonate with those described by Kirby.[10] He used a case study of an ecovillage to construct five dimensions of "a life lived according to the principles of sustainability": (1) a connection with the natural world, (2) with community, and (3) with the cultivated land; (4) intergenerational sustainability; and (5) a sense of personal integration.

Sustainability Ideals in a Changing Society

Ecovillages are strongly committed to contributing to "a better world" and are active in creating lifestyles that present alternatives to mainstream society. The interest in such alternatives has increased as the values of ecovillages have become more accepted and appreciated in mainstream society. According to Ray and Anderson,[11] a large group of people identify with formerly countercultural values and practices, such as authenticity, activism, (global) ecology, women's rights, and self-actualization.[12] Such societal changes have contributed to a convergence of lifestyles of ecovillagers and society, as colleagues and I have argued elsewhere.[13]

These communities also make efforts to communicate their ideals to the outside world. For example, at the time of the field research, Chickenshack's members had quite ambitious plans with respect to functioning as a model for "green living." They intended to organize permaculture courses, trainings in personal development, outdoor pursuits, outdoor weekends for disabled children, and a demonstration of the use of hemp as an environmentally friendly insulation material. In the following quote, one Chickenshack member described how they intended to be an example for society:

> Best-case scenario: we get our act together, and we develop this café, [build it in a green way,] and the garden, and the field into something that is really a great demonstration. Customers would come and stay here, and pay for some teaching. . . . It means that this place would become, over the years, a perfect example of the greenest way of living in sort of . . . mainstream culture. (Chickenshack, male member, 40s)

10 See A. Kirby, "Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at the Ecovillage at Ithaca: A Case Study," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2003): 331.

11 P. H. Ray and S. R. Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

12 Self-actualization here refers to the personal drive to reach one's full potential, which is also often associated with the highest level of psychological development in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

13 See also L. Meijering et al., "Constructing Ruralities: The Case of the Hobbitstee," *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2007): 357–66.

The other community members mentioned similar ambitions. With their attempts to create intellectually independent and alternative spaces, ecovillages can be seen as part of social movements.[14]

Besides a more tolerant, diverse society that is open to ecological ideas, the communities have also become more accepted as a result of a certain degree of conformity to more mainstream ideals by the community members. The main process of adaptation that was recognized by community members was that of individualization:

> Especially in the [70s and] 80s, people had much more in common. We were closer to each other. Now it's sort of [similar to the broader] society. . . . I think it's because we work more. . . . At that time, we still had the big kindergarten, there were more people working there and [also on the buildings], so [people did] more together at this place. [They] had more energy for doing crazy things: big parties and stuff, you know. [N]owadays people use most of their energy for their own things: work, family, whatever. . . . You can see the same preferences in society. People are getting more and more individualistic. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 50s)

As this quote illustrates, gradually, the communities conformed to the capitalist, materialist values they had originally rejected.

Practicing Sustainability

The underlying ideological foundations of ecovillages are relatively stable and unchanging, but how they are practiced varies over time and between groups. A characteristic of all three communities is that no individual plot of land is privately owned, although the members have private apartments or houses. As a member of another community (not discussed in this paper) put it:

14 P. Chatterton, "Making Autonomous Geographies: Argentina's Popular Uprising and the 'Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados' (Unemployed Workers Movement)," *Geoforum* 36, no. 5 (2005): 545–561; D. Pepper, "Utopianism and Environmentalism," *Environmental Politics* 14, no. 1 (2005): 3–22; R. Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997).

> The joint ownership of the soil should be unifying, ... everybody should contribute to [the community's] continuity. (Eden, female member, 40s)[15]

The statement might easily apply to the ecovillages under discussion, as well. In the three communities, there is also some sort of common built space. In Toustrup Mark, the common building is centrally located and easily accessible from most apartments. It functions as the main meeting place for the community, such as for the daily community dinners, kindergarten, and workshops. In Chickenshack, the common house consists of a kitchen and two sitting rooms. While it is typically an informal meeting place, official meetings are also held, albeit irregularly, there. The outdoor spaces are common land in Chickenshack; whereas in Toustrup, over time, individual families have begun to claim their own private gardens behind their houses—although the land is still collectively owned, it is privately used. One member thought that the apartments might also be privatized:

> I think the next big discussion will be about privatizing the apartments. [Now,] we use a lot of energy discussing things like, why don't you paint your windows? Why can't I get a new washing machine? We could stop that discussion [through making] it your own, and instead use our energy for doing up the common places. In that way, I think it's a good idea. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 30s)

Ecovillages tend to practice their ideals in their everyday lives, which creates a sense of togetherness between the members. Examples of practices are work days, in which the community works together on a project, and various social activities, such as communal dinners, parties, meditation, music, sports, theater, and gardening. Gardening is an important step towards becoming self-sufficient and independent from the formal economy.[16] Ecovillages strive to become "organic places," where "organic" refers both to a commitment to protect the environment, as already described, and to transform the communities into self-contained places where all aspects of life can take place. The ecovillagers in this study search for possibilities to combine working and living in the community, in order to increase the functioning of their ecovillages as small,

15 This quote is from a member of Eden, a different community that I also studied for my PhD research. Although I do not focus on Eden in this paper, the quote is another good illustration of what is going on in the three communities in this paper.

16 C. Ergas, "A Model of Sustainable Living: Collective Identity in an Urban Ecovillage," *Organization & Environment* 23, no. 1 (2010): 32–54.

independent societies. According to the respondents, this should result in a stronger sense of commitment to the place.

Ecovillages as Role Models

The ecovillages discussed in this paper focus on sustaining the environment through living simple, community-oriented lives in rural surroundings. They aim for ecological sustainability through such practices as generating solar energy, raising animals, and growing their own food. Besides ecological sustainability, the communities also strive for communal sustainability, which refers to sharing one's life with other people and practicing a common ideology together. Within the communities, open discussions about their uniting ideologies were not shunned. However, some basic values, such as the common ownership of land, were never discussed because they formed the fundaments of the communities. While maintaining such basic ideals, the ways and extent to which these were practiced were flexible and subject to change, often influenced by trends in mainstream society. For instance, all communities were confronted with increasing individualization. Communal activities, such as parties and work days, became less important over time and were replaced with activities for individual families. Such developments were not always approved, but were perceived as inevitable and a sign of practical flexibility.

My PhD research was embedded in debates on ruralism and, therefore, I focused on ecovillages in rural areas in this paper. However, many ecovillages are located in urban settings as well. Perhaps the most well-known example of a European urban ecovillage, at least when considering its original ideals, is the "free state" of Christiania in Copenhagen.[17] Similar to their rural counterparts, its members wanted to create an alternative to consumer society and be self-sufficient.

Ecovillages are guided by the desire to contribute to a "better world" by functioning as examples for mainstream society. They are involved in society through the organization of courses, such as vegetarian cooking or organic gardening. Ecovillages have increasingly become part of mainstream society, because countercultural values—such as

17 H. Donkers and S. van Poppel, "Christiania 2.0: Deense vrijplaats maakt doorstart," *Geografie* 21, no. 2 (2012): 6–10.

protecting the environment, authenticity, communal living, and personal growth—have become more accepted in the mainstream.[18] Members of ecovillages want to exemplify how to live sustainably and can be seen as "eco-role models."[19] Thus, it seems that ecovillages have the potential to contribute to a society that is more sustainable.

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