

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

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### **Ecovillages: Islands of the Future?**

Ecovillages have now existed for roughly 40 years. They have multiplied and changed in these four decades, and have organized themselves internationally. But in the eyes of the public, they are still sometimes seen in the light of the old cliché: places for old, long-haired hippies who never really became adults, practice free love, are stuck in their old dreams, and live a backwards life, outside society.

This cliché was probably the primary reason mainstream social science had never really taken the initiative to research the subculture; it seemed there was nothing new and relevant to find. Also, although they have grown enormously in the last two decades, ecovillages were not very open to scientific research or analysis in their early years. They worked in an almost isolated manner on a different future and cloistered themselves in their own subculture. They saw themselves as refugees of a consumerist and violent society, on which they had turned their backs. These “hippies” had only a foggy vision of their future, which they believed they could achieve through either a “back to the roots” approach or a glorification of the “old” life, as described in Vine Deloria Jr.’s book *Only Tribes Will Survive*. Often, though, they did not really know which strategy to follow. The village life was a test site. They did what seemed good, and they followed their intuition, opposing the mainstream, which, in the overdeveloped Western world, seemed to produce only ecological devastation, war, and despair.

Interestingly, research on ecovillages started at a time of cultural evolution, when the purely materialistic, profit-oriented society had clearly approached its long-foreseen limits. As long as the growth model, based on the heavy use of fossil fuels to keep engines running, was successful, the alternative path seemed to reflect a “counter-development.” Ecovillages seemed to be almost “third-world islands” in the middle of “oceans of unlimited possibilities,” as the Western world saw itself. But times of crisis open up the possibility to change perspectives and to look beyond the limits of the current paradigm.

Hence, my argument is that ecovillages are “islands of the future” in the presence of growing insecurity, crisis, and collapse. To understand this argument, it is necessary

to take the meta-perspective first developed by American ecologist Joanna Macy and further developed by writer David Korten. Both call the transition we are in “The Great Turning.” They don’t see the current process of disintegration as a catastrophe or even as doom, but as a phase of cultural and societal change.

What do they mean by a Great Turning? It is becoming more and more obvious that if no transition happens in the coming years, there may soon be a grim future for some, if not all, human societies. But let’s reframe that perspective by assuming that, if there are future human societies in two hundred or three hundred years, they will have learned to overcome the present risks and dangers. They will live in a cleaner environment, will have disarmed the huge arsenals of atomic weapons, will have achieved equality between the Global North and South, will have solved the hunger problem, will be powered by renewable energy, and so on. With this vision of the future, how then will these future societies look back on our times? It is highly possible they will talk about the times of crisis and uncertainty that we are currently experiencing as a time of fundamental changes, as a Great Turning.

What I want to make clear is that we are already in the very midst of that change. We—you, me, our science, and our visions—are part of that change. What we are mainly dealing with is not an apocalyptic end of human history. Instead, what we are experiencing are the symptoms of change, the elements of crisis that always occur when a system goes through a major transition. And that change is happening in *three different stages*. In short, the first stage consists of all actions that slow down the process of destruction and collapse; the second entails the analysis and the understanding of the structural causes of the present crisis and the creation of alternative patterns; and the third is a fundamental shift in values and worldviews. Each stage is equally important, and they are interrelated and can facilitate one another.

The **first stage** of change occurs in the public and political resistance to the destruction of natural support systems. This resistance, which can happen within or outside of political parties and through NGOs or local initiatives, can be accomplished with a wide range of actions, such as lobbying, demonstrations or civil disobedience, documenting ecological destruction, public campaigns, internet initiatives, or collecting signatures. It can also be achieved by citizens voting in the interest of future generations or by parliamentarians pushing for tougher environmental laws. The important role of such

actions is that they slow down environmental destruction and give us more time for the necessary process of cultural transition.

The **second stage** of change happens simultaneously with the first. This stage is about revealing destructive patterns in society and economics and the search for alternative structures that will transform society peacefully and evolutionarily. For instance, in this stage, people deal with the structural patterns of transnational corporations, the functioning of industrialized agriculture, and the dynamics of the energy industry, among other issues. In a sense, the stage could be analogized as a massive growth of green vegetation sprouting through the concrete of old systems.

The purpose of seeking alternative structures can thus be seen as “building rafts for the sinking ship.” In other words, by building alternative structures, we can slowly create complementary models that can also soften the consequences of a crisis. Already there are countless initiatives around the world attempting to design alternative structures, including anti-neoliberal globalization groups like the International Forum on Globalization and ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financière et l’Aide aux Citoyenne); think tanks and forums, such as the World Watch Institute, Positive Futures Network, the Natural Step, and Bioneers; social entrepreneurialism; and, of course, the analysis of the emergence of alternative communities.

Many of these developments are extremely promising, because of their ability to show that another world, another future is possible. But, as with the first stage, this alone is not enough. These avant-garde projects have to be integrated into mainstream culture, which requires a fundamental shift in values and in the way we perceive our world.

Thus, the **third stage** is about adopting a different perspective on reality. It requires the development of a new worldview; a new self-perception as humans: new values regarding society, the environment, and future generations; and even new forms of spirituality. Since it is our worldviews and value systems that provide the basis for all individual decisions and actions, it is in this third and most fundamental stage that whether we can transform our unsustainable society into a life-sustaining culture will be finally determined. We can already see big changes that have taken place in the last 50 years and that are accelerating in the present. For example, in modern science we are witnessing a fundamental paradigm shift from a mechanistic approach to a

systemic approach of interrelatedness and wholeness. We are also witnessing a growing shift in cultural values away from fundamentalist ideologies and closed-system thinking to worldviews that celebrate a diversity of solutions, open systems, and build on potential personal development. There are fascinating studies by researchers, such as political scientist Ronald Inglehard, Duane Elgin, and sociologist Paul Ray, about the scale of value-shifting in modern societies.

Inhabitants of ecovillages are exhibiting change at all these stages. In the case of the first, they are often part of a protest movement against destructive forces, such as violence or environmental destruction. By virtue of their existence, they are part of the second, model-building stage and are, thus, creating “islands of a possible future.” And, without question, their experimental lifestyles make them an integral part of value and consciousness change. They not only talk about different values or an alternative lifestyle, but they actually “walk their talk.” Even if they don’t always succeed, they serve more or less as working models, as proof that “another world is possible,” to borrow the World Social Forum’s slogan.

More specifically, I would like to demonstrate how the environmentalism of ecovillages fits the three stages of the Great Turning. First of all, ecovillages adopt practical actions that reduce the size of the community’s ecological footprint. For example, Findhorn Foundation recently proved it has the smallest ecological footprint of any community in Great Britain. Ecovillages are able to achieve smaller footprints through practices such as carpooling, sharing electrical devices, self-sufficiency in food production, and attempts to create an independent energy supply through renewable methods.

Secondly, ecovillages have proven to be a sort of low-tech technology developer for the rest of society. A lot of technological innovations have come out of ecovillages’ experimentations, such as the cheap radiation detector developed by The Farm in Tennessee; water saving systems like the composting toilets created by Sekem Farm in Egypt; and cheap and energy-efficient building methods, as designed by Germany’s ecovillage Sieben Linden.

Thirdly, through their high levels of internal communication, discussion, idea-sharing, and consciousness-raising work, ecovillages often prove to be avant-garde in leading

value-based ecological lifestyles, demonstrating to the rest of society that a reduced use of resources and energy can be combined with an actual growth in quality of life.

Ecovillage activities at the third stage are most interesting, because this is when new ways of thinking, new social tools, and new scientific and social approaches are developed, which lie at the foundation of ecovillage culture. These approaches might also serve the rest of society. For example, interesting in times of economic crisis is the experiment with community-owned, self-governed economic enterprises, in which workers own the enterprises and employ high degrees of collective decision-making. An ecovillage with almost two decades of successful experience with this kind of alternative economics is the German community Niederkaufungen near Kassel. Other interesting new approaches happen on the social level, including alternative forms of social security (e.g., support for people in financial crisis), new ways of caring for the elderly (as practiced in the German ecovillage Tempelhof), and the creation of progressive education projects, such as wilderness kindergartens and sustainability-oriented universities like Gaia University and Heliopolis University.

With this variety of approaches, ecovillages are pioneers for cultural transformation, because they establish a different consciousness. They are change agents that show under which conditions sustainable and environmentally just lifestyles can be established, while increasing quality of life. By collectively discussing and dealing with processes of personal growth in communication and spiritual awareness, they are pioneers in combining inner growth with social and ecological project building. In doing so, they combine what is usually separate: personal development and social change. Moreover, all ecovillages seem to focus on enhancing an individual's personal potential and see this as a precondition for collective transformation.

This is extremely important for contemporary social science and future building, as it makes obvious the reality that a different world cannot be built without new cultural, ethical, and spiritual values. Moreover, these values also have to be practiced. As long as new experiments are conducted in the realm of old paradigms, they won't go beyond the threshold of conventional thinking. And if they do not go beyond this threshold, all experiments will, sooner or later, be consumed by the old system. Only when the values and worldviews of an old, failing system are understood and also transformed can a new world, community, and society be built.

My argument describing ecovillages as “islands of the future” is quite optimistic, maybe even unrealistic. Inhabitants of such alternative communities carry a huge weight on their shoulders; with little support from mainstream culture and the majority of the public, they are trying to build a new world within the old. They are trying to establish new structures almost always by trial and error, and they need to be able to deal with and accept disappointments, crashing illusions, and failing visions. For many ecovillages, this creates a high amount of social stress, burnout, and the feeling of being alone on the path to build a sustainable future. This brings me to my final point: these pioneers need active support from mainstream culture. They need to be supported financially and morally, because in solving collective challenges, they are creating new models and designing a new culture.