

# **Ecovillages: Seeking Local Solutions to Global Problems**

By Liz Walker

*Green Horizon Magazine* -- Winter 2008

As an environmental activist for over three decades, I have recently felt a tremendous sense of gratitude that the world seems to be waking up (at last!) to the dire nature of our circumstances. Many thanks go to Al Gore for his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, which had the desired effect of educating millions of people about global climate change. The subsequent Hollywood film, *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour*, goes even further in outlining the systemic nature of our environmental problems, as well as a few solutions. But both films, as helpful as they are in reaching their mainstream audience, beg for a more comprehensive solutions-oriented approach. The message seems to be: cut down on your individual energy use and corporations and government will do their part, primarily through implementing a few technological breakthroughs. In my view, this message is oversimplified. As a responsible individual, once you've changed all the light bulbs in your house to compact fluorescents, signed a petition to stop new coal-fired plants, and turned down your thermostat, what's next?

I think the missing link is at the local community scale. It is here that we can begin to address the systemic, inter-related problems of climate change, Peak Oil, over-consumption, cultural breakdown, and the ravages of the corporate-controlled, globalized economy on the environment. At the local scale, people may cultivate a sense of belonging, and can see how their actions make a difference. This is already beginning to happen with the local foods movement. Everyone from college students to Wal-mart seems to be jumping on the local, organic bandwagon. In the U.S. the average food item travels 2,000 miles from farm to plate. By purchasing locally grown food, whether at supermarkets or local Farmer's Markets, we are not only saving the enormous energy costs of transportation, but we are also beginning to reweave the local economy, and honor the knowledge of local farmers. We are building webs of connection that create a strong and resilient community foundation.

## **Ecovillages—a comprehensive approach**

In the same way that the local, organic food movement has begun to penetrate mainstream American culture, another, even more comprehensive approach is just beginning to be recognized. In the September 17 issue of *Time* magazine, there was a two and a half page spread on ecovillages—in particular, EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI), my home community. EVI is described as “a clean, green village hoping to show the rest of us how to live a fully modern life while reducing our environmental footprint to little more than a tiptoe.”

We are just one of an estimated 379 ecovillages around the world, loosely united by the Global Ecovillage Network. Each of these ecovillages is a living experiment in how to lead a more earth-friendly existence while creating a strong sense of community. In addition to *Time* magazine coverage, Worldwatch Institute, an environmental think tank, recently produced a report about ecovillages. Researcher Erik Assadourian said, “It’s clear the communities are growing stronger ... I think they’re the way of the future.”

What are ecovillages? While there are many definitions, I think of ecovillages as human-scale communities that are seeking to substantially reduce their ecological impact through using green-building techniques, employing energy efficiency and renewable energy strategies, growing much of their own food, building a local economic base, and educating the public through hands-on programs, in addition to the most important factor of all—creating a strong sense of community. These communities are small enough that people feel a remarkable sense of belonging and connection—promoting that essential sense of extended family, or “tribe” which is so lost in modern society. Ecovillages are at the forefront of a paradigm shift in learning how to live more sustainably on the planet. They greatly increase the quality of life through promoting a renewed connection with both people and place.

I’ve recently had the privilege of spreading the word about ecovillages around the U.S. and in several other countries. Here are two examples:

## **Japan**

It is November, 2006, chilly but sunny in Tokyo, the largest city in the world. I am here on a six-city speaking tour, invited by a coalition of groups which is seeking to popularize the ecovillage model in this highly industrialized country. A diverse range of people attend the large Tokyo conference—architects, students, planners, developers, environmentalists. The excitement in the air is palpable.

At a restaurant in Kobe, another stop on the tour, one of the young organizers tells me, “In our country young people have lost hope for the future. Most of us don’t want to get married, or to have children. Listening to you talk about ecovillages, I feel like maybe it is worth it to have a family. I’m starting to feel hope again.” A few weeks later my EVI friend and colleague Elan Shapiro addresses a national conference on ecovillage development called by the Ecosystem Conservation Society of Japan (I was told it is similar to a cross between the Sierra Club and the EPA). This conference brings together hundreds of mayors and other government officials to look at ecovillage design. Later, the president of the Society, Mr. Hobun Ikeya, writes, “As the living model of a sustainable community where the residents are leading a lively and healthy life by helping each other, and by minimizing the burden on the planet, EcoVillage at Ithaca gave off a bright light over the future of Japanese communities. I believe the success of this conference will lead to a big step forward for promoting an ecovillage movement here in Japan.”

Why are the Japanese so interested in ecovillages? Kiyokazu Shidara, founder of the Permaculture Institute of Japan, and a frequent visitor at EVI, explains:

*When I visited EVI for the first time, I got a strange feeling, because its atmosphere reminded me so much of my hometown community in which I grew up. Sadly that has now totally changed into a big city. Japanese traditional culture was based on the worship of nature and use of local resources, and was sustainable for a very long time. We have lost that culture and those local communities, because of the economic and cultural globalization that is spreading all over the world, destroying precious nature and local cultures. The reason why I organize tours to EVI for my students is to let them see the actual process of creating a sustainable community intentionally – and how the people think and work to realize their objectives.*

## **The Philippines**

Mindanao Province, February, 2007. I am here as a keynote speaker and facilitator of a two day “Ecovillage Living” conference. First my Filipino guides (including one woman who was imprisoned and tortured under the Marcos regime) show me the beautiful area they are trying to preserve—Mainit National Preserve. In the pouring rain we jounce along muddy back roads in the back of a van. We stop to see a massive mudslide, caused by illegal logging of the steep mountain slopes, compounded by illegal gold mining practices which also bring cyanide and mercury poisoning to the rivers. Various squatter settlements line the banks of the central river in this rainforest. One shantytown next to the river, Reserba, is on high alert. We cross a log bridge over the flooding river, and watch in awe as 50-foot trees, with full root systems are swept along in the raging torrent below. One resident tells me, “We’re frightened. Our village can be swept away at any time.” It turns out that the rainy season has lasted six weeks longer than usual. Climate change compounded with other human impacts—many caused by poverty and an unjust social system—have created this dilemma.

It’s very encouraging to see the amazing turnout at the conference the next day. Over two hundred people have come to learn about ecovillages. They include the local mayor and other city and provincial officials, the squatters from two major settlements, nuns from a local Catholic school, planners, architects, attorneys, school children of all ages, teachers, small farmers and many indigenous people. Luckily I am able to give my two presentations—one about international ecovillages and one about EcoVillage at Ithaca, before the power gives out. It is now over 100 degrees and humid, in a room with no air conditioning, no microphone or lights. The Filipino organizers have a good sense of humor about it...they bring out snacks and we radically re-organize plans for the day. We decide to meet in small groups to do a participatory ecovillage design exercise. This turns out to be a huge success. I ask each group to design an ecovillage for their particular area, and give them multiple design criteria. People from all walks of life work together for several hours, then present their ideas to the whole group. Most people stop speaking in English (the official language) and speak animatedly in Visaya (the local dialect). The

Reserba squatters work with a local planner, and have the most sophisticated idea of what they want to create, including green homes, market gardens, livestock husbandry, a spiritual center and more. By the end of the conference, local government officials are talking with them about how to purchase land for their future ecovillage.

### **Many of the same solutions apply**

In my travels, I've been struck by the similarities across national and cultural boundaries and different ecosystems. In each case, from highly industrialized, wealthy urban centers in Japan to impoverished squatters in the rainforests of the Philippines, to rural and urban communities in the U.S., many of the same problems apply, as well as many of the same solutions. We are all facing drastic climate change, cultural and environmental destruction, and the devastating effects of a globalized economy that does not value local traditions and knowledge. Likewise, the local solutions, while adapted for each culture, are very similar: bringing people together across cultural divides to work together, building a strong sense of community, searching for sustainable ways of growing food, building homes, and supplying energy. Ecovillage principles are one fascinating way of applying local solutions to global problems.

-----

**Liz Walker** is co-founder and Executive Director of EcoVillage at Ithaca ([www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us](http://www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us)) and author of *EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture* and *Choosing a Sustainable Future: Ideas and Inspiration from Ithaca, NY*—both published by New Society Publishers. She has helped to coordinate the development of EVI's three cohousing neighborhoods, as well as its educational programs with Cornell University and Ithaca College.