

Foreword

ECOVILLAGES: SEEDS OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

by Duane Elgin

The human family has entered a pivotal time in history when we are challenged to make not superficial changes, but a deep transformation in our manner of everyday living. The great wisdom of developing more sustainable patterns and ways of living was powerfully declared in 1992 when over 1,600 of the world's senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed an unprecedented "Warning to Humanity." In this historic statement, they declared that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course . . . that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know." They concluded that "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated." Roughly a decade later came a related warning from 100 Nobel Prize winners who said that "the most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed."

As these two warnings by the world's senior scientists indicate, powerful trends are now converging into a whole-systems crisis, creating

the likelihood of a planetary-scale evolutionary crash within this generation. These “adversity trends” include growing disruption of the global climate, an enormous increase in human populations living in gigantic cities without access to sufficient land and water needed to grow their own food, the depletion of vital resources such as fresh water and cheap oil, the massive and rapid extinction of animal and plant species around the world, growing disparities between the rich and the poor, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The potential for “vast human misery” and conflict seems very great.

Another path is possible. Rather than pull apart in destructive conflict, the human community could choose to pull together in cooperation and work collaboratively to create a sustainable future. I am heartened by research that indicates public attitudes and behaviors seem to be shifting in favor of more sustainable ways of living.

A “World Values Survey” was conducted at the turn of the 21st century, which represented a majority of the world’s population and covered the full range of economic and political variation. Strikingly, this survey revealed that, over the several decades prior to the turn of the century, a major shift in values has been occurring in a cluster of a dozen or so nations, including the United States, Canada, Northern Europe, Japan, and Australia. In these societies, the emphasis is shifting from economic achievement to post-materialist values that emphasize self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life. These emerging values are important in supporting a shift beyond a narrowly focused materialism to a broadly oriented concern for more sustainable and satisfying ways of living.

A similar shift in values can be seen in other surveys focused on the United States. They show that several generations have tasted the fruits of an affluent society and have discovered that, for many, money does not buy happiness; instead, it is producing a society of emptiness and alienation. Not surprisingly, millions of people are trusting their experience, pulling back from the rat race of consumer society, and moving toward a way of life that is richer with family, community, creative work in the world, and a soulful connection with all of life.

Overall, in the United States and a dozen or so other “post-modern” nations, a trend toward simpler, more sustainable ways of living has evolved from a fringe movement in the 1960s to a respected part of mainstream cultures in the early 2000s. These surveys show there

exists a distinct subpopulation — that I would conservatively estimate at 10 percent of the US adult population, or 20 million people — that is pioneering a way of life that is outwardly more sustainable and inwardly more soulful and satisfying.

Although millions of people are seeking to move toward new ways of living, they face an enormous challenge — our current patterns and scales of living do not suit their emerging needs. The scale of the household is often too small and that of the city too large to realize many of the opportunities for sustainable living. However, at the scale of an ecovillage, the strength of one person or family meets the strength of others and, working together, can create something that was not possible before. To illustrate from my own life, for a year now, my partner Coleen and I have lived in a cohousing community (often viewed as a stepping stone to an ecovillage) of roughly 70 people, and we have seen how easily and quickly activities can be organized. From organizing fundraisers (such as a brunch for tsunami disaster relief), to arranging classes (such as yoga and Cajun dancing), planting the community landscape and garden, and creating community celebrations and events, we have participated in several dozen gatherings that have emerged with ease from the combined strengths and diverse talents of the community.

A new architecture of life is needed: one that integrates the physical as well as the social and cultural/spiritual dimensions of our lives. Taking a lesson from humanity's past, it is important to look at the in-between scale of living — that of a small village of a few hundred people. Great opportunity exists for organizing into clusters of small ecovillages that are nested within a larger urban area.

Looking more broadly at this inspiring vision of a sustainable future, I can imagine that a family will live in an “eco-home” that is nested within an “eco-village,” that, in turn, is nested within an “eco-city,” and so on up the scale to the bioregion, nation, and world. Each ecovillage of several hundred persons would have a distinct character, architecture, and local economy. Most would likely contain a childcare facility and play area; a common house for meetings, celebrations and regular meals together; an organic community garden; a recycling and composting area; some revered open space; and a crafts and shop area. As well, each could offer a variety of types of work to the local economy — such as the arts, health care, child care, a non-profit learning center

for gardening, green building, conflict resolution, and other skills — that provide fulfilling employment for many. These micro-communities or modern villages could have the culture and cohesiveness of a small town and the sophistication of a big city, as virtually everyone will be immersed within a world that is rich with communications. Ecovillages create the possibility for doing meaningful work, raising healthy children, celebrating life in community with others, and living in a way that seeks to honor the Earth and future generations.

Ecovillages represent a healthy response to economic globalization as they create a strong, decentralized foundation for society and a way of living that has the potential for being sustainable for everyone on the planet. Because they typically range in size from roughly one hundred to several hundred people, they approximate the scale of a more traditional tribe. Consequently, ecovillages are compatible with both the village-based cultures of indigenous societies and post-modern cultures.

With a social and physical architecture sensitive to the psychology of modern tribes, a flowering of diverse communities could replace the alienation of today's massive cities. Ecovillages provide the practical scale and foundation for a sustainable future. I believe they will become important islands of community, security, learning, and innovation in a world of sweeping change. These smaller-scale — human-scale — living and working environments will foster diverse experiments in community and cooperative living. Sustainability will be achieved through different designs that are uniquely adapted to the culture, economy, interests and environment of each locale.

In a shift similar to that which nature makes — for example, in the jump from simple atoms to complex molecules, or from complex molecules to living cells — humanity is being challenged to make a jump to a new level of organization: social, ecological, economic and cultural/spiritual. We have never before *consciously* confronted the combined opportunity and necessity of such an enterprise before.

Despite the importance of ecovillages to a sustainable future, and despite a reservoir of interest numbering in the millions of persons, there are only a relative handful of ecovillages in the United States. One of the largest and most well-known ecovillages in the United States is in upstate New York. EcoVillage at Ithaca or EVI was co-founded by Liz Walker in 1991. Liz has lived within, and been the director of, EVI

since its inception and has worked on all aspects of the community's development. It is understandable that there is great media interest in the Ithaca ecovillage because, in it, we can see the seeds of our own future. As a pioneering experiment in sustainable living in the US, EcoVillage at Ithaca will surely be recognized as a catalyst, spurring innovation throughout the country.

What is the lived-experience of transforming these seed potentials into a practical reality that can be seen and touched, with real people co-creating community, resolving conflicts, building consensus, celebrating together, constructing a distinctive physical architecture, stewarding the land to walk upon, and eating food from the community garden? Liz Walker answers this and other questions by taking us inside the personal journey of creating, and living within, the Ithaca ecovillage. The journey she describes feels both ancient and familiar as well as modern and exciting. I believe this is a journey to which we are all being called.

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