

Ecovillages and Other Intentional Communities

IF YOU'RE SEEKING to create more of a "sense of community" in your life, or to live a more sustainable lifestyle in the good company of friends — especially now with the emergence of Peak Oil issues — this book can offer valuable insights and how-to advice. While you may know little about ecovillages or other kinds of intentional communities, the men and women you'll meet in these pages will show you what these communities are about and why they're increasingly appealing. So, whether you're one of the "cultural creatives" who would like to know more about ecovillages and intentional communities, or if you're actively seeking a community to join, let the stories in these pages inspire you.

What this Book Can Do For You

You'll find an overview of ecovillages and other kinds of intentional communities and what they're doing; how to contact them; and how to visit them enjoyably and evaluate them intelligently. If you find a community you'd like to join, you'll learn how to make a good impression on the group and enter into your new community life with grace and confidence.

If you're interested in this topic generally, my hope is to pique your interest and inspire you to learn more. If you're already planning to join a community, my hope is to help you evaluate and compare communities wisely and discern what may lie under the surface. I'd like you to be able to

consider each potential new home in terms of your own long-term social, spiritual, financial, and legal well-being, and to evaluate how you can best stay in harmony with your personal vision and closely held values. This book will show you what to look for and how to look for it.

Community seekers also need to know how to avoid the common blunders that well-meaning but inexperienced people can make when first visiting and joining communities. You'll learn what to expect, how to join a community with more assurance, and how to enjoy the experience. This book will caution you to avoid impossibly high expectations, for example that living in community will solve everything. It will offer a realistic perspective, based on years of experience — my own, and those of experienced colleagues living in ecovillages, cohousing neighborhoods, and other kinds of intentional communities.

I'd like to guide you on this journey because I've explored the subject from several perspectives — from those of community seekers, community founders, and communities seeking new members. As editor of *Communities* magazine since 1993, I've been privy to dozens of anecdotes and stories from communities across North America about what works and what doesn't work in terms of new people joining them — and dozens of similar stories from people who have visited communities and found those that impressed them and those that seemed troubled. I've helped friends visit and join

communities, and sought and successfully joined a community myself, Earthaven Ecovillage, where I now focalize its Membership committee. I've also researched what it takes to start successful new communities, and written a book on the subject — *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* — published by New Society Publishers in 2003. I give workshops and speak at conferences about these topics all over North America, where I meet more community members and community seekers and have learned even more about this topic. This book is an opportunity to share what I've learned with you.

Who This Book is For

This book is first for “cultural creatives” — people who value environmentally sustainable living, cooperation, and a sense of community (and who perhaps have a spiritual practice) — but may not know much about ecovillages or intentional communities and would enjoy learning more. It's for people who want to know more about folks who live off the grid, grow their own food, or create their own biodiesel fuel, for example, or who share meals with friends and neighbors, raise their children cooperatively with others, work at jobs they find fulfilling, create their own home-grown entertainment — and thrive. People exactly like this visit ecovillages and intentional communities every week. “We didn't know a place like this existed!” they often say.

It's also for people who might consider joining an ecovillage or intentional community sometime in the future — and who'd like some guidance in the meantime about how to go about it.

Lastly, it's for active “community seekers” — people engaged in the process of seeking an ecovillage or another kind of sustainable intentional community — who would like some tips and pointers on how to make the journey far easier.

What is an Intentional Community?

My favorite definition of an intentional community is Bill Metcalf's in *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (Findhorn Press, 2004): “Intentional communities are formed when people choose to live with or near enough to each other to carry out a shared lifestyle, within a shared culture and with a common purpose.” Most intentional communities share land or housing or live in adjacent properties, though a few are non-residential. Most govern themselves with some form of participatory democracy, such as consensus decision-making, super-majority voting, or majority-rule voting. Relatively few (usually spiritual or religious communities) are governed by a spiritual or religious leader or a group of leaders.

The common purposes of communities vary widely. *Ecovillages*, for example, are intentional communities which model and demonstrate ecologically sustainable lifestyles. They can be urban or rural. My favorite definition of an ecovillage comes from Robert and Diane Gilman, in 1990: “A human-scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.” Ecovillage members tend to live as sustainably as they can, which often includes (depending on their setting) growing much of their own organic food, living in passive-solar homes made of natural materials such as strawbale or cob, generating their own renewable energy, car-pooling and/or using biodiesel fuels, and so on. We'll explore ecovillages much more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

The almost 100 *cohousing communities* in North America offer great family neighborhoods owned and managed by the residents themselves — ideal places in which to raise children or grow older. In fact, elder cohousing, a new but growing trend

in the cohousing movement, offer seniors an appealing alternative to retirement communities. In cohousing communities people live in smaller-than-normal housing units, often in two-story townhouse-style dwellings, and share common ownership of a large “common house” with kitchen, dining room, meeting space, children’s play area, laundry facilities, and other shared amenities, and in which they share optional meals several nights a week.

Urban group households of various kinds offer their residents lowered housing costs, shared expenses, and a lively social scene. Some urban communities are organized as *housing co-ops*, including *student housing co-ops*, *elder housing co-ops*, and *limited equity housing co-ops*. These allow students, elders, and people with limited funds, respectively, to share ownership of their housing, share resources, make decisions cooperatively, and enjoy a closer connection to their neighbors than they would simply living in apartment buildings or condos.

Rural *back-to-the-land homesteads* offer their members the opportunity to grow much of their own food and practice rural self-reliance skills. Communities organized as *conference and retreat centers*, *holistic healing centers*, and *sustainability education centers* are often rural, food-growing settlements as well, offering workshops and courses to the public.

Spiritual communities such as yoga ashrams and Buddhist meditation centers provide spiritual teaching and common spiritual practices, while spiritually eclectic communities welcome members with a variety of different spiritual paths, and

often offer public workshops on a wide variety of spiritual and personal growth themes. Some spiritual communities, such as the over 100 *Campbell Communities* in Europe and North America, serve the needs of developmentally disabled adults or children in a community setting.

Christian communities offer Christian fellowship and shared worship. Some are income-sharing, some are not. Some Christian communities also provide needed services to others, for example, the *Catholic Worker* communities in many cities offer food and shelter for the urban homeless. By the way, most scholars of intentional communities include Catholic monasteries and convents, which they consider the most long-lived form of intentional community in the Western world.

In most *income-sharing communes*, members operate one or more community businesses. Each member receives room and board, and the community either pays them a small stipend or pays for their basic needs, such as clothes, toiletries, nutritional supplements, medical care, and so on. In some income-sharing communes members work outside the community, and pool their salaries or wages, with the same arrangement — receiving room, board, and a stipend, or the community pays for their basic needs. I use the term “commune” in this income-sharing sense, and not as a synonym for “intentional community,” as many journalists mistakenly do.

We’ll look at each of these kinds of communities more closely. But to start with, let’s look at *why* anybody would want to live in an intentional community.