

What is an Ecovillage?

Posted on April 10, 2011 by [Daniel Greenberg](#)

Ecovillages are green communities on the cutting edge of sustainable human development. But what exactly *is* an ecovillage? Defining the term is challenging because, like “sustainability”, “ecovillage” is used in many contexts with different meanings.

Robert Gilman offered an early and enduring [definition](#) in 1991 when he wrote

“an ecovillage is 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, [with multiple centers of initiative](#) , and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.”

This is clearly a tall order. In fact, using a strict interpretation of this definition, one could argue that there are *no* ecovillages on the planet today. So regardless of what definition we use, ecovillages are better thought of as communities striving towards these ideals rather than actualized utopias.

At [Living Routes](#) , we view ecovillages as living laboratories – “beta test centers” – for a more equitable, just and sustainable future. They are creating lifestyles that are both “

high quality

” with equitable access to resources and power and “

low impact

” with minimal ecological footprints. We therefore define ecovillages as

“communities striving to live well and lightly together.”

Environmental and Social Responsibility

Using this simple definition, it becomes clear there are two directions towards the ecovillage model. Ecovillages within developed, resource-rich countries are typically intentionally created

with members exploring how to bring their ecological impacts below local and global carrying capacities while maintaining high quality lifestyles. These ecovillages are also deeply examining the economic and political systems that put them on “top” and are often engaged in social equity and justice work in their neighboring communities, their nations, and the world.

Ecovillages within resource-poor, “two-thirds world” countries are generally indigenous, traditional communities working to elevate themselves above an “Equity Baseline” while maintaining their small footprints. They want access to adequate wealth and resources and the ability to affect political and social change. These communities also tend to have strong social bonds and are striving to honor, preserve and share their local cultures and stories, which often hold deep wisdom for how we can thrive in a post-carrying capacity world.

Living Lab

Resource Rich

Resource Poor

Both intentional and traditional directions are valid and necessary in our quest to create viable models of sustainable, human-scale communities. In this way, ecovillages are helping demarcate the “livable zone” in which all humans must enter if we are to survive as a species.

Being optimistic then, perhaps we could say all human settlements are nascent or developing ecovillages.

Diversity of Ecovillage Models



The [Global Ecovillage Network](#) lists ~500 self-identified ecovillages around the world, but it's likely there are over 1,000 and perhaps many more, especially if you include the ~1,800 member villages of the [Sarvodaya](#) network in Sri Lanka. There are also 300+ [Transition Towns](#) and a growing number of green-focused [cohousing](#) communities, but few self-identify as ecovillages.

The diversity of ecovillages is astounding.

- Some have fewer than 30 members and might be best thought of as micro-research, training or demonstration centers; others have very full-featured economic and social systems with hundreds or thousands of members.
- Some have a common “purse”; others have individual income & expenses.
- Some are part of national networks; others are more independent.
- Some are urban, but most are rural.
- Some are secular; others are religious; most are “spiritual,” with residents following their own unique paths.
- Few strive for self-sufficiency and most are well-connected catalysts for positive change within their bioregions.
- Some even have members who reject the label of “ecovillage” because they feel it falsely implies they have fully manifested their vision.

Ecovillage Commonalities

While models vary widely, ecovillages all share an intention to develop and integrate new and more sustainable forms of economic, environmental, social, and even worldview development. They are all conscious and participatory experiments in designing a more connected and livable future. Features common to most ecovillages include...

- Appropriate technologies and renewable energy systems
- Organic agriculture and community-based food systems
- Habitat restoration and stewardship
- Group facilitation, consensus decision-making, and community organizing
- Shared work and celebrations
- Communication skills, conflict resolution and mediation
- Mindfulness practices such as meditation and yoga
- Ecological design, green building, and community development
- Social-responsibility, environmental education and activism
- Cross-cultural and diversity awareness
- Social justice and equitable access to wealth and power
- Holistic health, nutrition, and alternative medicine

Ecovillages are *not* utopias

Humans are in kindergarten when it comes to developing sustainable relationships with each other and the planet. While ecovillages range perhaps from elementary to middle school, most are still at least partially embedded within wider resource & energy intensive infrastructures (e.g. transport, production, processing) and inequitable economic and social systems. As a result, few, if any, are both *above* an Equity Baseline and *below* local and global Carrying Capacity (i.e. within the “livable zone” described above).

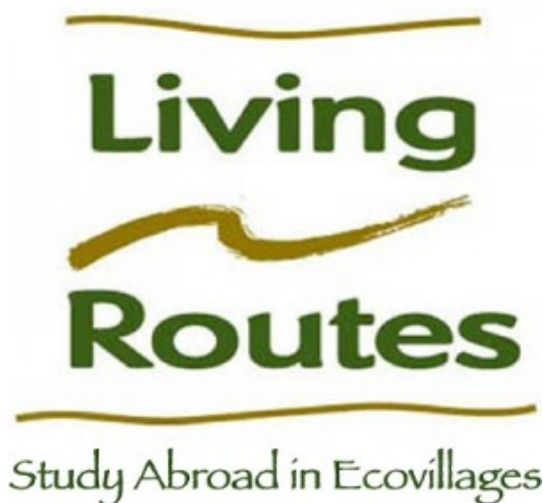
For example, a [study](#) by the **Stockholm Environment Institute** cited the [Findhorn Foundation](#) (one of the oldest and best known ecovillages) as having the smallest ec0- footprint of any community in the developed world – half the UK average. While certainly a laudable achievement, if everyone on Earth lived like a Findhorn Community member, we’d still need several planets to support our lifestyles. Ecovillages are trying to prepare us for some major real-life “exams” humanity is facing, but they still have a long way to go.

Ecovillages are not finished products and are very much in process. Real people – like you and

me – are developing these unique communities, often under very difficult conditions. Common challenges include inadequate financial and human resources, restrictive zoning, local fears and misconceptions, and even language barriers within these often very international communities. Ecovillages encounter the same hurdles any new business faces while at the same time building residences, decision-making structures and interpersonal relationships. This is hard work!

In addition, there is little being attempted in ecovillages that isn't – *on its own* - being done better elsewhere. One can easily find more successful or cutting edge renewable energy facilities, green buildings, organic farms, and even decision-making processes outside of ecovillages. What makes ecovillages unique and relevant then are not these individual components, but that they are trying to put the pieces together into human-scale communities, into wholes that are more than the sum of their parts. Ecovillages are, in effect creating new cultures and "stories" about what it means to live interdependently with each other and our planet.

Partner Ecovillages



Recognizing this core work, Living Routes is proud to collaborate with a select number of these ecovillages as "campuses" where students can learn about sustainability while actually living it. In addition to offering models of economic, environmental, and social development as described above, Living Routes' partner communities...

- are diverse and "full-featured" and able to offer a rich academic and community experience.
- have good accommodations, classrooms, and internet access.
- have highly trained and educated professionals engaged in real-world sustainable development.

- are located in stimulating environments with minimal health and safety concerns.

Information on partner ecovillages that host Living Routes programs is available at:

- [Auroville](#) (India)
- [Crystal Waters](#) (Australia)
- [Findhorn](#) (Scotland)
- [Monteverde Institute](#) (Costa Rica)
- [Ecocentro IPEC](#) (Brazil)
- [Huehucoyotl](#) (Mexico)
- [Kibbutz Lotan](#) (Israel)
- [Sachamama](#) (Peru)
- [Sadhana Forest](#) (India)
- [Sirius Community](#) (USA)

Ecovillage Resources

The following resources are recommended for further reading about ecovillages and sustainable communities.

- [Global Ecovillage Network](#) (GEN)
- GEN's [Community Sustainability Assessment Toolkit](#)
- [Four Dimensions of an Ecovillage](#)
- [Ecovillage Network of the Americas](#)
- [Fellowship for Intentional Communities' list of Ecovillages](#)
- [Gaia Education](#)
- [Ecovillage Newsletter](#)
- [Living Together: Sustainable Community Development](#) . (In Context Magazine issue on ecovillages)

The world of ecovillages is ever evolving, so please add your comments, thoughts, and questions so we can further our understanding together. Thanks!

<http://blogs.livingroutes.org/sustainabilityeducation/2011/04/10/what-is-an-ecovillage/>