

Learning How to Start a Successful Ecovillage

By Diana Leafe Christian

I began teaching workshops and courses on how to start successful new ecovillages almost by accident. I was editor of [Communities](#) magazine in North America for many years, and visited many communities in the US. This led to presenting workshops on how to start new communities, including ecovillages; writing two books on ecovillages; and now publishing this newsletter about ecovillages internationally. Then becoming an instructor in an [Ecovillage Design Education \(EDE\)](#) course as well as an instructor in a month-long course on ecovillages at a small college in the Midwest.

Over the years in this work I've become passionate about what experiences really help people become informed and empowered enough to create successful new ecovillages. What learning methods work best?

In this article I'd like to share effective ways I've found to help people who take my courses and workshops learn how to start ecovillages, including wonderful online resources you can see right now.

1. "Visit" ecovillages through well-produced media. I advise anyone who wants to start an ecovillage to visit successful ecovillages to find out what they look like and feel like. What is daily life like? How does the ecovillage function — ecologically and economically? How do ecovillage members govern themselves and create the unique social, cultural, and spiritual life of the place? However, another way to learn about ecovillages is to watch ecovillage videos. I like to share the following short videos (two to nine minutes) with course and workshop participants.

- [Crystal Waters Ecovillage](#), Australia
- [Findhorn Ecovillage](#), Scotland
- [Sieben Linden](#), Germany - German-language trailer for a documentary, *Menschen Träume Taten* ("People Dreams Actions")
- [Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage](#), US
- [Rodnoye Ecovillage](#), Russia
- [Cloughjordan Ecovillage](#), Ireland
- [EcoVillage at Ithaca](#), US

2. Show the rewards of ecovillage life. I want course participants to know why we create ecovillages: that it's not only good for the Earth but feels good too! The following short video of [La'akea Ecovillage](#), Hawaii, expresses these social and cultural benefits of ecovillage life.

3. Draw from real-life stories of people who created successful ecovillages. Course participants need to know what ecovillage founders actually do to get their projects up and running. To write [Creating a Life Together](#), for example, I interviewed founders of successful as well as failed projects in the US in the 1990s. Like a permaculture designer observing the landscape, I saw obvious patterns about what seemed to work well. Permaculture designers incorporate the way nature actually functions in their landscapes (instead of going against it!). Thus they get higher yields with less time and effort. Similarly, I learned that successful community founders designed communities that incorporated the way *human nature* actually works (instead of going against it!). These founders too, got “higher yields” — successful, thriving communities. But this design was incorporated with only 10 percent of those I interviewed! The other 90 percent didn’t do this, and their communities failed.

A decade later Russell Austerberry asked the same kinds of questions, interviewing 35 community founders in 18 ecovillages up and down Australia's East Coast. Even though it was a different country, and in a different century, the same kinds of patterns were revealed. See his article, [Rules of Thumb for Starting an Ecovillage](#)” in the Nov/Dec 2009 issue of this newsletter.

Ecovillage course participants need time to connect with each other too. (*Left to right*) Aileen, from the Philippines; Claudia, from Colombia; and Min, from Malaysia attended the 2009 EDE course in the Philippines.

I want ecovillage course participants to have access to the valuable set of principles and best practices that Russell and I each found. This includes “how we did it” stories and the roughly 15 different steps and stages ecovillage founders take, from identifying and articulating a shared Mission & Purpose — the *first* thing a group should do — to creating a village-scale economy! Like Newton, these course participants get to “stand on the shoulders of giants.”

I also like to share GEN co-founder Robert Gilman’s insights on “multiple centers of initiative,” a phrase he added in 1998 to his famous ecovillage definition. Please see article: [“Robert Gilman on Multiple Centers of Initiative,”](#) in the September 2008 issue of this newsletter.

4. Give ‘em a taste — of ecovillage design. The best way to learn something, I believe, is to apply what you’ve learned soon after learning it by teaching it to others. So I ask course participants to meet periodically in small groups to design an ecovillage they envision, and present it to the rest of the group at the end of the course. It could be a real project one of them is working on, or an imagined project they make up for this exercise. I ask them to include many of the above elements, and encourage them to make it seem as real as possible — through verbal description and visual aids such as power point presentations, realistic-looking site plans, and so on.

5. Give ‘em a taste — of small-scale ecovillage economics. Another exercise is for participants to study alternative currency systems used in various ecovillages (like Findhorn’s EKOS or Dancing Rabbit’s ELMS, for example) and then design and create an alternative currency scrip out of construction paper to exchange among themselves for small goods and services. And to periodically adjust their currency system when needed, as is done in real ecovillages that use alternative currencies. (See [“Ecovillage Economics: Dancing Rabbit’s ELMS System,”](#) this issue.

I also like to introduce the idea of micro-loans. Here's a wonderful short video [“Senegal Ecovillage Microfinance Fund”](#) about how micro-loans help villagers in the Senegalese Ecovillage Network (SEN).

6. And a taste — of communication and group process skills. Participants in an ecovillage course want to experience the “spirit of community” with each other too. What works well for inducing this sense in the temporary community of a residential course can include getting to know each other better through check-ins, sharing circles and/or talking-stick circles, and learning conflict resolution processes, just for practice — as well as for actually use if conflict arises in the group!

7. And a taste — of ecovillage decision-making. Future ecovillage founders will need good decision-making skills, so I like to include workshop sessions about the consensus decision-making process, followed by participants learning to make proposals about various minor aspects of the course, creating practice agendas for meetings, and practicing facilitation.

As part of this process I like to share these online articles about various aspects of the consensus decision-making process:

[“N-Street Cohousing’s Solution-Oriented Consensus Method”](#)

[“Sieben Linden’s Four-Choice Consensus Method”](#)

[“Trust and Consensus”](#)

The following websites offer free downloadable information about consensus from professional consensus trainers in the US and Mexico:

- Website of consensus trainer [Tree Bresson](#).
- Website of consensus trainer [Beatrice Briggs](#) and the International Institute for Facilitation and Change (IIFAC).
- Free downloadable booklet, [“On Conflict and Consensus,”](#) by CT Butler:

This September, my friends Penelope Reyes and John Vermuellen and I will put these learning methods together in an [EDE course](#) offered in the Philippines (in Cabiao, south of Manila, August 28-September 25, 2010). It's the first time that we know of that these methods will be used in this particular combination in an EDE course. We're quite excited about it.

An ecovillage course can be empowering, inspiring, and filled with practical information. It can help grow more ecovillages and ecovillage-like projects in the world. It's an honor to be an instructor in these courses . . . and watch the global ecovillage movement grow!

[Diana Leafe Christian](#), editor of this newsletter, lives at [Earthaven Ecovillage](#) in North Carolina, US.

For more information on the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course Diana will co-teach in the Philippines, see the [Happy Earth website](#).

Portions of this article first appeared in the May, 2010 issue of the “Ecovillage Roots” column on the GEN website (Global Ecovillage Network) [home page](#).

"Rules of Thumb" for Starting an Ecovillage

(My Whirlwind Aussie Road Trip, Part II)

By Russell Austerberry
(Nov/Dec 2009)

Editor's Note: In the 1990s I visited dozens of intentional communities across North America and interviewed founders to learn what made ecovillages and other kinds of intentional communities succeed or fail. What I learned went into the book [Creating a Life Together](#). In 2007 Russell Austerberry interviewed dozens of founders as he visited ecovillages and other ecologically oriented settlements up and down Australia's East Coast. He plans to complete his outline below — rearranging and fleshing out each point — for a primer on sustainable community development. What I find amazing and wonderful — my jaw dropped as I read his pithy aphorisms — is that Russell's research in the Down-Under South in 2008 uncovered the very same foundational principles and best practices I found in a different decade in a different hemisphere. Wow! —Diana Leafé Christian

The journey Steph Zannakis and I made in 2008 through eastern Australia: visiting 6 states and 18 communities, conducting 35 interviews, and travelling 7 500 kilometres in 31 days (*what were we thinking?*) was to learn — from people who are living it — how to establish sustainable community. Now, two years after our return, I wrote this quick outline of what we learned that seems to work well in establishing sustainable new communities:

- 1. Early on, agree on a decision-making procedure.** Some variant of consensus in the whole group is common, but initial stages may be served better by a small group of founders making all the decisions themselves.
- 2. Prioritize process skills.** Take the time to explore interpersonal conflict issues and find resolution.
- 3. Determine your mission first.** It's too easy to rush into looking for land before you've hammered out your group's identity.
- 4. Know how you want the community to function before choosing a legal model.** It's tempting to settle on a particular legal model before you've worked out exactly how *you as founders* want things to run in the community.
- 5. Manage council** (that is, your local regulatory agency). If you're doing anything “out of the box,” get council on board very early — and be prepared to continue to educate them, possibly through two or three terms of office different councilors (regulatory officials).

6. Spread the load. Find ways to pass the baton amongst various founders with leadership ability, and to get the whole group to mobilise in concerted action. A “one-man band” will fail, period.

7. Build common facilities central, first, and big. Central means they will be visited often and used naturally; first means people don’t have to build workshop or guest quarters or install laundry tubs in their own house; big means there will be plenty of options for usage. All of these physical layout decisions help promote a strong sense of community.

8. Value the community-building process. By far the biggest resource any group has is not land or money, it is people — and specifically, a group of people who can achieve much more together than they could alone. Design for sustainability *and* community simultaneously.

9. Use systems design. Design so the village can be at one and the same time a farm, a school, a residence, a workplace, a safe haven, and a place of beauty. Each element should contribute toward a robust and resilient society; toward rehabilitating and nurturing the land itself; toward conviviality; toward security; and toward a deep sense of place and belonging. The key phrase here is “Permaculture design.”

10. Take your time. It will take many years for people starting from scratch to create anything resembling a sustainable community because of how many decisions and how much work is involved. From scratch to settlement the process is likely to take 2, 5, or even 10 years — and that’s not counting the next 20 years or so of maturing as a society.

11. Be flexible. Every location has a unique set of challenges and a unique collection of people (which means there is no McSustainable Village franchise across the world). Creating a better place to live involves continual creative thinking, consultation, and commitment to hearing all voices. Flexibility is essential.

11. Aim high.

12. Hear all voices.

13. Budget for trainings to build new skills. Allocate funds for trainings in meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, ongoing management, and quality design, as well as for earthworks and buildings. Communities run on people, and people need training in how to get along.

14. Design for resilience. Consider local food production, local business possibilities, local power generation, energy efficient homes, and a “car-lite” lifestyle.

15. Design physically for community spirit. Include large, central, multipurpose common facilities; cluster houses together; have many houses looking out onto common greenspace and a play area; prioritise for pedestrians rather than cars.

16. Design structurally for community. Factor in time for social, business, and “heartspace” meetings — and consider how to separate these functions; train or hire meeting facilitators; and embed rites of passage and celebratory rituals in the culture of the community; do work bees (work parties) together.

17. Laugh. Belly laughs in a meeting are a good sign of health in the community!

18. Define the group's identity. Create a shared story which attracts people, and keep telling and tweaking the tale.

19. Make it hard to get in. A waiting list, a trial period, a solid deposit required, and an orientation process all slow the membership process down and give potential members more time to work out if they are compatible with the group. If they jump all the hurdles, they are likely to fit in well and be keen to stay.

20. Screen potential members. In addition to self-selection processes, you can evaluate prospective members. Do they put in more than they take out (money, warmth, chores, whatever)? Are they prepared not to get their way all the time? Do they tolerate others? Have an idea of what disqualifies someone from joining the community, and be prepared to say "no" when necessary. Turning someone away before they come in is much easier than evicting them once they have caused havoc.

21. Make it easy to leave. Things change, people move on. Make the transition as painless as possible — pay attention especially to the legalities and finances regarding how a member may leave the community if they want to. Will they get all or part of their equity back? Make this clear so as to avoid the trap in which a member wants to leave but cannot — and becomes toxic to the group.

22. Tax entry and/or exit. On the occasion of a member joining or leaving, consider levying some chunk of money — perhaps a percentage of the sale price or a set fee — as a means of keeping funds in the community.

23. Guard group identity. A community can only handle a small number of emotionally disturbed people, so guard your membership process. I distinguish between people who need more care and attention than most but who are not hostile, and people who persistently drain community goodwill and finances. Once your community is up and running and doing well, you may be able to absorb some of the former. But never the latter.

Since 2002 Russell Austerberry, who lives in Brisbane, Australia has been researching and visiting ecovillages and cohousing neighborhoods — which he sees as providing practical ways "to relocalise, retribalise, and reclaim a sense of empowerment in our lives." He is writing a book about his community travels, and he and his wife Gabrielle and three others hope to share a large house in Brisbane as the first step toward community in the city.

He wrote about [Bega Eco-Neighbourhood Developers \(BEND\)](#) in New South Wales in "[Our Whirlwind Aussie Road Trip, Part I](#)", in the May 2009 issue of this newsletter.

Related articles:

- [Robert Gilman on "Multiple Centers of Initiative"](#) - Sep '08
- [Our Whirlwind Aussie Road Trip, Part I](#) – May '09

