

F O C U S



The EcoVillage at Currumbin, Queensland, is designed to make it easier to cycle or walk to the Village Centre rather than use a car, with all facilities located within walking distance of every home. Currumbin EcoVillage

Inside **EcoVillage** Life

Once regarded as little more than hippy communes, ecovillages are attracting a lot of attention as Australians, driven by concerns about climate, sustainability and community, seek a more satisfying lifestyle alternative. But are they for everyone? **Rachel Sullivan** reports.

The first ecovillages started in Sweden in the early 1980s. Initially, members were galvanised by opposition to the use of nuclear energy, but the movement quickly became about finding new ways to live sustainably in the urban environment.

The concept spread rapidly across Europe, the UK and the US in the 1980s, and even to Australia, to a lesser extent, most notably at Crystal Waters in Queensland's Sunshine Coast Hinterland.

In the 1990s interest tapered off again, resurfacing recently as concerns about climate change have grown more pressing.

According to Dr Vanda Rounsefell, a consultant to the CSIRO who has made an international study of ecovillages, and was on the earliest organising committee for

South Australia's Aldinga Arts EcoVillage, it's a concept that is seeing broader appeal.

'While obviously concerns about living a sustainable and eco-friendly lifestyle are at the heart of many people's interest, for others it is the desire to live in a community with a supportive social network and a sense of shared purpose that is the key driving force.

'Many see the breakdown of traditional forms of community, wasteful consumer-driven lifestyles, natural habitat destruction and overuse of fossil fuels as practices that need to be changed, and the simpler, more environmentally friendly community lifestyle is an attractive alternative,' she says.

Village life

Ecovillages are small communities of as few as 150 and as many as 5000 people, living together in a village-style setting. They are structured to provide security and a sense of belonging and shared purpose, and are small enough so that people are able to participate in making decisions that affect their own lives as well as that of the community. In this way they differ quite purposefully from modern suburban settings that many feel result in more isolated and anonymous living.

Ecovillages may be either rural, like Crystal Waters, Somerville EcoVillage near Perth, Aldinga Arts EcoVillage and the soon to be developed Bunjil Community Village in the Yarra Valley; or urban, such



Ecovillage residents say the social environment is ideal for families and children, although it can be a challenge for more introverted 'cultural creatives'. Vanda Rounsefell

as Melbourne's Westwyck development. They may be either community-driven, like most of the above, or developer-driven like The Ecovillage at Currumbin in the Gold Coast Hinterland.

Irrespective of where they are, or who built them, they all have a number of things in common. They feature sustainably designed buildings that are water, energy and thermally efficient, and use recycled or non-toxic building materials. The street layout is usually specifically oriented to allow passive solar design for all sites, and roads are shared traffic zones, where children's games and walkers have priority. Ecovillages are usually independent of



Stormwater at The Ecovillage, Currumbin, is kept in the environment via swales to maintain landscape features such as ponds.

Currumbin Ecovillage

standard infrastructure, like roads and sewers, and maintain their own roads, street lighting and services, such as water treatment and recycling plants.

The villages are designed on a 'human scale', where facilities are within walking distance to minimise use of the car, and feature shared community buildings so that commercial activities may be undertaken by residents lessening the need to travel outside the area. Residents have their own vegetable gardens and often share 'chook' runs – fenced enclosures for hens and other poultry. The villages also often feature organic farms or permaculture and other ideas that encourage ecosystem function and biodiversity, and regular community working bees, which, for example, revegetate degraded local areas with indigenous plants.

Houses also tend to be clustered to minimise their ecological footprint, by either grouping autonomous buildings or through cohousing – multifamily dwellings in which some facilities such as laundries, kitchens and living space are shared.

According to Elizabeth Heij, longterm resident of Aldinga Arts EcoVillage and a sustainability expert, although very popular in the US and Europe, cohousing is an idea that hasn't really taken off in Australia yet, although some of the newer developments have at least some cohousing mandated in their overall design.

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'It works very well,' she says. 'Families have their own rooms, but share facilities that are more expensive to establish and maintain. For example, a laundry might feature one large commercial washing machine shared by several families, instead of each family having its own smaller, less efficient domestic model.'

Similarly with the kitchen: Dr Rounsefell visited cohousing projects in the US where cooking was done on a roster basis; while one group was cooking dinner, the other members sat around sharing a beer and catching up on the day's news.

Both agree that whether people live in cohousing or in single family housing in an ecovillage setting, it's a wonderful experience for children as they grow up in a very safe and supportive environment, where neighbours become like extended family. 'The trade-off,' says Heij, 'is a lower level of privacy, because there are no fences, which can take some getting used to, but makes for a very safe neighbourhood.'

Idealism v. reality

Despite sounding like an idealistic situation, Heij says ecovillage life is not for everyone. Despite the undoubted pleasures of living this way, and the sense of shared purpose that binds village members together, she says for some people the realities of such intensive community life come as a bit of a shock.

FOCUS

Living the dream

Crystal Waters Permaculture Village is Australia's most mature ecovillage. Started in 1987, it has 83 freehold residential and two commercial lots occupying 20 per cent of the 259 ha property. The remaining 80 per cent is owned in common, and can be licensed for sustainable agriculture, forestry, recreation and habitat projects.

The village centre is zoned for commerce, light industry, tourism and educational activities. While the village is best known for its work in permaculture, consulting locally as well as in Africa and East Timor, it has also been the site of many interesting projects, according to Vanda Rounsefell.

'Local residents are all involved in home-based businesses, or they work within the village. They may be artisans, or permaculture consultants, but one person experimented with growing water chestnuts in the river, while someone else experimented with growing bamboo for use as an alternative building material.'



Photovoltaic array on the roof of the community EcoCentre at Crystal Waters Permaculture Village. Excess solar energy is sold to the grid. EcoLogical Solutions

Crystal Waters is often used as a proving ground for 'green' technologies such as composting toilets, and innovative systems have been developed at the village before being introduced into the wider community, including land management and wastewater management techniques that are now being used in Vietnam and New Zealand.

Find out more at: www.ecologicalsolutions.com.au/crystalwaters/overview/overview



Ecovillages are characterised by sustainably designed homes with northerly orientation for passive solar heating, eaves, solar hot water, rainwater tanks and other sustainable living features. Vanda Rounsefell

'When people first join they come in starry-eyed about how life will be in the community,' she observes. 'They are full of big ideas, but it doesn't take long for them to become disillusioned by the slow process of group decision-making.'

People in normal society are very independent, and are accustomed to both being in control of their lives and making decisions, she continues. 'But once they join an ecovillage, there is a big shift from "all about me" to "all about we", which can be very difficult for some people.'

'Australians in particular are very autonomous, perhaps without realising it; they can have real difficulties with this adjustment, and can become very disappointed.'

Another disadvantage people find is coming from a high profile background in external life – status in a community driven ecovillage comes from the way in which members participate, which is very different from the hierarchical structure of normal life. Respect and position are earned through participation in working bees and committees or other community activities, for example; Heij notes there have been instances where high profile citizens have been seen as 'tall poppies', and treated with suspicion when they join a village. 'Incomers need to ask themselves whether automatic respect is important to them,' she says, 'because when they join an ecovillage they lose this assumed status, and there can be difficulties adjusting.'

One of the most interesting paradoxes,

according to Heij, is that those people responsible for pioneering ecovillages are often those who have the most trouble living in them.

'People referred to as "cultural creatives" tend to start ecovillages, but they have the biggest problems with the pressure that tends to grow up within the community,' she comments. 'The pressure to conform to the norms of the group becomes too much; over time; the beast called "community" is made of its members, and cultural creatives often become uncomfortable with the place where the community becomes entrenched.'

She says that there is both tacit and overt pressure to conform. Overt pressure comes in the form of community bylaws such as eco-design principles for housing and restrictions on the use of common land (at Aldinga, 'smoking of any herb on common land is prohibited', for example). Tacit pressure is more insidious, however, and ultimately more of a challenge for cultural creatives, who are often introverts as well. By not participating in the 'approved' way, such as not regularly attending community meetings or working groups, or having a different view from everyone else, cultural creatives can be made to feel excluded from the group.

'Ecovillages are very comfortable and reassuring for people who are happy in group settings, and are great for extraverts who are naturally drawn to community situations, but there can be real problems appreciating introverts,' Heij says.

She also observes that everyone wants to give to the community in their own way, but unless the gift being offered – such as a financial donation, for example – is within the normal standard (like participating in committees and working bees), the desire to give in other ways has been seen by influential members of the community as a bid for power and influence, and led to difficulties.

Testing 'sociocracy'

Both Elizabeth Heij and Dr Vanda Rounsefell agree that conflict resolution is one of the greatest challenges in ecovillage life, saying that a lack of formal conflict resolution structures can lead to festering conflicts, which in turn saps the energy of voluntary work, and eats away at community goodwill.

Under the *South Australian Community Titles Act*, which governs Aldinga, the village needs unanimous resolution to enact some changes, and with around 150 property owners, that can be very difficult to achieve. 'It can also lead to good ideas stalling because of dissent from just one party,' says Dr Rounsefell.

Because of past governance issues, and because ecovillages around the world have found this to be a very suitable model, Aldinga is currently looking into a different system of governance, called 'sociocracy', which has a strong element of conflict pre-emption or prevention.

Sociocracy presumes equality of

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individuals and is based on governance by consent. However, this equality is not expressed using the 'one man one vote' law of democracy, but in the principle that a decision can only be taken if none of those present have a paramount objection to it – meaning the person cannot live with it in its present form. In larger groups, sociocracy theory uses a system of delegation in which a group chooses representatives who make the decisions for them at a higher level, although Dr Rounsefell says that in practice it is often not that simple.

The developers at the newly opened, multiple award-winning Ecovillage at Currumbin made an international study of the pitfalls of ecovillage living

before the first soil was turned. As part of their drive for best practice, and complementing Currumbin's high standards – in terms of its architecture, innovative closed loop water system (it is the first residential subdivision of this size to be granted voluntary disconnection from the municipal mains in Australia), power generation and social ecology – the developers established proactive governance structures to help with conflict resolution.

According to Marketing Manager Kerry Shepherd, they have taken the principles set down by Queensland community title legislation, and tailored them to meet the needs of the ecovillage community. 'We have prepared guidelines on how to facilitate group discussions and forums and are very supportive of community members who are interested in acting as facilitators.'

'For certain bigger issues, such as a recent matter about whether, given our aspiring organic status, we should spray to get rid of rampant nutgrass, the community elected to call in an external facilitator to manage the debate, which turned out to be a very productive, community-strengthening solution.

'Having these very good guidelines means that our community can accommodate all ends of the social spectrum in relative harmony,' she says, 'and as a developer-led ecovillage we had to invest in this right from the start, rather than proceeding in a more ad hoc manner as the community grows.'

'You can get the built environment right, and the environmental objectives right but if you haven't ticked that last box of the triple bottom line – the social component, then the whole thing could fall apart.'

Dr Vanda Rounsefell concurs, saying that ecovillages are really just a microcosm of human society, and the great friendships that are nurtured between ecovillage community members can only be strengthened by having good governance that gives everyone a voice, and an equal platform from which to be heard.

More information:

About ecovillages,
www.greenlivingpedia.org/Ecovillages

Aldinga Arts EcoVillage,
www.aldinga-artsecovillage.com.au

The Ecovillage at Currumbin,
www.theecovillage.com.au



Shady outdoor area of an Aldinga Arts EcoVillage passive solar house. Slate and limestone (garden walls in foreground) sourced locally minimise greenhouse impacts from housing.

Vanda Rounsefell