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# VITAL SIGNS 2007–2008

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The Trends That Are  
Shaping Our Future

In numerous communities around the world, people are working to reduce their impacts on the local as well as the global environment. Some are retrofitting existing communities, others are building new ones, still others are creating new programs in existing communities.

The growing global ecovillage movement is one of the more developed examples of this trend. An ecovillage, according to one widely accepted definition, 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 and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.”<sup>1</sup> So far, these rather stringent criteria provide an ideal that ecovillages strive for rather than a standard actually achieved.

According to the Global Ecovillage Network directory, there are currently 379 ecovillages around the world.<sup>2</sup> (See Table 1.) While all ecovillages strive toward a similar goal, the diversity found among them is striking. They can be found in rural, suburban, and urban areas and in industrial as well as developing countries.<sup>3</sup> This figure does not reflect the total number of communities striving to be sustainable, however; it excludes, for example, cohousing communities and several broader networks of sustainable villages.<sup>4</sup>

In the mountains outside of Asheville, North Carolina, there is a rural ecovillage of 60 individuals.<sup>5</sup> Started 13 years ago, it is designed to grow to 160 once finished.<sup>6</sup> Homes there are built mainly from wood harvested from the local forests, water comes from mountain springs and rainwater harvesting, and electricity is generated from solar photovoltaic cells and a microhydro generator.<sup>7</sup>

Another rural ecovillage, Mbam, is located in the Siné-Saloum delta in Senegal.<sup>8</sup> Along with using low-impact and appropriate technologies such as solar ovens and permaculture, one of its primary activities is restoring the health of mangrove forests to help protect the coast from salinization.<sup>9</sup>

A suburban ecovillage in Denmark, Munk-søgård, is about a half-hour train ride from

Copenhagen.<sup>10</sup> Some 230 residents live in 100 apartments clustered in five groups.<sup>11</sup> Munk-søgård maintains a 24-hectare organic farm that provides food for the community.<sup>12</sup> It is the largest ecological building project in the country and in 2000 received first place in a Danish competition for the best sustainable design for the twenty-first century.<sup>13</sup>

Ecovillages are also being established in urban areas. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, for instance, a community for 28 families was built in 2002.<sup>14</sup> The group used sustainable building methods and materials (such as passive solar design and locally sourced materials) and included gardens, grass roofs, and artificial wetlands to process sewage.<sup>15</sup> Along with serving as a demonstration project for affordable, sustainable housing, the community—through a consultancy firm it established—is helping to start two more ecovillages in the city.<sup>16</sup>

Many ecovillages have made great strides in reducing their ecological impact. A recent analysis found that the ecological footprint per capita at Findhorn, an ecovillage in Scotland, was about 60 percent of the average footprint in the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> And in the Sieben Linden ecovillage in Germany, per capita carbon dioxide emissions were just 28 percent of the German average.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond ecovillages, a much broader set of communities is also providing lessons in sustainable living. Certain religious communities have chosen to lead simple lives, even when modern technologies are readily available. In the United States, for example, some Amish communities do not use electricity or motors (although most Amish do not ban the use of motors) and thus have much smaller impacts on the global environment.<sup>19</sup> Many homesteading communities, in which the majority of residents sustain themselves with farming and use more local resources, have much smaller environmental impacts than other communities.<sup>20</sup>

Yet most people raised in the consumer society have no interest in “going back to the land.” But there are many more mainstream opportunities to reduce the environmental impacts of

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**Table 1: Ecovillages, by Region**

Region	Number
Europe	138
North America	110
Latin America	58
Asia/Oceania	52
Africa/Middle East	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>

Source: Global Ecovillage Network.

daily life at the community level—some of which do so more as a byproduct of trying to rebuild social connections in a culture where social ties are diminishing.<sup>21</sup>

The cohousing movement, for example, is primarily focused on improving the quality of life of community members by designing housing that facilitates social ties.<sup>22</sup> Cohousing efforts involve a shared community building, which means individual homes can be smaller; a clustered housing pattern, which allows more of the community's land to be preserved in a natural state (if in a rural area); occasional shared meals; and some shared services and major appliances (such as cars, power tools, and other major pieces of equipment that are used infrequently).<sup>23</sup> This tends to make cohousing communities more sustainable than the average community.<sup>24</sup> While exact numbers of cohousing communities are difficult to find, an estimated 229 of them are found in North America and more than 250 in Europe, with the majority of these located in Denmark—the birthplace of cohousing.<sup>25</sup>

Mainstream developers are also starting to incorporate sustainability into their designs for new housing. Peabody Trust, which provides affordable housing for more than 50,000 people in London, created an 82-unit housing complex called the Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED).<sup>26</sup> As the name suggests, the goal of the community is to produce as much energy as it uses, which it strives for through a combination of passive solar design, energy efficiency measures, a community-scale power

plant that provides electricity and hot water and is fueled by wood waste, and greater use of walking, cycling, and public transit.<sup>27</sup> A resident living at BedZED has just 60 percent of the ecological footprint of an average individual in the United Kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

International agencies, too, are helping to support community-initiated sustainable development efforts. The Global Environment Facility's COMPACT program (Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation), for instance, provides grants of less than \$50,000 to communities in World Heritage Sites such as Mount Kenya to help villages create projects that improve people's lives while also reducing their impact on the surrounding ecosystems.<sup>29</sup>

With dramatic changes from a warming climate and the unsustainable use of many of the ecosystem services on which humans depend, more communities are trying to address sustainability issues.<sup>30</sup> Many are trying to localize farming, reduce energy use, and create stronger local businesses.<sup>31</sup> Already, communities have established local food co-ops, community-supported agriculture programs, carpools, and other ways to connect a community while lowering environmental impacts.<sup>32</sup>

Broader networks have sprung up around the world to spread these sustainable practices. The Relocalization Network, started in 2003, helps coordinate 159 local groups in 12 countries, providing an online forum for local communities trying to become more sustainable and less dependent on a fragile, globalized economic system.<sup>33</sup> And many ecovillages, such as The Farm in Tennessee, offer classes on how to increase sustainability at the community level.<sup>34</sup>

In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement now works with 15,000 villages, helping them to develop economically in a more sustainable way.<sup>35</sup> The Sarvodayan “no poverty, no affluence” model is based on addressing basic needs such as access to food, shelter, clean water, and basic health care, but it considers nonmaterial needs like access to a clean and beautiful environment, a well-rounded education, and spiritual sustenance equally important.<sup>36</sup>

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