



Redefining social and environmental relations at the ecovillage at Ithaca: A case study

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Abstract

The goal of the recently constructed ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) is to create a “socially harmonious, economically viable and ecologically sustainable settlement that will demonstrate that human beings can live cooperatively with each other and with the natural environment.” (EVI Housing Cooperative, undated) This paper examines the blend of social vision and personal factors that brought the 30 households together to realize this project. Interviews were conducted with residents that explored their initial motivations in becoming involved with the project, and solicited their impressions of the first 5 years of the ecovillage’s existence. The interplay of personal and ideological factors emerges, revealing an implicit and explicit critique of the existing social mode, as residents seek reconnection with each other and with the natural environment. This paper explores the nature of the community that has been created, socially, spatially and imaginatively. In so doing, it reveals the challenges, rewards and disappointments that residents have experienced in realizing their vision. The various ways that residents seek to connect with the world are enumerated, and these are proposed as the dimensions that constitute a sustainable lifestyle.

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1. Introduction

The ecovillage movement is a worldwide phenomenon that has arisen in response to the effects of the modern lifestyle on both our social and ecological environments. This movement is of particular interest and potential relevance in the United States, the country with by far the highest per capita consumption of resources. At present there are at least 500 ecovillages and ecologically oriented cohousing developments either in existence, under construction, or in the planning stages in the US ([Global Ecovillage Network, 2002](#)). Planning for the [ecovillage at Ithaca \(EVI\)](#) began in 1991 as a group of individuals and families began meeting to plan a demonstration community that would challenge the existing social mode and offer a new model for sustainable development.

In 1995 construction of the first of five planned ecovillages began on the 176-acre site the group had purchased on the outskirts of Ithaca. This consists of 15 duplexes, constructed on the cohousing model ([McCamant, Durrett, & Hertzmann, 1994](#)). The build-

ings are clustered around a pedestrian courtyard, with a recreational pond, office and workshop space, and a commons house for get-togethers, celebrations, and thrice-weekly optional communal meals. The compactness of the village plan means that when all five ecovillages are constructed up to 80% of the land will remain as either woodlands, wetlands, open, or agricultural land. It is the marriage of environmental concern and community building that distinguishes the ecovillage movement from other intentional communities, both historical and contemporary.

This research examines the blend of social vision, and ideological and personal factors that brought the 30 households together to realize this project. The social critique that emerges provides the focus for community coherence and activity. This research also examines the ways in which residents are connecting both with the environment, through developing a relationship with the natural world, and with a community of like-minded individuals, which is facilitated both by the physical design of the ecovillage, and by the practices that the community has adopted. The multiple ways in which residents achieved a sense of connection and reconnection are revealed through the interviews, observations

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and field notes. From these forms of connection the dimensions of a life lived according to the principles of sustainability begins to emerge.

Intentional community building has a long tradition in America that stretches all the way back to the early days of the pioneer settlers. Over this period the level of activity has ebbed and flowed, often in response to the major issues and challenges of the day (Kanter, 1972). Whether on religious, political or social grounds, all community builders believed that social change could best be achieved through the construction and demonstration of a single ideal model that could be duplicated throughout the country. Observing that individual dissent, gradualist reform, and revolution had proven ineffectual in creating change, citizens and reformers were drawn to a mode of protest that was novel, nonviolent and total in scope (Hayden, 1976).

Whereas earlier community groups responded to many of the same issues that contemporary intentional communities attempt to overcome, other issues have only arisen within the past 20 or 30 years. Such factors as globalization of trade, accelerated environmental degradation, the rise of information technology, and the changes that have resulted from these, have radically altered our perception of space and place. At the same time there has been an increasing sense of the breakdown of community principles as modern life has become ever more segmented. This has resulted in feelings of isolation and disconnectedness, and further withdrawal from traditional forms of political and social participation (Putnam, 2000). For some individuals, the answer to this situation lies in the creation of a radical alternative that synthesizes social, environmental and spiritual concerns through the creation of intentional community. It is the fusion of these elements that forms the core of the ecovillage ideology, and provides a focus for those who see conventional social patterns as unacceptable. For individuals living according to conventional cultural patterns an increasing sense of dissonance becomes evident between their sense of self and the behaviors that the culture encourages them to adopt. Recognition of the structural constraints that are inherent in a consumer-oriented environment leads to the realization that the construction of a new space may offer solutions to their personal experience of psychological dissonance.

Residents are aware of the destructiveness of the individualistic, capitalist, consumer lifestyle on both the social and ecological environment. The inseparability of these two factors is the guiding principle of the ecovillage movement. According to EVI founder, Joan Bokaer

I don't separate them. When I decided to start this thing it was just the deep conviction that the design of our human settlements was very, very destructive, and very isolating. And that the two go together, the

social isolation and the destruction of resources (Bokaer, 2000; Interview with author at the Ecovillage at Ithaca).

It is the culture of individualism that has come to dominate Western, and especially American life, that threatens both community and the environment. Putnam (2000) catalogs the decline in association that typifies American social life in the late 20th century. In describing the reduced integration of the American adult into the social structure, a steady decline in social capital is revealed. As a resource for action social capital is of special relevance to the ecovillage movement. It may be defined as a value that is inherent in the relationships between individuals. In a community where reciprocity is one of the established norms, where information is shared, and the system is closed in the sense that functioning feedback mechanisms are in place, social capital will be high. In such a setting, a community will be well endowed with the resources necessary to provide a functionally significant and psychologically meaningful group association that promotes the individual's well-being. Such a community acts as an effective mediator between the individual and the wider economic, political, and religious worlds (Coleman, 1988).

The real problem, according to Nisbet (1962), may not be the loss of the old associative patterns of community, as much as the failure of the present system to produce new contexts of association that can provide functional and psychological significance. The result has been an increasing sense of isolation and separation. Yankelovich (1981) has charted the rising number of individuals who have responded to this perception by seeking to elevate what he refers to as the "sacred/expressive" aspects of their lives over the purely "instrumental." This evolves into an ethic of commitment that shifts the focus away from self, in terms of self-denial or self-fulfillment, towards a connectedness and engagement with the world. The two major forms of expression of this new ethic are, a desire for deeper personal relationships, and the search for a means of striking a better balance between the instrumental, or means-to-an-end, aspects of life and the more sacred/expressive mode. Often this involves sacrificing career opportunity for a closer relationship with the natural world. The move back to rural areas and small town living, in recent decades, by disenchanting urban professionals and their families has been noted (Coffin & Lipsey, 1981; Bellah & Madsen, 1985; Jacob, 1997). The new social ethic that Yankelovich identifies is a means of binding the community together rather than allowing it to continue disintegrating under the demands of competing interests. The search for self-fulfillment then becomes a journey outwards as well as inwards, and self-realization takes place within the context of the co-created and shared meanings of a new psychoculture.

According to Wapner, Kaplan, and Cohen (1973), “The social normative character of the environment... tends to set limits to the malleability of that environment for any individual engaged in action” (p. 273). Thus, it becomes difficult to explore the environment for new possibilities or solutions, even though the environment contains such potential. For socially and historically situated individuals transactions with the environment are to a large extent shaped by participation in a particular social and cultural milieu. An organismic-developmental approach provides a framework for specifying the manner in which the individual in an ecological community, breaking with conventionally accepted modes of dwelling, comes to embody a new approach to inhabiting the world. Intentional communities have traditionally sought to establish a bounded space in which to explore new possibilities. The physical form of the ecovillage and the practices that are engaged in are an attempt to shape the world into a concrete expression of aggregated beliefs, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, and feelings. Accordingly, in ongoing feedback between the structure of the environment and the construal of the self within that environment, both the physical world and the self are successively and reciprocally transformed as new practices emerge and inform the shaping of the landscape.

In response to a growing awareness of the destructive effects of human activity on the environment a movement has grown up that calls for a shift towards a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle. According to Ralph Metzner (1993) we are currently in transition from a modern industrial worldview to an ecological worldview, a change that mirrors the postmodern transformation of the social and natural sciences, philosophy and religion. In coming to recognize that our production is actually consumption of finite natural resources (Rees, 1997), and that this activity produces waste products that threaten the stability of the biosphere on which we depend, the notion of sustainability becomes of paramount importance.

Whereas some individuals have reacted from a personal sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo as represented by contemporary consumer society, others have been moved by the implications on social and environmental levels to seek change. In this way, the intersection of personal concerns for establishing viable community and living environmentally, and more global concerns for the future of our society and the global environment, find expression in the creation of an environmentally oriented community like the EVI. In investigating the intersection of personal considerations and social and environmental concerns that result in involvement in contemporary community building projects such as the EVI, both a critique of the existing social mode and a proposed solution to the problems as identified begins to emerge. The over-

arching question that emerges is how to realize a sustainable lifestyle.

2. Study site and research

The EVI is located on the outskirts of the town of Ithaca, in upstate New York. It sits on 176 acres of gently sloping land that overlooks the town, and Cornell University. The site had originally been zoned for standard suburban development, the construction of over 200 houses on half-acre plots. Present plans propose the eventual construction of up to five ecovillages containing a maximum of 30 units in each. In contrast to the suburban development, the footprint of each settlement will be kept to a minimum, thus preserving as much open land as possible for biodiversity and amenity, allowing space for horticulture, and drastically reducing paved surfaces. The second neighborhood group is presently under construction.

The 30 households total just under 100 persons, of which approximately 65 are adults and 35 are children. A wide variety of occupants, from single person households to younger and older families and retired couples live at the ecovillage, with a wide range of occupations, from gardening to clerical, social work to software design. Residents formed the Ecovillage Cohousing Cooperative, which purchased 33 acres, on which the ecovillage was constructed, from the EVI nonprofit Corporation that owns the 176-acre site. Ownership consists of holding shares in the Cohousing Cooperative.

The houses are constructed along environmentally friendly lines, with passive solar collection, triple glazing and super-insulation. Houses share hot water and heating facilities, which further increases efficiency. Although final figures are not yet available, preliminary results indicated that the EVI household may consume as little as one-third of the US average (Jacobson, J., 2000: Interview with author at the Ecovillage at Ithaca). In addition, car-pooling is regularly practiced, reducing the need for families to purchase second cars, saving gas, and going some way to addressing the issue of the extra mileage involved in traveling to and from Ithaca town and Cornell. Reducing travel by car is a widespread community concern and the subject of an ongoing search for alternative solutions. An additional benefit is that car-pooling serves to increase community connectedness.

The level of community involvement that each resident experiences is purely an individual decision. The communal meals are optional, and one may either eat them in the commons house with others, or take them home to eat. A sign-up sheet lets the volunteers who come together to prepare the meal know how many to cook for. The cooking of the meal itself may become

a social occasion. Outside on a warm day or inside when the weather is colder, residents gather and chat in anticipation of the food being ready. This easy sociability replaces the effort traditionally required to invite someone to dinner, organize baby-sitters, etc., and serves to keep people in touch with each other in a natural and informal way. In summer the pond that borders the village provides another focus for group activity and socializing as adults and children swim together, or adults supervise the playing children.

The decision to draw the houses together and cluster the community in the midst of an open and wild landscape creates a living metaphor for the ecovillage philosophy. The compactness of the dwelling space amid the immense openness of the natural environment serves to turn the attention back toward the village itself. The houses look inward to the central ribbon that connects them, a safe, pedestrian space that encourages chance encounters. In such a setting, establishing and maintaining connection with others becomes easier.

The houses also look outwards, away from the community, to the land amid which they sit, the gently rolling hillside and the distant forested landscape. A sense arises from this of the place of the community in the wider natural setting, and the responsibility that this implies towards the natural environment. The absence of traffic in the village, and the paved roads that accompany them, brings nature right to the door. For the residents of the ecovillage the automobile no longer acts as an intermediary between themselves and the natural world.

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents over the course of a week's stay at the ecovillage in August of 2000. Four lines of inquiry were utilized in this analysis. These were as follows:

1. Inquiry into residents' motivations for moving to EVI.
2. Evaluation of ways in which residents' prior expectations had or had not been met.
3. Assessment of the major challenges that had been faced in the first 5 years of the ecovillage's existence.
4. Description of the experiential quality of life at the ecovillage.

Interviews resulted from familiarity through participation by the researcher in communal activities, and introduction by previous interviewees. This process was facilitated by residents' interest in discussing the development of EVI, and resulted in a kind of snowball sample. Such an approach may have led to a less than representative sample as it may have resulted in contact with the more active and connected residents. Further research will address this question.

In addition to conducting interviews and writing field notes, the rhythms of daily life at the ecovillage were observed. Participation in communal activities included,

removing rocks from a field that was to become a berry patch, helping to prepare the communal meals, and participating in the annual "Guys Baking Pies" celebration in which a group of men took over the communal kitchen to bake fruit pies with the children. These, and other more casual opportunities for socializing, helped to form a more complete picture of the community and the ways in which residents are working to reconnect with each other and with the wider environment.

A phenomenological approach to data gathering was adopted. The focus was on the qualitative nature of residents' experiences, and assumed an interdependence of psychological, social, and spatial processes in the service of realizing authentic environmental meaning. According to [Dovey \(1985\)](#), this emerges from a "connectedness in the relationship between people and their world" (p. 4). It may be expressed through what [Seamon and Mugerauer \(1985\)](#) refer to as "dwelling in place," and be driven by a desire to achieve consonance between sense of self and the manner in which this is expressed through behavior in the world.

3. Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Codes were ascribed to segments of the text using a grounded theory approach. This allowed themes to emerge from the data without the imposition of prior categories of analysis by the researcher. ATLAS.ti is uniquely suited to proceeding in such a "bottom-up" manner, containing a function that allows for the construction of networks and code hierarchies as the analysis proceeds. The process involved reading the interview and coding any phrases or sentences that directly pertained to answering the questions posed. Once this task was completed, the resulting responses that had emerged as significant across the interviews were grouped together under a set of general headings. These headings were then successively aggregated under more general headings, creating a code hierarchy that revealed the commonalities in the responses of the interviewees.

4. Results

To learn about what motivated residents to move to EVI all interviews began with the same open question, "How did you get here? What factors and influences were important in making the decision to settle at EVI?" From this initial inquiry respondents created a narrative that made sense, within the context of the interview, of their life course to that point in time, reaching as far back into their personal history as they deemed necessary.

One thing that initially emerges clearly from the data is the array of diverse personalities, dispositions, situations and life experiences that have found their confluence in the creation of EVI. For most residents, concern for creating community for social reasons outweighed purely environmental considerations as a motivating factor in the decision to move to EVI (by 10 to 3). For the remaining five the two were equally important, and for several others environmental issues were important, although to a lesser extent. Residents' responses reflected a general concern with establishing a firm connection with other like-minded individuals and generating the sense of trust and reciprocity that a satisfying community life offers. In residents' narrative accounts of their previous life experiences a degree of disconnectedness and alienation from conventional social patterns and mores is evident. This operates on a personal level, as well as being observed and formulated on an ideological/global level.

Social and environmental activism were regular themes, in 14 of the 18 interviews, as EVI residents consistently reported involvement in educating themselves or others about such matters. Most often, the genesis of their interest in these topics was personal experiences. These arose from childhood events that proved instructive, one way or another, or from adult experiences, often as a result of having children themselves (in 10 of 18 interviews). Separation and divorce were reported in five of the 18 interviews as catalysts that forced some reflection on the position of the individual with respect to their wider social network. Such a disruption of identity necessitates a reappraisal and reconstruction of the world. Similarly, life transitions such as starting a family, having children grow up and leave home, and recognition of aging, are nodal points at which individuals consider their duties, needs and options (in 7 of 18 interviews). The common decision of the residents of EVI as they faced these points in their lives has been to make a commitment to involvement in community.

Realization of the ecovillage project offered a solution to two pressing problems for the residents of EVI; a perceived loss of community, and accelerating damage to the environment, through what Schehr (1997) referred to as the reconstitution of localized space. Through establishing consensus on the use of space and energy, and foregoing the excesses and privileges of modern individualism by agreeing to the voluntary limits that ecovillage life involves, residents were motivated by the intention to break the destructive cycle implied by Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons.

Members of EVI see themselves as progenitors of cultural change. Schehr (1997) comments that the self-conscious recognition of a shared vision and organizational participation are the prerequisites of a social

movement. Responding to the initial vision of the founder, the thirty individuals and families who colonized the EVI, set out to develop a practice that would combine personal, social and environmental goals. On a personal level residents revealed that they sought a meaningful life experience, one that would allow for personal growth and self-actualization. At the same time, this was to take place within a community setting in which personal, face-to-face relationships would become an important factor in creating the social capital that many felt was missing from contemporary society.

The EVI project appealed to residents on both personal and global/ideological levels. In personal terms, at the same time as commitment to the EVI project held out the promise of a fulfilling way of life that would serve to confirm a self-identity as a socially or environmentally concerned individual, in a wider sense, it provided an opportunity to demonstrate a viable alternative to the present social mode. In personal terms this commitment provides for the balancing of the sacred/expressive aspects of making a life with meaning against the purely instrumental aspects of making a living. The EVI was envisioned as a hands-on effort to effect social change, and recast the world in a more humane and sustainable way (in 16 of 18 interviews).

Whereas integrating into the built form the technology for living in an environmentally sustainable manner is relatively easy, the task of creating the kind of community that can experience and demonstrate a socially sustainable lifestyle has proven to be a much greater challenge. This undertaking has been fraught with difficulties and has tested residents' resolve. Nevertheless, EVI's function as a kind of social laboratory was humorously highlighted by one resident:

Int. 10: And so, thirty families moving at the same time, all within a span of six months of each other. All of them uprooting everything they have going and trying to then come together, live together, and make decisions together. Does that sound like one of those torture scientific experiments?

Responses to the second and fourth questions outlined above, whether residents' expectations had been met, and a description of the experiential qualities of life at EVI, resolved themselves into either positive or negative evaluations or experiences. Within these categories a range of issues were identified and prioritized according to how often they occurred across the interviews. The third question, assessment of the challenges faced at EVI, was resolved into three categories. These were *personal challenges*, in which the primary impact was on the individual level, *interpersonal challenges*, which primarily affected relationships between individuals or families, and *situational challenges*, that were seen to have arisen as a result of the

process of formation and colonization, or other factors in the development of the ecovillage itself. Rather than describing the findings in each category in turn with frequencies and quotations, it may be more apposite to reconstruct the events of the first 5 years as revealed by the interviews. In so doing, residents' evaluations, experiences and challenges will appear in the context in which they occurred.

Planning for the ecovillage began in 1991, as interested individuals and families came together and worked to achieve consensus on the form that this new community should take. The consensus process formed a core principle of ecovillage philosophy, together with a commitment to sustainability in both community and environmental terms. In practice the adoption of the consensus process was seen as both a blessing and a curse, described variously as "a beautiful process in theory," "ponderous," and "the tyranny of the minority." During the initial planning stages, in which a set of guidelines were drawn up, and the early settlement period, the consensus process stretched the resolve, patience and creativity of the group. With many decisions to make and financial commitment from all parties the consensus process was pressured by the deadlines imposed by the need to begin construction. The result was that:

Int. 03: during the development process it (community process) was continually shunted aside. And, ... I kept saying we have got to slow down, we gotta spend more time on our relationships and work things out because we are going to develop animosities that are going to undermine the effort to move ahead. Most of the people (said) well, we gotta do this now, we gotta make these decisions, if we don't make these decisions this is going to happen, it's going to cost more money, we are going to lose people. And so we kept pushing and pushing and pushing, and the end result was a lot of animosities developed, resentments lingered, because there was no time taken to work through these things at the time. And we ended up doing a lot of work subsequently, to try and heal those wounds.

If the pressure of achieving consensus strained the energy and reserves of the group prior to the completion of construction, once the families moved in they faced even greater pressures.

Int. 14: Aha, there was a sense of shell shock in the first 6 months or so after people moved in here. There was not just one family moving and all the changes. It was everybody sort of moving all at once. I could see sort of a glaze in peoples eyes, the weeks and months afterwards, just feeling they were on overload, so much to be done.

The pressures of time and commitment were only one barrier to the consensus process. A second source of discord was felt to emanate from some of the individuals themselves:

Int. 12: ...we have some very difficult individuals, and people were so wedded to one hundred percent consensus, and everybody has a piece of the truth, and we have to learn how to hear them. But you can listen to them for a thousand years but they are still going to be upset. I mean, people will bring in their own emotional needs, and sometimes that is counter-productive to the group. So, that's been the most difficult part, just the incredible amount of energy that they took up.

Under the twin pressures of arranging their own lives as well as making the myriad decisions that needed to be made to organize the fledgling community, residents struggled to adapt to the new living situation. For some, resentments and animosities that had developed during the planning stages grew, creating tension within the community and further threatening the consensus process.

Int. 16: February of '98 there was a lot of tension in the community so we actually hired a team of professional facilitators to come in and teach us how to work with conflict. It was very slow going, and there were some people that were not interested in the process, that were considered outsiders and didn't really want to work with this process. But, for those of us who did work with them, it was beneficial and the communication got more open because of it.

Introducing outside facilitators to open channels of communication led to significant improvement in the ability of ecovillage residents to listen to each other and to respond appropriately. The third-party perspective offered by the facilitators proved invaluable. Over the next 2 years three families decided to leave the ecovillage and eventually put their houses up for sale.

Int. 12: I see the group as a wonderful mirror, to help people see where their antisocial behavior can change in a supportive way. But if the group won't ever acknowledge that somebody is a problem, and they wouldn't, and these two families were really a problem. We got built in spite of them. They are leaving; their houses are for sale... One of the families is moving out now. I just feel that with each box that leaves, just a little lighter. Because they just walk around angry. They are so angry at the group, and the group worked so hard to hear them and accommodate them, they have no idea.

Three years after the effort to resolve animosities and improve communication the general opinion was that the situation was much improved. All those interviewed

expressed overwhelmingly positive evaluations and experiences of life at EVI. Among the dominant negative evaluations having to give up some cherished aspect of their personal vision of how the ecovillage should be developed stands out. In terms of environmental attributes regret that more tangible ecological hardware had not been employed in the construction, due to such factors as costs, zoning restrictions and consensus, was expressed by 4 of the 18 residents interviewed. With regard to negative evaluations of the community aspects of EVI the principal comment is that the expectations that life would become simpler, and that there would be more time, did not materialize. This was directly expressed by three of the 18 residents interviewed, as well as by others in casual conversation.

Int. 18: Yeah I think a lot of people were surprised, maybe me too. I think we thought our lives would become simpler somehow. And that hasn't necessarily happened. So I think that whatever ways that living in community simplifies your life is more than offset by ways that it adds some degree of complexity to it. There's obligations, social interactions that take time.

In all, 15 instances of negative evaluations were coded, as compared to 42 instances of positive evaluation. On a personal level, individuals have responded to the challenges of living in close association with others and all of those interviewed (18 of 18) expressed that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. The interviews revealed a sense of the excitement, trepidation, and satisfaction as residents began to realize a sense of connection with each other. This was expressed by 10 of the 18 residents.

Int. 8: It's a continuing, growing process. Just it's rich in so many ways. It's really a classroom for interpersonal relations, and for working on your weaknesses and contributing your strengths, and working on your interpersonal relations, that I have that I might like to improve on. And sometimes that's a little risky and sometimes that hurts because maybe you get feedback you didn't necessarily want to hear, or is surprising to hear. So by and large people are very considerate and caring of each other, you know.

Another source of positive evaluation that extolled the virtues of this kind of living arrangement for the children was advanced by 10 of the 18 residents interviewed. Advantages included the safety of the pedestrian environment, the presence of adult role models other than the parents, and a connection between the generations due to the intergenerational quality of the ecovillage that provided grandparent roles to the benefit of both children and older individuals.

With regard to the second question that provides the material for this analysis, namely the challenges that

have been faced during the first 5 years of the ecovillage's existence, these are resolved into three categories. There are 5 instances coded of *personal challenges*, 63 instances of *interpersonal challenges*, and 12 instances of *situational challenges*. The largest category, *interpersonal challenges*, is split fairly evenly into three subcategories, *boundary issues* (23 instances), *communication issues* (21 instances), and *consensus issues* (19 instances).

Personal challenges refers to the individual's struggle to come to terms with living in this new community on a personal level.

Int. 3: And the challenges for me, strike me as essentially personal challenges, at least it starts that way. When I came here part of the problems I had in the first year were twofold. One is, I wasn't really sure I could be comfortable in a community, and, two, I wasn't really sure the community was really going to be comfortable with me. So, I was sort of feeling it on both sides, and I had this vague notion that I was going to have to change. Or, something or things in me were going to have to change, if I were going to really find a place in this community. And I didn't know, had no idea what they were. Now I know what they were, and I'm not so happy about finding out all the things that I needed to struggle with (laughing) and deal with myself, in order to find a comfortable place in the community.

Interpersonal challenges includes *consensus issues*, which have already been touched upon in relation to the initial planning and settlement of the community. The strain of those times has cast a slight shadow of cynicism over residents expressed attitudes to the consensus process. However, many refer to it in a manner that expresses a kind of grudging fondness towards it, and confirms its continued importance in the development of the community.

A second set of *interpersonal challenges* was in the area of *communication issues*. Living in a community as something more than regular neighbors, where everyone has a stake in the outcome of decisions that are made has led to recognition of the importance of open channels of communication. The conflict resolution workshops of 1998 proved an invaluable resource as residents learned to avoid blaming, listen, and make clear personal statements.

The third set of *interpersonal challenges* revolved around *boundary issues*. These identified residents struggles to define acceptable levels on the public/private continuum, as individuals, as families, and as parents. As an individual at EVI, one resident expressed difficulty in learning to say no to requests for help, time, and commitment beyond what was comfortable. For others the question of disciplining others' children, or allowing one's own children to be disciplined was a

difficult boundary issue. The issue of parenting styles came to the fore in such a close-knit community setting. The natural tendency of children to seek out locations where particular behaviors can be indulged in that might be frowned upon at home was a cause of much discussion and decision-making amongst the residents. Differences in bedtimes, eating and study habits, and acceptable behavior towards other children, were all the subject of continuing negotiations among the adults. At the family level, making time for the family to be together in the face of so many opportunities for children to interact was a challenge that required both patience and determination to resolve.

The relative closeness of the community at EVI is demonstrated by the lack of curtains in first floor windows. Visibility goes both ways, and the public nature of the pedestrian space around which the houses face is not abruptly halted by closed doors and curtained windows. This blending of the public and the private shifts the conventional boundaries of self in subtle ways that may or may not suit everybody all the time, suggesting the evolution of new conventions for asserting those boundaries.

Int. 17: And, I don't know, it pretty much works for me. It gets a little hard, and there were a lot of emails flying around about a month or so ago about that. Can you walk down the neighborhood without five people coming up to you and saying, oh by the way did you blah blah blah, when all you want to do is walk to the common house and home, you know. And how can we honor that, and how can we respect that. We are all different. Some of us are just waiting for someone to stop us and say hi, and others are hoping no one will bother me. And how do we accommodate that for each and every one of us.

The third set of challenges identified by residents of EVI is situational in nature. The *situational challenges* largely refer to factors of location and economics. In terms of economics, the ecovillage is not an income sharing community. Due to the relative interpersonal closeness of the community the wide variation in income levels becomes something of a challenge for some to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Not only is it a challenge in terms of making decisions on improvements to amenities when some residents are struggling to make ends meet, but it was expressed by two residents more as a sense of discomfort as the principles of creating community and acting with compassion and neighborliness clash with the limits imposed by living within an individualistic capitalist system. This is a fundamental boundary issue, and an important area that requires deeper investigation.

Through examination of these three sets of challenges that were experienced by residents of EVI a picture

emerges of individuals striving to redefine their sense of connection to each other in ways that provide meaning and satisfaction to their lives. The challenges were overwhelmingly interpersonal in nature, and their resolution required establishing clear communication, a firm commitment to consensus, and a determination to challenge their own preconceptions and prejudices. From these practices an experience of EVI as a unique place finds expression in response to the final question that forms the material for this analysis.

There were 51 coded responses related to the experience of living at EVI. Of these, 2 were negative. One resident continued to miss having a fireplace to burn wood, but accepted this as part of the process of compromising in order to reach consensus. The other resident resented having to drive to work since moving to EVI, rather than being able to walk, as before, even though car-pooling resolved this a little. The remaining 49 responses were all positive. Whereas 2 of these referred to valuing the land and the landscape, the remaining 47 were positive comments about the people and the community.

The picture that emerges from these responses is of a rich and stimulating environment that has provided a wealth of exciting and enjoyable experiences. Without downplaying the continuing challenges, residents report a strong sense of personal satisfaction at being a part of a mutually supportive, forgiving, and intimate community of committed individuals. Those who are retired feel useful, and those with young families feel supported, while the children benefit from the presence of adult role models and surrogate grandparents. Through lessons learned in conflict resolution residents feel confident that disagreements can be overcome, and through commitment to the consensus process they are assured that their voices will be heard.

Residents of the EVI have created a community that is high in social capital. While they are aware that they are involved in an ongoing and sometimes difficult process of development, a strong sense of mutual obligation and trustworthiness and the free flow of information aids residents as they strive to create an effective set of norms that promotes sustainability on both environmental and community levels. On a personal level, sustainability arises from the assurance of social support, and the opportunity to make full use of physical and mental resources as residents age. Commitment to a project that demonstrates that people can live cooperatively with each other and with the natural environment constitutes a meaningful form of engagement with the world that further enhances the sense of personal sustainability.

The practices of the EVI create a community of inclusion through formal arrangements such as the communal meals that take place three times a week, and other organized get-togethers, as well as spontaneous

acts of sharing and community that bring a sense of satisfaction to residents' lives.

Int. 13: So for me it's just worked out perfectly, in that I love the spontaneity of a bonfire, a swim, a party, a celebration, and there is always someone to do it with. And I know that as I grow even older, I don't want to sit alone in my house and eat my meal. I want to join with other people and talk and find out what is happening.

5. Discussion

Through the interactions of the residents of the EVI with each other and with the natural environment five forms of connectedness emerge as significant. These are listed below in Table 1.

The theme of connection or reconnection does not always appear explicitly and directly in the interviews and conversations. Individual residents expressed a need or desire for a certain relationship as a motivating force in the decision to move to EVI. Other residents discovered new forms of relationship once they were there. In reviewing the transcribed interviews and field notes connectedness suggested itself as a rubric under which these various impulses could find common expression.

The first of the five forms of connectedness, a connection with the wild land underscores a sense of belonging and communion with all life, in its widest and most spiritual sense. This connection fosters an awareness of one's place in the larger scheme of things, and may be a unifying factor at the ecovillage in the absence of a uniform religious creed. It is made explicit by the compactness of the village, with an unbroken line from the tree-clad horizon to the residents' back doors. A sense of connection with the wild landscape provides an often commented upon source of inspiration and satisfaction at the ecovillage.

A second form of connectedness is a connection with the ecovillage settlement that creates a sense of community and supportive association with fellow humans. This leads to a sense of belonging, and cooperative communion in realizing a common goal. This connection is further underscored by the contrast between the compact settlement and the expansiveness

of the land amid which the ecovillage sits. The physical limit of the buildings forms a kind of psychic boundary for the community that defines the human world from the wider world of nature.

A third form of connectedness arises through the organic farm and associated environmentally oriented activities. This creates a sense of partnership with the living landscape of natural and benign human activity, and connects the landscape and the community together. A dynamic interaction with the land as the source of physical sustenance and the community as the source of emotional sustenance is implied. Residents cooperate to ensure both. This connection unites the human world and the world of nature through the common activity of respectful stewardship and cultivation of the land. Such activities include organic farming using the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model in which subscribers, ecovillage residents as well as other local residents, share the crop risk with the growers, as well as recycling, and other modes of working towards reducing individual impact on the environment.

A fourth form of connectedness is intrapsychic in nature. The recognition that modern life fragments and compartmentalizes the various components of our lived experience, work, socializing, family, organizational activity, hobbies, etc., leads to a desire to reconnect at least some of these in meaningful ways. Involvement in ecovillage life tends to bring together family, social ties, interests and activities, and in some cases work, in a way that brings a sense of personal psychological satisfaction to residents that is often lacking in the wider society.

Finally, a connectedness through the generations, from children to old people, forges a temporal connection that implies a commitment to sustainability and dedication to continuity through time. The value of all age groups is acknowledged, and their unique contributions to the common welfare of the community are asserted. Aging residents find outlets for their accumulated skills and abilities, while children profit from their wisdom, patience and attention.

These five forms of connectedness constitute a proposed framework that requires further investigation in order to test its completeness and applicability. As demonstrated at the EVI, connection across these five dimensions contributes to the creation of the kind of social system that is supportive of healthy human growth, while simultaneously acknowledging the natural environment as the ultimate source of our existence. Thus, these five forms of connectedness may identify the essential dimensions of a life lived according to the principles of sustainability. A sustainable lifestyle would register as highly connected on all five dimensions, such that a person would:

- Experience and acknowledge a sense of awe and deep respect for the creative power of nature.

Table 1

1	Connection with the wild landscape (a spiritual connection with the natural world)
2	Connection with community
3	Connection with a cultivated landscape of benign human activity (<i>use of nature</i>)
4	Sense of personal integration (reconnection of separated components of experience)
5	Connection through time/intergenerational sustainability

- Experience a sense of belonging to a close and supportive community.
- Support only benign human activity.
- Experience a sense of personal integration of goals and various components of life.
- Support and participate in intergenerational association and consider the long-term implications of all decisions and activities.

Through the adoption of practices at EVI that make explicit the connectedness of the individual to the social and ecological worlds both self and environment are being mutually and reciprocally transformed. The development of a new form of social and ecological relations takes place through the everyday lived experience of residents as they construct and construe their environment. While phenomenologists have traditionally stressed the importance of the *Lebenswelt*, academic scientists have tended to assume that the solutions to ecological problems take place at a level of complexity that requires methods and conceptualizations that preclude such considerations as individual lived experience (Wapner et al., 1973). The results of this research suggest that, prior to moving to EVI, residents experienced a sense of dissonance between their identities and the behaviors that they were constrained to follow, and which were seen to perpetuate the degradation of the social and ecological environments. Living at EVI, despite the ongoing challenges that are presented by developing this lifestyle, brings about a sense of consonance between identity and behavior. This research suggests that this is an identity that is based on a sense of connectedness to core elements that promote the experience of a sustainable life.

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