

'Ecotopia' Society Was Ahead of Its Time

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompskins.org.

In 1975 a tiny company called Banyan Tree Books in Berkeley, Calif., published "Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston." Twenty-five publishers had previously rejected the manuscript. This slim science-fiction volume of 167 pages eventually sold over a million copies in 12 languages. More recent editions advertise it as "The first dramatic portrait of an ecologically sustainable society." The author, Ernest Callenbach (1929-2012) claimed he

got his ideas from reading Scientific American and Science magazines.

Ecotopia is based on the fictional news dispatches and the personal diary entries of fictional correspondent William Weston, who travels to the new nation of Ecotopia in 1999. In 1979 northern California, Oregon and Washington had seceded from the U.S. and created an environmentally based new order. (How they managed to break away and stay separate is explained in the book.) As the first U.S. reporter to visit Ecotopia, Weston describes the new society people have built—and falls in love with a sexy and open-minded Ecotopian beauty.

Correspondent Weston finds a

decentralized, eco-friendly, non-uptight culture with no cars, lots of high-speed trains, local small-scale hospitals carrying out cradle-to-grave health coverage with less high-tech equipment and more preventive medical practices than in the rest of the U.S.

The country is divided into five metropolitan and four rural sectors. Local governments have extensive powers. People live in groups of five to 20; workers own the main productive institutions, and education focuses on systems thinking. The elderly live in these groups and provide child care and early education. Homes are built of wood or of corn-based plastic tubing and are all located around rail stations. People cannot inherit

land; only personal articles.

All plastic is derived from plants, none from hydrocarbons. Plastics are thus biodegradable. Refrigerators run on household septic tank methane. Microwaves are illegal—you eat fresh food. People use the metric system, and recycling containers are found everywhere (remember that this book was written in 1975 when hardly anyone recycled anything in the U.S.).

Synthetic chemical fertilizers were abandoned and replaced with compost from food waste and sewage. Ecotopian scientists were working on strains of plants that could produce electricity from photosynthesis. "Your garden could recycle your sewage and garbage,

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provide your food and also light your house." Books are accessible electronically via computer stations linked to a giant national library in Berkeley.

Taxes are levied only on enterprises (no payroll taxes), train cars are filled with hanging ferns and small plants. Streets are quiet (no cars, remember?) with only occasional electric taxis—even in the nation's capital of San Francisco. Bus service is free and public bikes are found everywhere, available for temporary use. The general work-week is 20 hours. Wood is not exported from Ecotopia.

Technicians are creating alternatives to the diesel log trucks that remain a stubborn reminder of the previous way of doing things. To build a house of wood, you first must work for a few months in a

forest labor camp planting trees to replace the wood your house might use. However, trees are cut and trimmed with a strange, almost religious respect: showing the emotional intensity and care we might use in preparing a ballet.

The GNP of Ecotopia is very low. Mankind, the Ecotopians assumed, was not meant for production. Instead, humans were meant to take their modest place in a seamless, stable-state web of living organisms.

Want to guess whether Weston returns to the non-fictional U.S.? Does this account sound similar to a manifesto of the sustainability movement today? Could such a society succeed? Callenbach thought so.

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