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Couple grows an ecovillage on saltspring

Community to feature organic farm, biodiesel production, rainwater catchment and educational workshops

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Backing onto hundreds of acres of wild public land, towering mountains and sandy beaches is the home of Jan Steinman and Carol Wagner, the first residents at Saltspring Island's very own ecovillage. Here life is lived a bit differently since it is a life that includes thoughts of the future.

Visit Steinman and Wagner at their humble 37-acre (15-hectare) plot of land cleverly dubbed EcoReality, and you'll most likely find them weeding the garden, cleaning out the chicken coop or taking the village's newest residents, Maya and Shakti, two adopted Nubian goats, for a stroll around the property.

"Humanity needs to relearn how to live in a steady state, a condition not predicated upon endless growth," said Steinman who, along with his wife, Carol, helped co-found the EcoReality Sustainable Land Use and Education Cooperative nearly four years ago.

Living in a suburb of Portland, Ore., Steinman and Wagner felt disconnected from their community and disillusioned by Western consumerism. "We didn't know our neighbours and nobody was very friendly," said Wagner. "We wanted to do something better with our lives and thought an ecovillage was a good way to start."

After extensive research and location hunting, Steinman and Wagner discovered Saltspring Island and instantly fell in love with its rugged terrain and natural beauty. "Jan has always wanted to live on an island so when we visited Saltspring we knew it was right," said Wagner.

Soon after deciding on the location, Steinman and Wagner met their co-founders, Shannon and James Cowan, a Vancouver-based couple who shared a similar vision regarding sustainability and community values. "We started talking and quickly found out we are all very dedicated to this way of life," Wagner said. "We decided then and there that the four of us were going to try and start this."

ECO-VISION TO ECOREALITY

Today, their vision is finally becoming a reality as they slowly wade through the logistical and bureaucratic channels needed to get EcoReality up and running. Steinman and Wagner already live on the land and Shannon and James Cowan, along with their two-year-old daughter Sienna, will take up permanent residence there at the end of July. But other members will have to wait until EcoReality obtains the necessary permits, at which time residents will live in temporary structures while permanent residences are built.

"Adding residents to agricultural land is a sensitive issue here, and when we are ready to apply for rezoning we will be doing a public education campaign to explain in detail the agricultural labour needs that justify such a number," said Steinman.

Shannon Cowan is an assistant professor of agroecology at the University of B.C. and, as EcoReality's ecological steward, is conducting a study to determine the number of residents the land can support. "Essentially, we're determining each person's ecological footprint,"

Cowan said. "So if we have 30-some acres for the eco-village, I'm in the process of figuring out how many people that land can sustain."

While there are now only two houses on the property, plans for EcoReality include a cluster of natural-building homes and an organic farm, biodiesel production and educational workshops.

"We'll have shared facilities with kitchenettes, but we'll also have a great hall for meetings, shared meals and classrooms."

Planned educational courses include local biofuel production, alternative energy systems and natural building, as well as farming and gardening and a "permaculture design certificate" course.

EcoReality plans to undertake a permaculture design of the site, which, according to Steinman, stresses multiple functions supported redundantly, in order to seek self-sufficiency in energy, water and food to the greatest degree possible.

For water, EcoReality will rely on a well, a 4,500-litre per day licence for Reid Creek -- which runs across the land -- and rainwater catchments.

"This gives us triple redundancy and a high degree of water sovereignty," said Steinman.

EcoReality will also be seeking triple redundancy in energy systems. "We already make more than enough bio-diesel for our needs, sharing the excess with the greater community," said Steinman.

"There is also excellent wind and micro-hydro power potential on the site and a seven-acre wood lot will keep us supplied with heating wood, while we begin a coppice forest for continued, sustainable firewood production."

COMMUNITY, NOT COMMUNE

For many, the term eco-village brings to mind images of tree-hugging Birkenstock-shod hippies who spend their time singing around campfires, but EcoReality residents are quick to point out that an eco-village is in no way synonymous with commune. "Although I am an old hippie at heart, that's not what we're about," Wagner joked. "Part of building our ecovillage will be educating the public about what we're doing so that people know we're not just a bunch of hippies building a commune."

For Wagner and Steinman, an ecovillage represents a return to our roots. "We just think that it used to be that communities lived and worked together and we feel that we're going to be going back to that," said Wagner. "An ecovillage means a lot of different things to a lot of different people but for us it's about community and about sharing things, about being stewards of the land."

For Cowan, living in an ecovillage is about reconnecting with the Earth. "To me it seems like the population explosion on the planet is such that each one of us now has to make choices for change in our daily lives," she said. "I'm not necessarily advocating that everyone suddenly move to an ecovillage, but what I see for the future is the need to reconnect with our source of vitality, which is the land and the resources there."

But it is also the desire for a sustainable future for their daughter Sienna that makes the idea of life at EcoReality so appealing to the Cowans. "The urbanization of the world has created generations of children who don't have strong ecological values because of the way we live in modern western civilization," said Cowan. "I really feel that this move will allow my daughter the experience of connecting with people and stewarding the land the way that our forefathers did."

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Building an ecovillage does not come without its challenges, as EcoReality's founders have

come to find out. "Financing is always a challenge," said Steinman. "Banks don't know what to do with us, which in many ways is good, as one of our core values is freedom from external debt, but it does make short-term goals more difficult."

"I see challenges in a whole host of areas and yet I think that that's part of building a human scale ecological demonstration site," Cowan said.

"At a very personal level, I think that interpersonal relationships may be one of the most serious challenges we face but I'm also committed to developing regular group-process activities that will lead us through the relationships."

Wagner added: "I think the biggest challenge will be to quell the fears of the naysayers, of the people who don't understand and whose minds are stuck. It can be hard to change that sometimes, but we are totally committed to this process and I have total faith it will be a success." EcoReality demonstrates the effort to live and work in such a way as to sustain not only people and communities, but also the life of the planet. Rather than exploit our planet and its resources, the folks at EcoReality are creatively rethinking how we relate to the planet, the local flora and fauna, and each other.

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