To Jon and Carol, with love and affection, gratitude, and admiration for all.

Diana Leafe Christian

Finding Community

How to join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community

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Can Living in Community Make a Difference in an Age of Peak Oil?

Can it make a difference to the planet, and to energy usage overall, that some of us living in communities conserve energy, share resources, grow food, and employ other ecologically sustainable practices to create a smaller ecological footprint? I think so. But because there are relatively few communities at present, it probably doesn’t make much difference overall, at least not yet. At the same time, no great historical movements ever started without some people getting the ball rolling, so it might as well be us. I like to think that we who live in communities and might be living more lightly on the Earth, might be part of a grassroots movement that ultimately makes a huge difference. At least, it’s heartening to proceed as if this were so.

Another question is, can living in community make a difference in terms of how comfortable or safe one might feel during increasingly tough economic times stemming from dwindling supplies of oil? Here’s what Richard Heinberg says in The Party’s Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Societies: “Life in an intentional community could offer many advantages… Association with like-minded people in a context of mutual aid could help overcome many of the challenges that will arise as the larger society undergoes turmoil and reorganization. Moreover, new cooperative, low-energy ways of living can be implemented now, without having to wait for a majority of people in the larger society to awaken to the necessity for change.” He goes on to recommend ecovillages, including Findhorn, Mitraniketan in India, Ecovillage at Ithaca, The Farm, Earthaven, and Dancing Rabbit.

In Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World, Heinberg mentions friends of his in various intentional communities and ecovillages worldwide who are pursuing “Powerdown” and “Building Lifeboat” strategies simultaneously. “While they engage in activism on many fronts,” he writes, “participating vigorously in the anti-globalization, peace, and environmental movements — they also have established rural bases where they save heirloom seeds, build their own homes from natural and locally available materials, and hone other life-support skills that they and future generations will need. I admire those people unreservedly: if there is a sane path from where we are to a truly sustainable future, these folks have surely found it.”

I frankly don’t know if people living in ecovillages or intentional communities will be any better off during energy decline than people living in mainstream culture, or if so, to what extent, and for how long. My friend Jan Steinman and I considered the pros and cons of these issues in our editorial, “Community Survival During the Coming Energy Decline,” in the Spring 2006 Peak Oil issue of Communities magazine. Essentially, Jan and I do think communitarians will be better off than many others on the planet, but perhaps not as well...
off as communities—or people who want to join them—might think.

Community Survival During the Coming Energy Decline

"Well, we've got off-grid power from solar panels and wind power," a community might say, "and we've got wood stoves, too. No matter how high the price of gas goes, we'll be fine."

Perhaps, but does the community buy any food items they don't grow themselves? While its members can certainly bicycle, car-pool, or use biodiesel to get to the local food co-op, are any of these food items grown, processed, or packaged in other regions? If so, they'll pay for the ever-increasing cost of transporting these items into their area. The same is true if the community uses local suppliers for seeds, soil amendments, fencing, hand tools, or other gardening supplies that originate elsewhere, or building supplies from other regions—from lumber to cement blocks to electrical supplies and PVC pipe.

But this is only considering the rising price of gasoline. It's harder to grasp, but equally true, that the cost of all manufactured goods themselves will steadily increase in price—because manufactured goods are tied to the price of oil. Why? First there's the electricity used in factories to manufacture things: the electric power in most regions of the world is generated in power plants fueled by non-renewable fossil fuel such as oil and coal. Second, there's the use of metal in manufactured items, which must be mined, smelted, and formed into parts—all of which requires electrical power. The same is true of rubber, machine oil, glass, and other materials used in manufactured goods—not to mention the silicon used in items from solar panels to computer chips. Third, there's the plastic used in manufactured items themselves and the plastic used in the packaging and shipping of such items—since plastic itself is made from oil.

What happens when a community's wind turbine or inverter needs a new part? Most likely its members are used to clicking a mouse or picking up a phone, finding the part hundreds or thousands of miles away, performing an electronic transaction that depends on the fossil-fuel-powered infrastructures of electricity, telecommunications, and banking, and then a large brown truck—powered by fossil fuel—brings the part in a week or so. But with the coming energy decline it won't be so easy.

And even if the community did happen to have an "Off-Grid Power Parts 'R Us" franchise nearby, does that retail outlet actually mine the copper, aluminum, iron, tin, cobalt, antimony, beryllium, niobium, and various other metals that they smelt, forge, and extrude into wind turbine or inverter parts? Do they have equally basic methods for obtaining any rubber, plastic, glass, or silicon required for these parts? And if they do happen to have such parts on hand, their seeming availability just masks the dependence on fossil-fuel-driven infrastructure that goes to the very core of our civilization.

Well, you get the picture. But there's more. Many rural communities are already growing at least some of their own food, however, this is usually vegetables, and usually in the summer—few communities also have produce year-round, or grow or raise their own protein, fat, or grain-based carbohydrates. In mainstream culture, outside of the tiny percentage of food that's organically grown, the entire food industry (and thus, the world's burgeoning population) is totally dependent on fossil fuel. That's because most non-organic fertilizer is either made from the byproducts of refining oil or from natural gas. As a civilization, we are literally eating fossil fuel, from the natural gas that produces virtually all commercial fertil-
izer; to the diesel farm machinery that prepares the land, weeds the crops, and harvests and distributes the yield; to the energy-intensive processing, packaging, and distribution networks that get the food to us.

All told, about ten calories of fossil fuel goes into each single calorie of food we eat (not counting fuel used for cooking). And make that ratio at least 100:1 for heavily processed foods.

So agribiz-grown food (even though we communitarians don’t eat it), heating oil for home furnaces (even though we choose renewable heating sources), manufactured goods (even though we eschew most of them), and transportation fuel (even though we car-pool or bicycle), all affect the greater economy. And most ecovillages and intentional communities are embedded to some degree in the greater economy — whether we intend it or not — and the greater economy is completely driven by fossil fuels. And it’s not just the economy — it’s almost everything we take for granted in our lives: modern medicine (antibiotics, anesthetics, insulin, glasses, hearing aids); holistic medicine (nutritional supplements, Chinese herbs); communications (telephone lines, electronic switching equipment, satellite dishes, satellites themselves, computers, networks, modems, servers); law and order (police cars, police communication systems, police officers’ salaries), the ability to govern — these are but a few examples of non-obvious things we take for granted that are totally dependent on fossil fuels.

This means, of course, that as the supplies of fossil fuels become more scarce, and the price of oil and natural gas goes up, everything will become more expensive. As the economy worsens, many businesses will severely downsize or even shut down because they can no longer afford parts, repairs, or needed services. Thousands of people, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thou-
hope for a pleasant decline from Peak Oil, but if we pay attention, humanity may choose to plan for a long and orderly Peak Coal.

Is Intentional Community the Answer?

Julian Darley, author of *High Noon for Natural Gas* and founder of the Post Carbon Institute, believes civilization is necessarily headed down the path of "re-localization"; that is, reversing the energy-fed globalization trend that has wrecked the Earth for the past century or so. Those who already enjoy a measure of self-sufficiency, such as ecovillages and other kinds of sustainable intentional communities as well as sustainably organized neighborhoods, will already have the skills and experience needed for re-localization.

"This is a time of tremendous challenge," says Richard Heinberg, author of *The Party's Over* and *Powerdown*, "but also a time of great opportunity." In *Powerdown*, Heinberg notes that small, self-sustaining communities may become cultural lifeboats in times to come. "Our society is going to change profoundly — those of us who understand this are in a position to steward that change. We are going to become popular, needed people in our communities." When asked at a Peak Oil conference in 2005 about what can be done, Heinberg replied, "Start an ecovillage!"

These changes are not going to happen overnight. James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency*, calls the coming energy decline a "long emergency" because it is occurring almost too gradually for most of us to register. The energy decline is often compared to the metaphor about boiling frogs: if you want to cook frogs and you put them in boiling water, they will immediately hop out, but if you put frogs in room-temperature water and only gradually turn up the heat, the frogs will stay in the water — not noticing it's gradually getting warmer — and slowly cook to death.

We could say this is happening to our civilization at large. Most of us have a vague feeling that things in general are getting worse, but from minute-to-minute, day-to-day, and even year-to-year, the worsening is not enough to get us to change our energy-consuming ways.

The Trends Research Institute, a network of interdisciplinary experts who forecast developing trends, echoes Darley’s prediction for "re-localization." One of the hottest trends they see is a "rapidly growing desire of more people to be self-empowered, non-reliant, and off the grid," in the broadest possible sense, as in "off the grid" of mainstream society. Such as, for example, ecovillages, sustainable intentional communities, and organized neighborhoods.

"It's time to return to the community," says Pat Murphy, executive director of The Community Solution, "to clean up the mess and get back on the right path." Murphy ended his organization’s second annual conference on "Peak Oil and the Community Solution" by noting that the survivors of this crisis will be those who seek out a "low-energy, caring, community way of living."

Humanity faces its biggest challenge since at least World Wars I and II, or perhaps even since the great plagues of the Middle Ages, or perhaps ever. No matter how prepared an intentional community may be, it will be adversely impacted in some way.

Is Intentional Community Enough?

Experts suggest numerous scenarios for the coming energy decline. These range from a "magical elixir" scenario — a totally unexpected technological fix, to a "power-down soft landing" scenario of everyone cooperating to reduce energy use by perhaps 90 percent or more, to a "Mad Max" scenario of anarchy and insurrection. Some even whisper the possibility of human extinction, since by most
measures, we have overshot our resource base, a situation that ecologists believe is often a cause of extinction. But the point is, any of these scenarios will present significant challenges for intentional communities.

In the "soft landing" scenario, there will still be massive structural changes in society, with winners and losers. In this and other scenarios, being in debt may be the undoing of many. Let's say a community is deeply in debt, for example, and is still paying off its property purchase or one or more construction loans. Let's say the community loses its financial resource base — if many members lose their jobs, for example, or if a weak economy reduces the market for the goods and services the community produces — the group could default on its loan payments and may have its property seized by the bank or other creditors. Common advice among Peak Oil experts is to get out of debt! (Although a vocal minority say you should take on as much fixed-interest debt as possible, in the hope that escalating energy prices will inflate the debt away.)

A property-value crash may worsen the debt situation for intentional communities. During the last oil crisis, the market value of prime farmland fell by 30 percent or more. If a community's property value falls below their equity in the property, they won't be able to save themselves from defaulting on loans by selling off their land, which is typically the last resort of farmers in debt. (Again, a vocal minority claims that as energy prices escalate, fertile farmland will also increase in value.)

All the shortages and systems failures that can affect mainstream culture can affect intentional communities as well. Clearly just "living in community" will not confer any kind of immunity from this gradual but drastic change. A community in a mountain forest setting may have plenty of water and firewood, for example, but little flat, arable land for growing food. A community on the prairie may have plenty of fertile, arable land, but little firewood. A community in the Great Plains may have plenty of sunshine for passive solar heating and off-grid power from solar-panels, but not enough firewood or water for growing food. A rural community may have enough space to grow food but little help from local emergency food-distribution networks; an urban community or organized neighborhood may have little place to grow vegetables, but proximity to emergency food distribution networks and local government assistance. But any community may not have enough foresight, labor, tools, or funds to create alternatives to whatever their members use now for heating, lighting, cooking, refrigeration, water collection, water pumping, and disposing of graywater and human waste.

Then there's the matter of community security — a subject many find "politically incorrect" even to consider. Many communities that embrace nonviolence may find it difficult to nonviolently defend their community in the face of anarchy or insurrection in the society around them. If the local government fails or if a local law and order system falls apart, there can be various kinds of dangerous consequences. Desperate, hungry people can loot and steal and take what they want from others. Vigilante groups can form to deal with the lawlessness, or take what they want themselves. State or national government can declare martial law, rescind constitutional liberties, send in troops, and restore order or take what they want from others. Having supportive neighbors and good networking in the greater community may help. But in the worst-case, "Mad Max" scenario, it may not help much.

Embracing weaponry for self-defense may not be useful, either, as the presence of weapons and ammunition may simply make one a more
an attractive target of people who want to get their hands on the community's weapons.

Another, much more basic and subtle challenge to preparing for the coming energy decline is even being able to, as Richard Heinberg advises, "start an ecovillage" in the first place! It's really hard to start a new community in today's political, cultural, and financial environment. Land prices are exorbitant and getting more so every day. Zoning restrictions, designed to protect homeowners' property values, can severely limit a group's ability to create the community they want with the numbers of people they need. Building codes, designed to protect a county from lawsuits from approving unsafe buildings, and county and state health codes, designed to keep people safe from biological and other health hazards, can stop a community's sustainability plans faster than you can say, "That's illegal!" And the all-too-human tendency to bring habitual reactive and destructive behaviors to community settings — making it hard to get along well and resolve inevitable conflicts — can make cooperating with friends or neighbors, especially in frightening and desperate times, even more challenging than it normally is.

It is also difficult to radically change one's energy-consuming lifestyle. It may be easy to think, "I'd like to join an ecovillage some day" or "I'll stop depending so much on fossil fuels and live a more sustainable lifestyle soon," yet it's easy to become inexorably distracted from that goal by the demands of jobs, family, and other responsibilities. Tearing oneself away from the status quo may be the most difficult thing we can ever do. Once we make the break, resisting the allure of today's cheap-energy lifestyle can be a constant effort.

Yet we must. The experts agree: the future will have more in common with the 18th century than it does with the 20th. Societal upheavals will favor those who have prepared over those who come to realization late, without building community and sustainability skills.

In just a century and a half, humanity has spent down about half of its "bank account" of formerly cheap energy that has taken millions of years to accumulate. This may be our species' greatest crisis ever, and there will be a very few winners, and possibly billions of losers over the rest of our lives and longer. The winners will be either those with the power to hoard much of the remaining fossil energy, or those with the foresight, knowledge, resources, and will to live within the Earth's sustainable energy budget.

We certainly have no answers, solutions, or magic bullets for this dilemma. We both believe it's better to live cooperatively and sustainably with others, but we don't know what else is needed to truly be prepared for the inevitable energy decline. Is it better to be widely connected with one's neighbors and bioregion, or isolated and inaccessible? Is it better to grow all of one's own food and generate all of one's own energy, or to create a tight web of trade and barter relationships with one's friends and neighbors, supplying some of what they need and vice-versa? We are sure of one thing though: people who understand what is happening, and act with others of like mind to build sustainable agriculture, culture, and energy systems — in right relationship with the Earth's finite energy resources — will have at least a chance to live fulfilling lives in these challenging times.

Excerpted with permission from Communities magazine, Spring 2006, by Jon Steinman and Diana Leafe Christian. Jon Steinman is a founding member of EcoReality Co-op on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia: EcoReality.org
How to Research, Visit, Evaluate and Join the Ecovillage or Sustainable Community of Your Dreams

This stunning overview of ecovillages and intentional communities is not only terrific read, but abounds with essential, profoundly important information for anyone seeking more community and a sense of belonging in their lives.

— Joan Medlicott, author, The Ladies of Covington Send Their Love series and The Three Mrs. Parkers

Diana Leafe Christian has done it again! Her first book, Creating a Life Together, has become something of a bible for would-be community founders. Finding Community promises to be just as important. Thoughtful, thorough, and engaging, and enlivened by stories from the trenches of real community life, it’s a must-read for anyone seriously seeking community.

— Liz Walker, author, EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture, and cofounder and director, EcoVillage at Ithaca.

Ecovillages and community living are attracting increasing attention as people seek to create more of a sense of belonging in their lives, or live a more sustainable lifestyle in the good company of friends. Finding Community is a no-nonsense guide to help readers research, visit, and evaluate each potential new community in terms of their own long-term social, spiritual, financial, and legal well-being.

Case studies, anecdotes, and a “What It Costs” table cover both the US and Canada and provide a thorough overview for those who are considering community life. Useful considerations include:

- Important questions to ask (of community members and of yourself)
- Signs of a healthy (and not-so-healthy) community
- Cost of joining and staying
- Common blunders to avoid

An ideal complement to Creating a Life Together, Finding Community shows how to research thoroughly, visit enjoyably, evaluate intelligently, and join gracefully.

Open-hearted and hard-headed in equal measure – and with a delicious sense of humor...


Finding Community is like having an explorer's compass and a roll of charts under your arm as you embark upon unknown waters. All the more important to learn these essentials before you’re out at sea!

— Richard Register, author, Ecocities: Rebuilding Cities in Balance with Nature; president, Ecocity Builders; founder, International Ecocity Conference

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