

Eco-Villages

Studying in sustainable communities throughout the world

By Sarah Kessler

Eco-villages don't look like most people's idea of college classrooms.

Instead of only blackboards and books, there might be windmills, a waste management system, or an organic farm to study.

At one site students participate in a 50-year water plan so intricate it takes into account bird migration patterns and an entire zone of reforestation. In another, students are guided to a personal cave where they engage in a 40-hour process of self-introspection.

Yoga, meditation and dance are practiced regularly. Decisions are made by consensus, and daily tasks of living are carried out in community.

But although eco-villages make unconventional classrooms, Daniel Greenberg considers them to be the best ones in which to learn about sustainability.

"You talk about sustainability, you live sustainability," Greenberg says. "And students get it on a very core level. They come away with it in their bones."

Greenberg is the executive director of [Living Routes](#), an organization that facilitates study abroad in eco-villages. Since it started sending students abroad in 1999, Living Routes has collected about 800 alumni and is sending a larger number of students abroad every year.

Participants in Living Routes programs earn course credit from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst by taking classes related to sustainability. The curriculum in the Israeli eco-village Kibbutz Lotan, for instance, is comprised of four classes: Peace-building and Local Justice, Group Dynamics, Permaculture Design, and Sustainable Building.

Studying abroad in eco-villages is still a relatively new concept, but so are eco-villages themselves. The word "eco-village" only became prominent in 1991, when Robert Gilman, the president of Context Institute, a research organization that explores sustainable living, wrote an article entitled [The Eco-village Challenge](#).

Gilman defined an eco-village as 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."

Even though the word "eco-village" was undefined until Gilman's article and still

doesn't appear in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the [Global Ecovillage Network's website](#) lists 395 communities that label themselves as such.

For some communities, being an eco-village means preserving the sustainability they've always practiced while moving toward a higher quality of life. Other communities are intentionally formed to reduce the global footprint of an already high quality of life.

Either way, an eco-village's efforts in sustainability involve more than recycling and using compact fluorescent light bulbs. Self-discovery, spirituality, and community are just as important in the eco-village curriculum as environmental practices.

Dr. Daniel Christian Wahl, academic director for postgraduate courses on sustainability at Findhorn Foundation College in Scotland, described this importance in a recent paper.

"By addressing personal transformation, group dynamics, and interpersonal relationships," he wrote, "as well as non-violent communication, consensus decision making and conflict facilitation, these programs offer the vitally important 'software' of a more sustainable culture without which the 'hardware' of sustainable technologies and infrastructure design will be doomed to fail."

Danielle Connor, who studied at eco-villages in both Mexico and Brazil, agreed that the non-environmental aspects of her programs were in some ways the most valuable.

"You can build all the windmills you want, and they'll last for a million years," she says. "But if the relationships in the village don't sustain, the village will die."

Other students agreed that these non-environmental aspects impacted their lives after the program.

Connor says she uses what she learned about community outreach and consensus decision making in her work for an environmental group.

Jaime Van Leuven, who studied in the Indian eco-village Auroville, plans to start a camping circle at her university to allow students to express their emotions through song in an embracing environment.

And Brian Thompson, who studied at the Scottish eco-village Findhorn as well as Auroville, says he'll incorporate lessons about group dynamics into his curriculum when he begins teaching at a California school next year.

These are the kind of impacts Living Routes hopes to make. The organization trusts that the relatively few students it sends abroad will create a ripple-effect of change in their own environments.

Gilman is confident study abroad in eco-villages is effective at creating these ripples, no matter how few students participate.

"The numbers don't bother me," he says. "What's more important is that there be an opportunity for people to get in focus and discover things that are meaningful to them...You need a lot of people to do what their heart tells them before it's fashionable and popular in order to get to a stage where it can be fashionable and popular."

Although he calls the GEN's list of eco-villages "broad and inclusive," Gilman agrees that there has been recent growth in the number of eco-villages

worldwide. And the United Nations agency for promoting socially and environmentally sustainable communities, UN-Habitat, has included eco-villages in its database of best practices since 1998. While they might not yet be, “fashionable and popular,” eco-villages are certainly gaining prominence and legitimacy.

But some are still skeptical about using eco-villages as classrooms. Although most universities accept credit from Living Routes, Greenberg says a handful refuse. One study abroad coordinator even told Greenberg that the “e” word—he was referring to experiential learning—wasn’t used at his school.

Eco-villages have long been considered laboratories or experiments in sustainable practices, and, as with any experiment, some results are different than intended.

Van Leuven noticed this when she studied in Auroville. She thought the community was so focused on the vision of its founder, who villagers refer to as “the mother,” that other problems were overlooked. She found the gold-plated structures in the meditation center a poor use of resources and the presence of motorcycles where there used to be only bikes disheartening.

“It was good to actually see what you’ve been dreaming about,” Van Leuven says. “It seems like young people are excited about the sustainability movement and hear about places like Auroville and say, ‘why isn’t the rest of the world like that?’ If you go, you realize how difficult it is.”

Still, despite their difficulties, eco-villages are attracting serious attention from people who once looked at them as misguided hippie creations.

“Ten years ago if you were at Findhorn you wouldn’t have government representatives coming near the place...,” Thompson says.

Findhorn currently grows more than 70 percent of its own fresh food, produces more than 100 percent of the electricity it uses, has erected 45 ecological buildings, and sustainably disposes of its own waste—none of which are small achievements.

“...There’s been a total flip that now governments are bragging about places like Auroville and Findhorn,” Thompson continued. “[They’re asking] ‘how are you doing this? How can you help us become more sustainable in our greater city or greater country?’”

And as eco-villages become agents of change for the greater areas in which they are scattered, studying abroad in them may have a similar effect on international education.

Greenberg will head a task force this year to recommend sustainable solutions to NAFSA, an organization for international educators with more than 10,000 members in 150 countries.

“I honestly believe that, with what’s coming down the pipe, what we’re doing needs to become standard practice,” Greenberg says. “I mean, not necessarily going to eco-villages, but in terms of considering carbon emissions and looking at how we can make programs and programming as sustainable as possible. This needs to become something across the field, not just something ‘environmental’ programs are doing.”

This bio was accurate at the time of publication: Sarah Kessler is a sophomore Journalism major at Northwestern University and Abroad View's Closer Look editor.

What Makes an Eco-Village?

In the article "The Eco-village Challenge," Robert Gilman, president of [Context Institute](#), a nonprofit research organization that explores what is involved in creating a humane sustainable culture, defines an eco-village by five major principles:

1. An eco-village is a "human scale," which refers to a population within which it is possible to know and be known by others and to feel a personal impact on the community. Generally the population where this can be achieved is about 100 to 500 people.
2. It is a "full-featured settlement," in that day-to-day needs like shelter, employment, and recreation are met within the community.
3. It is a place in which "human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world"; eco-villages use renewable energy, compost waste, and avoid toxic substances.
4. It "supports healthy human development." Eco-villages promote growth in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of healthy life.
5. It can be "successfully continued into the indefinite future." Eco-villages must be sustainable, which means they cannot be dependent upon unsustainable practices elsewhere or exclusive of a stage of life such as childhood or old age.

—Sarah Kessler