
Organizational Challenges for RINGING CEDARS Ecovillages

Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones

© By **Dmitriy Olhovoy**

Foreword

The process of creating ecovillages on Russian territory distinguishes itself from similar undertakings in the West by way of specific features. These features cause both unexpected benefits as well as specific problems which might seem very curious to Westerners.

One important difference is the fact that most of the Russian ecovillage movement is and has been inspired by the Ringing Cedars of Russia (RCoR) book-series. It specifically draws key concepts, images and ideas from the information given in these books. Accordingly, certain issues which are focused upon in the books might receive more attention from ecovillage organizers, whereas other questions not covered in the books might not even be taken under consideration.

In Russia, less of those kinds of communities exist which are referred to as ecovillages in the West, while there are many more villages which might be better described as a collection of neighborhoods of Kin's Domains. For example, in their charters, frequently it might not even be stated that such land should be cultivated by way of organic agricultural methods rather than commercial approaches. This is understandable because among Russian ecovillagers, the tacit assumption prevails that a person would never do any harm to his own Kin's land; it is his duty and responsibility to take good care of it.

The RCoR books in many respects may be defined as "spiritual literature". They present many interesting concepts such as the power of thought, the relationship between Man and Divine Mind, the structure of our material world as related to the human mind, questions of happiness and misfortune, love, interpersonal and sexual relationships, conscious conception, child-birth, education, etc. But regarding community life, Vladimir Megre's explanation that in the books the idea of Kin's Domain is revealed in art form appears to be only partially true since from those same books one might actually gather that ideally, a person's happiness is more easily found in seclusion and the lap of untouched nature, not so much in community life with other people.

This issue affects life in those ecovillages which are created on the basis of the ideas brought forth in the RCoR books. For instance, the very fact of another person's Kin's Domain practically next door inevitably affects the possibility for undisturbed dialogue of Man and Nature and enters a new, unknown factor, namely communication with a neighbor. This is a relationship which is, in fact, hardly addressed in the books other than in story form, which is what Megre calls 'revealed in art form'. As a result, psycho-

logical difficulties arise quite commonly when neighboring activities in an ecovillage setting interfere with another villager's attempts at quietly and privately communing with his land and with nature. These contradictory needs seem to occur frequently, such as wanting to experience a 'free life in nature' while suffering what they might experience as 'social enslavement', namely the many meetings and social needs of a well-managed ecovillage.

Therefore, the difficulties which arise in Russian ecovillages arise much more so from interpersonal dilemmas between villagers, namely the owners of certain Kin's Domains, and their disagreements about co-management of the neighborhood collective of family-domains.

In addition, the transpersonal, inspiring nature of the RCoR book-series can increase idealistic thinking in terms of people's relationships to their own domains and toward their ecovillage. As much as the visions of the future created by Anastasia are unusual and magical, attempts at bringing them into reality are proportionately more complicated. Any concrete actions undertaken, for instance, for decisions on land development, communication with the local people, development of infrastructures, etc. seem too basic and mundane for such idealistic people, as though these necessary activities might destroy the grace and purity of their vision. As a result, in the Russian Ringing Cedars movement, situations occur quite frequently where people hesitate to take any practical actions: they prefer to make no decision at all, so as to maintain faith in their 'bright ideas', rather than to achieve something concrete in reality, namely to ground their vision in reality. This, of course, can rather complicate the process of joint decision-making and management of an ecovillage or intentional community.

The great number of people who have read V. Megre's books and support the ideas in thoughts and words, including the idea of the creation of ecovillages, would nevertheless intensely resist any real attempts to bring the ideas into reality, claiming that such practical embodiments 'distort the idea' or 'substitute the true imagery'. Any concrete results are compared to the ideals described in the 'green books'. Certainly, few ecovillages can stand up to such ideal descriptions and comparisons. Accordingly, situations occur all too frequently when people who worked hard to create such concrete results are labeled as 'traitors of the idea'. Unfortunately, this results in the fact that the most successful ecovillages in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (Kovcheg, Schastlivoe, SvetoRusje) have to endure an undue amount of aggressive attacks, such as being ridiculed or minimized in the mass-media, but most of all from their fellow members of the RCoR movement, via those members of the most idealistic persuasion.

These are, in short, some of the more specific conditions under which the creators of Kin's Domains and RCoR ecovillages may need to function in Russia. Aspects of these issues might come to bear upon developments in the West as well, as people deal with their romantic visions and the very down-to-earth demands of co-creating new lives together in intentional communities.

"It is very easy to create eco-villages, but very difficult to keep them going."

Seasoned Ecovillager

There is nothing wrong with falling head over heels in love without any need to be logical about it. Do fall in love as many times as you wish. But if you intend to enter long-term relationships, it is helpful and necessary to think a little bit more about it.

(Paraphrased from N. D. Walsh, "Conversations with God")

Q: "And what do you think about the kind of people who want to live in this way?"

A: "I think there is an initial euphoria: they just realized the first step of their dream - namely obtaining their land, and from then on, they see everything through rose-colored glasses. They go on and on about love and about their magical sensations when they first connected with the land and with nature, but if they do not comprehend certain essential common concerns and challenges, in a few years at best, they too will encounter the widespread problems typically encountered in ecovillages."

Q: "But really, don't you believe that people can overcome all these obstacles with love?"

A: "Everything is possible, but, you see, here we observe what has occurred many times already and it is repeated again and again in different ecovillages. At first, happiness, joy and love prevail among the people. But they do not seem to know where these feelings really came from, and they cannot help themselves when these feelings suddenly and unexpectedly seem to leave them. It simply happens. Just as other problems suddenly happen later as well. Therefore, it would seem desirable to propose reasonable rules and recommendations in order to create realistic circumstances which can save this love, to prevent conflicts. That way, people could follow these guidelines even when it is hard to love...after people find out that their neighbors are not as perfect as they initially seemed to be, before they started to live next to each other."

Q: "So you believe there are no exceptions to this rule, where people, even at the most difficult moments for the ecovillage, are able to preserve constancy and loyalty to their ideals?"

A: "There can be exceptions, of course. But more importantly, the main concern should not be exceptions, but a dependable methodology for general use for all people. There is a methodology which can be recommended for application in the majority of Russian ecovillages. It is a methodology where many possible stumbling blocks are understood, so that people can make informed choices on how to proceed." (From a conversation with Dmitriy Vatolin, Ecovillage Kovcheg, <http://eco-kovcheg.ru>).

Introduction

This series of articles developed as a result of correspondences and personal communications with Dmitriy Vatolin from the well-known and successful Ecovillage Kovcheg. In sharing observations from our own ecovillage life and from other villages known to us, though in different regions of our country, we found quite a few common experiences during the creating of the ecological settlements which were developed in accordance with Anastasia's ideas. We observed these patterns frequently and clearly enough that even when several thousand kilometers apart from each other, ecovillages exist with very similar histories and difficulties. The same kind of organizational steps lead to very similar consequences. This seems to be true both, for the successes with the development of an ecovillage as well as the major difficulties. That is why the idea emerged to write about it all - both, for those who are only beginning to create their ecovillage and want to avoid unnecessary problems, and for those who already experienced these

or other difficult moments and are pondering what to do to correct them.

I cannot claim that my view of the situation is sufficiently objective, impartial or true. However, when one sees and hears the same reports from completely different ecovillages, with the problems seemingly coming out of nowhere, one is tempted to make some generalizations and draw certain conclusions. I would therefore like to share some of these conclusions and examples from ecovillage life upon which they are based.

Almost all the examples (unless it is specifically stated) are taken from ecovillages located in the Kurgan's, Chelyabinsk's, Sverdlovsk's, Permian and Kirov's regions, the Republic of Udmurtia and Central Russia, where I either happened to visit personally or have met some of the villagers.

Part I: The Distinction of *TOWNSMEN* vs. *SETTLERS*

Surely everyone or almost everyone who organizes or intends to live in an ecovillage consisting of Kin's Domains has read the books of the Ringing Cedars of Russia (RCoR) series. And, as a rule, when future participants of the project come to join a local urban RCoR club or meet with a founding group, familiarity with the books frequently (although not always) becomes sufficient meeting-ground for a mutual understanding and the theme for the conversation with the newcomer. However, as the first steps regarding the concrete development of the ecological settlement are discussed (land acquisition, discussion of legal implementation questions and methods of land development, land surveying, beginning of construction work, etc.,) frequently and unexpectedly, the most unpredictable disagreements begin between heretofore kindly members of the group.

As an example in point, at the outset, the groups are oftentimes split into those who want to begin work directly with the land and those who do not - sometimes for sufficiently deep philosophical reasons. For example, there is a man here in Kurgan who participated in the RCoR reader's club activities from its inception and who carefully studied - not just read, but truly studied - the Megre books, so that he could easily cite from them by memory even down to the page number. However, this individual suddenly opposed the idea to obtain land and begin to develop it. His reasoning was that nothing much could evolve from the land unless detailed agreements for the ecovillage project were developed first, and also not until higher states of consciousness were developed via specific, personal psychological and spiritual work. Otherwise, he be-



lieved that firstly, people would be poorly bonded and secondly, they would bring all their urban difficulties right into the ecovillage.

Other members of the group, however, did not support him, pointing out the reasonable concern that to purify one's thoughts and effectively do any inner work on oneself in a city or urban environment was very difficult. "The land itself will bring out the true nature and value of people and things more effectively than any of our theoretical discussions," they said. As far as the vision of the ecovillage was concerned, the majority agreed that it would first be necessary to see and feel the land. Only then could plans be made about what and where to build. As a result, the man refused to participate in the project and began to make arrangements to start a new group.

During the following six years, the land did indeed clearly bring out the true nature of everyone involved. Unfortunately, when this became apparent, it was too difficult to change anything, since too many of those individuals who apparently were unprepared to develop their land had already completed the steps for legal ownership of the parcels. However, to be fair it should be noted that the dissenting gentleman also did not move far ahead: he did not succeed with assembling a new group.

Thus both the strengths and weaknesses of the two positions became apparent. It is true, when people begin to live on their own land, they can indeed enjoy the time and mastery to comprehend and correct what needs healing in their lives – much more than in the city. But it is also true that more people than not are really unprepared to move and live upon their own land. Far too many people obtain their ecovillage land *de bene esse* (ed.: just in case), often clearly aware that they will not move there. Do they think that the mere fact of owning a hectare of land in and of itself will miraculously maintain for them a space of love, or are they hoping that fellow members or finding their soul-mate will create such a miracle for them? If all these issues are not clarified beforehand, it may become apparent too late that people who obtain their land under such conditions are anything but like-minded.

So, we might then define the most basic truth when it comes to understanding Kin's Domains and ecovillages: ***Different people have very different ideas about the role a Kin's Domain will play in their life.***

1. Some people, while they support the concept of Kin's Domains in principle, nevertheless personally prefer to remain in the city and consider it best for themselves to apply the ideas in a positive way right where they are.

2. Others also believe it is better for them to live in the city and become 'self-realized in a societal context', but they also consider it essential to have a Kin's hectare of land somewhere for the future or for the 'benefit of

their soul'.

3. The third group obtains land in order to gradually prepare a Kin's Domain for their descendants, namely their children and grandchildren. "I will plant a forest and a garden here, and in 40-50 years, when everything has matured, my children and grandchildren will be able to move here, because the physical space which ensures sustainable life, and a space of love which protects its inhabitants, will already have been created."

4. The fourth type of plan entails more active land development, with people intending to come to the land for the summer and for weekends, i.e., to use their Kin's Domain as a 'dacha'. And in the future, when a favorable opportunity occurs, they may even move in permanently.

5. The fifth type of person obtains the land in order to move onto it and to start living there immediately.

I will not even discuss cases where people obtain land out of purely commercial considerations, namely in order to invest money and to resell it or use it for other kinds of investments.

But all these differences become profoundly important as soon as concrete actions are taken for the development of the ecovillage.

Why does this happen?

All five positions listed above are in complete agreement with Anastasia's ideas as presented in the RCoR books and I would even say that in the books themselves, the position of the summer resident and those who plan, and plant, for descendants, is given even more attention than the permanent inhabitants of an ecovillage. Nevertheless, in the practical reality of those ecovillages that I know, as soon as at least several families, maybe two to four, move to the land to live there full time, a conflict between permanent eco-settlers and the so-called townsmen arises almost unavoidably for a variety of reasons.

Of all considerations, the main causes for conflict are these: upon moving onto the domain, the amount of everyday needs which must be fulfilled right there and then, the connection of man with the land and environment, and the need for friendly social interactions increase in direct order.

This is the issue which is so very important to understand: there is a profound difference between intermittent visiting of one's land versus living upon it full time, and even more so if one gave up one's town apartment, and has nowhere else to go. Since for the summer residents, the ecovillage and its concerns are considered as a hobby, they are really not connected to any vitally important issues. Their home, family and work – all these remain in the city. For a settler, however, namely those who are already truly settled there, the life of the ecovillage means everything in their life. For a summer resident, for example, such questions as electrical installations for the settlement, the clearing of the roads in the wintertime, firewood harvesting, the construction of a community bathhouse, school arrangements - all these questions are non-urgent, because townsmen buy their food, take their baths and do their laundry and other such necessities in the city, with their children attending a regular school.

So, for instance, when settlers request the allotment of a substantial amount of the ecovillage budget for the purchase of a tractor, townsmen frequently feel rather resentful about such a proposition because it seems to them to be a waste of money. They might feel the funds would be better spent so as to organize several community holidays, or to sponsor singles meetings, or to pay some legal documentation fees. But for people permanently living in the settlement, the question about electricity and lighting might be a question of saving their eyesight; the question about a tractor purchase is a question



of transporting heavy loads across the settlement and of connecting with the external world in the snow of winter; a question about the bathhouse is a question of elementary hygiene and the possibility to provide for their everyday life. And a question about the village school is a question about the viability of the very idea of their ecovillage and its culture. To live without such provisions is often much more difficult than to live, for instance, without legal surveying documents.

All the examples listed above are especially true for the early stages - the stages of the pioneering settlers. It is only in an ideal situation, when the ecovillage is already all covered with blossoming gardens, that one can wait patiently until one's neighbors retire and come to live on their land, because no-one needs to suffer. And if one lives like Anastasia, namely in the forest without any material and social goods (the very things to which we have all become so accustomed), then one would not need to wait at all. However, under those early conditions when the pioneers take on enormous burdens - to establish everyday life, to find ways of earning a living, to create a new educational system for their children, indeed, to create an entire new culture and ways of living and interacting, including defending their ideals (oftentimes in quite aggressive environments via the inhabitants of neighboring villages and local authorities) - under these conditions each person who moves into the ecovillage permanently has to become like a warrior fighting for the survival of the entire village. Under these circumstances, when an important decision must be made or an official position must be defined, the absence of people and their lack of information about the current situation can cause difficulties. For instance, just trying to reach them promptly to reconcile important questions can cause a great deal of inconveniences and difficulties to settlers. Therefore, the settlers sooner or later begin to look at the townsmen with increasing resentments: "Either be with us now or, if you are not ready for this life, give over your land to those who *are* ready."

For the townspeople, especially those with the most pure, sincere and clear intentions, it may be very difficult to understand this attitude: it seems to them completely groundless, unnecessarily severe or selfish. They cannot understand why they should be required to move to the village land when they have done everything they can to support the common vision, even while they might have to deal with family, work and financial problems. In addition, they may not have enough funds to begin construction work.

Moreover, some townspeople, and in a certain sense this is also quite reasonable, are principally against the immediate development of land, since they believe that such rashness will lead unavoidably to a distortion of Anastasia's idea and will ultimately render it lifeless. "No one forced you to break your neck to go to live out in nature," said one of our organizers to me, "that was your own choice. You had to take on the entire responsibility of this step. Now you face all the consequences of your hasty and thoughtless decision." And we wonder in turn: "But how does that make sense? Yes, no one forced us, but we indeed thought that we all had the same purpose - to create an ecovillage. But how is it possible to create an ecovillage without actually settling there in physical form? We did think that you were in agreement with us and intended to live here too..."

A similar kind of misunderstanding which occurs quite frequently is the obvious fact that townsmen and settlers do not seem to have a general vision in common, stated in suitable form for the practical realization of it.

For instance, while referring to the same books, under the concept of Kin's Domains Idea, people obtain absolutely different thoughts and images from those words and accordingly, set priorities in different ways. Speaking about Kin's Domains and about an ecovillage, people understand them in entirely different ways and see the real embodiment of their vision very differently. For some people, an ecovillage is a whole way of life, others do not think about an ecovillage at all, thinking about their Kin's hectare only, namely "a place to which one can always return".

Some people have a tendency to take on common causes without having agreed upon their concrete demands. And as a consequence, each of them might be 'pulling the cart sideways' as a result. There is indeed much work which may need to be done in the cities - such as body purification and healing, raising people's levels of conscious awareness, working with legal authorities, the creation of cultural events or performances of songs conveying bright images. However, all these activities can hardly be considered part of the life and development of a certain ecovillage. Therefore, when a city person who carries out such activities obtains land in an ecovillage, it is good to clearly understand that he obtains it for another purpose than those settlers, who intend to live permanently in their domain. Even if we acknowledge that this person is also creating a Kin's Domain, it is necessary to keep in mind that his very understanding of the concept of Kin's Domain greatly differs from the understanding of the settlers. Also, the fact of having read and accepted the RCoR books does not necessarily assure that the people have a common purpose.

Vladimir Megre's books are profound and multi-faceted, covering the most diverse aspects of individual life, society and ultimately, the entire universe. And perhaps, trying to express their essential message in words might be futile, as they are necessarily symbolic and sometimes allegorical. They do not include any concrete system of views and recommendations as much as they try to awaken in the reader their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. Like any genuine

teacher, Anastasia does not give us ready-made truths, she tries to teach us to find our own truths (which also explains the many seeming discrepancy of her statements). Therefore the ideas that are born in the souls of different people from the touch of the 'green books' are extremely specific. And the depth of understanding obtained from the books (or better, the depth of entering deeply into oneself, which is provoked by the books) can change with every repeat reading. And so, to say that people who are inspired by the 'green books' all hold one common vision would be like saying that everyone who has experienced elevated feelings from an experience with nature shares the same ideas. A commonality exists, of course, but this commonality is at such a general level, that for such practical tasks as creating an ecological settlement, this abstract commonality appears to be insufficient. Rather, what must be achieved is another commonality, namely that of very concrete, 'earthly' understandings and agreements which are directly concerned with the organization and life of the ecovillage.

Please explore specific reasons which cause these conflicts among permanent settlers and townsmen in continuation of Part I, SOL Issue #5

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