
Organizational Challenges for RINGING CEDARS Ecovillages

Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones

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Continuation: Part III of an Ongoing Series Visions for an Ecovillage

We are continuing this series of articles by Dmitriy Olhovoy, dedicated to the organization of Ringing Cedars ecovillages. In Part I and II he explored the primary differences in the way people conceptualize the idea of an ecovillage and a Kin's domain. These conceptual differences can lead to serious problems and complexities in the process of development. This is especially true for the differences in the outlooks on life of the full time Settlers versus the occasionally/seasonally visiting Townsmen. In this section, Dmitriy writes about the vision for an ecovillage and how that can affect the settler's activities.

(1) A permanent settlement or a seasonal-type (dacha-like) village?

To be honest, I know very few ecovillages of the type where people actually clearly visualize what they are creating and how the community they are co-creating should look. In other words, such things as the vision for an ecovillage, despite the fact that this term is widely-known, is actually specific only to a very small number of proactive groups. But there are too many groups where the actual activities in the settlement run counter to the way it has been defined on paper.

As they say in the ecovillage Kovcheg: ***"There are people, who come to us in order to build their Kin's domain, and there are people who come to create an ecovillage, and these are different things. To take a hectare of land and to develop it is not a difficult task, really. Creating a harmonious community from those separate hectares is a much more complicated task."***

Many organizers of eco-settlements consider those to be simply a collection of Kin's domains; they believe that any social life, intercommunication and shared/common amenities "will somehow appear as the need occurs". Therefore in some ecovillages (and I know more than one of those) they don't even allocate a space for common purposes - for a community house, for a school, for any common use workshops or community parks, gardens and the like. In one Perm ecovillage, a question about common use of land was answered as follows: "Yes, when the need arises, we will allocate a plot from the remaining land...."

In the Ringing Cedars of Russia book series, a comparison is fairly often made between ecovillages of Kin's domains and seasonal-type (dacha-like) villages, and in Book 5, in the chapter named "Forerunners of the New Civilization", Vladimir Megre specifically writes: "The vast majority of dacha cooperatives in Russia correspond to ecovillage principles." And here he also writes about the fact that Russian dacha cooperatives, as a rule, do not have any management structure and any social amenities for common use. It is difficult to acknowledge this, but it is quite possible that these very lines from the book are now contributing to the fact that ecovillages, planned out and organized in accordance with the principles of dacha-like settlements (i.e. without any management) run into serious problems when participants attempt to arrange full-time living there.

***"An ecovillage
consists of Kin's
domains plus
a community"***
Fyodor Lazutin
(Ecovillage "Kovcheg".)

A dacha-like settlement is, first and foremost, a place for seasonal living. Secondly, it is not even designed as much for regular living, as for leisure time, for people who have their home, work, communication media and school for their children outside the dacha-like settlement, i.e., in the city. Thirdly, a dacha-like settlement does not inherently require the need for any cooperation of its inhabitants; it does not suggest the co-creation by the

dachniks of any larger joint actions (for instance the organization of a school, groups of interests, sport games, fairs, holidays, festivals or singles-gatherings, to name a few.) As a fourth point, a dacha-like settlement usually does not have a common culture which would distinguish it from others and which might make it necessary to defend its beliefs and principles before the public which might have other values. Accordingly, it does not have any protection mechanisms for its internal culture. And the fifth point (connected with the previous), dachniks always have an emergency exit: the dacha is not their only house, and if any problems occur with the dacha, then a dachnik can just leave it and return to the city.

All these issues essentially distinguish dacha-like villages from a settlement where people live all year round - where they work, give birth to their children, educate them, etc.. Therefore the layout of the common land and the life arrangements in an ecovillage must be very different. Permanent ecovillages cannot just consist of a collection of plots - something more is required. As defined by Fyodor Lazutin, one of the founders of the ecovillage Kovcheg, ***"an ecovillage consists of Kin's domains plus a community"***. Moreover, the word "community" here must represent various dynamics: the relationships between people; their common actions and interests, and also the territory, the property intended for the realization of these common interests. Therefore, if you plan to create an ecovillage, it is essential to pay attention not only to its Kin's domains but also to where and how interactions between their villagers will occur.

Although, of course, all of it does depend upon what results one wants to produce. For instance, in the Sverdlovsk region, in a beautiful, secluded, mountainous

place, a developing ecovillage has a very interesting layout plan. It is located along a river bank, and, according to the ecovillage project, each plot must have access to the beach. This means that each section adjoins the river at 100 meters and stretches up to the forest for 200, 300, 400 or more meters, depending on the distance from the river to the forest in any particular place. As a result, the sections in the settlement range from 2 to 3 and 8 to 9 hectares in size, and the settlement itself is stretched along the bank for approximately 4-5 kilometers with the only road running along the river's edge. Each new participant is allotted the next section in this "chain" of plots, so that the settlement grows only in length, and its center, accordingly, is also moved with each new allocated section.

It would be extremely interesting to look at the life of this ecovillage once it is populated, although it seems to be very difficult for it to get developed, considering that nobody lives there full time yet. With such enormous sizes of sections and such great distances in the settlement it will be rather complicated for the neighbors to visit each other or to have gatherings, never mind arranging for roads or power supply lines. It is quite possible that people there would live more isolated lives than those with a common, checkered village layout. Also, they will need to use vehicles and cell phones more extensively inside such a settlement. When people move so as to live in rural areas spontaneously, these pioneers will usually have their nearest neighbors at 2, 3 and even 4 kilometers. And considering the fact that with this ecovillage the nearest populated village is located 12 to 14 kilometers away, it is obvious that only strong, highly-spirited and self-sufficient people can survive under such conditions. And if the purpose of the organizers of the ecovillage was to build a community with such types of people, then everything might be fine. Weak souls, not capable of tolerating isolation and severe conditions (including great distances from civilization and from their neighbors), would be eliminated automatically.

However, an interesting point is the fact that the development program of this ecovillage includes such plans as "organization of a tourist center, building of a swimming pool, asphaltting of the access road (14 km)" and such, which means that the plans of the organizers were in no way considering these isolated lives, but, to the contrary, suggested intensive public activities.

I am bringing up this development specifically as an example of a case when the theoretical paper design of the ecovillage (suggesting an active social life) is in total opposition to its ultimate reality (by means of the layout of the territory and special features of its locale (which is more likely to produce lives of solitude). Evidence of that reality can be the fact that this ecovillage, which was begun even earlier than many others, still has no permanent inhabitants. And I have to say that this example is not the only one.

(2) Lifestyle in the future settlement: nature versus technology.

If one wants to create an ecovillage, it would be very helpful to work out an idea - with as much detail as possible - of what end results are expected. Should it be a cottage settlement of the Ringing Cedars type, with state power supply, gas, water and sewer systems at a distance of no more than 6-10 km from their work places (such as the ecovillage "Raiskoe" in Tyumen)? Or, to the contrary, should one move away as far as possible from civilization so as to live like Anastasia or like the Indians? (They say that such settlements exist somewhere in Eastern Siberia, where organizers did not even begin to legalize the land, but simply came and settled in the forest.) Or might one select some intermediate options? And if, while living in the city, one does not have an idea about what living options are possible in the countryside, for instance what kind of

dwellings to build, how to heat them, how to meet basic needs (food, water, toilets, bathing/washing), what kind of tools to use, how to organize a work-day etc., then it would seem advisable to familiarize oneself with a rural lifestyle first, by experiencing remote farmsteads or other ecovillages before trying to create a vision of an entire ecovillage.

There are purist groups or individuals in some ecovillages that dream about the deepest kind of relationship with nature in their domain: to live in a wigwam or an adobe hut, to walk barefoot or even naked, to exist on foraged wild plants and the like. However, if one really has such intentions, one should prepare for their realization very carefully - both physically and socially. I know two incidents (from the Ural ecovillages), where one person of such an extremist group first settled in an empty field and tried to arrange exactly this kind of life. But the consequences proved to be very unpleasant for the entire ecovillage. First of all, since this person was visually exposed to the local, rural inhabitants, after these neighborhood villagers observed his behavior, (the ecovillage is located somewhat close to the local village, practically across the road) they concluded that a group of mad people had settled on their former meadows. And so they decided that they could not have any serious relationships with such people and that therefore, it should be alright to freely cut grass for hay from these ecovillage plots and to just ignore their owners. The entire group realized that this situation was due to "Slavik" (the name has been changed) disgracing them before the locals ("we have these relationship difficulties because of him") and they began to treat their former group-member accordingly. As a result, this person, who had only the purest intentions and was most of all devoted to the idea of Kin's domains, ended up under the crossfire and other participants of the group somehow restrained their excitement about developing their plots, fearing perhaps that should they move onto the land, locals might treat them in a likewise disrespectful manner.

In another settlement, there was a very similar incident. When the first family moved to their hectare and began to live there in harmony with nature, they declared that "when these, our clothes, get worn out, we will walk around in imperishable clothes" (namely in "Adam and Eve suits.") Other group-members somewhat turned away from them and, being questioned by strangers about the life-style of these "pioneers", answered with an embarrassed smile: "Well, yes, they are somewhat eccentric. But this is purely their personal choice. We will live in a different way". Well, everybody has the right to make their own choices, but it is noticeable that other members of the group are ashamed of the fact that the reputation of their ecovillage is negatively affected by such eccentric people.



At the same time, I heard that in the southern part of the country, near Gelendzhik and in the Crimea, similar "children of nature" settle in tents and even in caves in entire communes. They do not formally allot any hectares for themselves, but simply live in the mountains and on the coast, feeding themselves with wild grasses and fruit from the local gardens and handouts from the local food markets. They bathe in the sea, and sometimes they play different performances for the tourists. And there, against the backdrop of the generally more exotic palette of these places, they look completely harmonious and raise sympathy and interest with visitors. I was even told stories that these "children of nature" healed people from diseases.

So the issue is this: when people try to settle together which have persuasions quite different from each other regarding the closeness to nature and the abandonment of modern civilization, that usually does not work at all. Some people even begin to feel ashamed and uncomfortable in a collective where such people live, and those individuals in turn feel that their group-mates "do not understand them in their highest aspirations."

Therefore it is very important that all members of a group should be interested in approximately the same level of the "closeness to civilization". If you wish to walk in "imperishable clothes" and to feed by sunbathing (which is really great!), then try to gather a group where people think in the same way. And do choose a suitable place - either most remote from civilization (let's say, in the Ural mountains or Siberia), or a place that is already exotic, where such eccentricities are not much of a novelty (e.g. the Black Sea coast). But if the majority of your group thinks in moderate, "civilized" terms, if radical types of people should want to join, you should try to explain to them that it would be better to find another group because they might have to deal with lack of support at critical moments.

The aforementioned also relates to the case of increased desires for creature comforts: if one part of the group dreams about state water and gas supply, asphalt roads and the like, and another part does not want to accept this, then it is very advisable to sort out these questions before buying land together. In this case, sometimes it may even go to extremes, when organizers, in creating an inviting image for their ecovillage, try to drag all possible goods of technical progress - from satellite dishes to the wonders of eco-housing with thermo-pane domes, from washing machines to generators working on torsion fields - over from the city to the fields. I see something similar in the image which Vitalik Kiyatkin tries to create for his ecovillage Bolshaya Medveditsa (the Great Bear). According to his project, the ecovillage will have grocery-shops, a

roadside cafe, a school, a medical center, and even a paid watchman - maybe even a fire station and a police station. In the end, attempts to implement such projects lead to the need for high admission fees for newcomers, increasing very quickly, and in the course of time new people simply cease to join the group. It seems that something like that happened to the Chelyabinsk group of Mr. Vostrikov, promising to create a "New America" in his ecovillage with asphalt roads and heliports on the roofs of the houses. He offered a hectare of land (still in 2004) for as much as \$17,000 US. (*Editor's note: For comparison, the average price for a hectare of rural land in Russia varies from \$300 to \$3000 US).

With these examples it is becoming clear that these questions cannot be left unresolved. They are important enough that lack of clarity about them may cause clashes and conflict situations in the future life of the ecovillage.

All these issues seem rather common, but unfortunately, I know about many groups where people begin to raise the question about how they will live only after land plots have been distributed and legally registered into private ownership. And later on, even if a person who disagrees with the ideological values prevailing in the ecovillage, leaves it, he frequently reserves the right for the land for himself - just in case. And the ecovillage becomes disunited and overloaded with "dead" plots even before they started settling.

What is most important to emphasize to some people who want to live in community is that an ecovillage is not the same thing as a simple collection of individual plots. The idea of wanting to develop a particular domain with a very different set of values from your neighbor's and the rest of the community is futile. Interactions and mutual influences exist at all times, and, if they remain unconscious and not addressed, could in time completely boycott all plans - or help tremendously, if addressed wisely. (Ed.: Understanding Systems Theory, as we discussed in last issue's article *The Mouse and the Earthquake*, as applied to organizational, community, family and any other systems, goes a long way in helping to explain and resolve such frustrations and confusions.)

Therefore, people gathering as a communal group must know each other's visions for the land and for their future lifestyle sufficiently well. And it is very important to consider not only future lifestyle in the ecovillage, but also social life: how will they intercommunicate, what will they do together, what common projects might they implement, what are their attitudes about life in general and specifically regarding family problems (for instance with spousal disagreements, divorces, single life, basic philosophies about child rearing and education).

And every issue - the layout of the territory, organization and finances, common rules in the ecovillage - must be considered and resolved in such a way that they will contribute, not take away from the main vision. To give a very specific example, if there is a decision to build some community buildings, it would seem to be necessary for someone to permanently live in them or near them to be able to look after them. Also, such buildings should be located in convenient places.

(3) Magical and supernatural abilities

Many Kin's domains creators try not to go too far ahead with the development of the envisioning of their future life for the reason that "in reality, everything will prove to not be in the manner we planned" or "because nevertheless, supernatural abilities will appear soon, like telepathy, ability to tolerate cold temperatures and so forth, and so our entire lifestyle will change dramatically."

According to my observations, there is some truth, as well as some falsehood in it. The truth is in the fact that life in an ecovillage oftentimes proves to be different from



the one planned, and many plans come undone on their own as they meet up with the living reality. However, it is also true that those who somehow prepared themselves ahead of time and obtained at least some knowledge and practical experience (for example, life in rural areas), adapt to the new conditions much more easily.

With regard to supernatural abilities I can say the following. My own experience and the experiences of other people from our ecovillage proves that unusual things really do begin to occur, but again, not entirely in the way that city people assume. During the first two years of the existence of our ecovillage (2003-2004), when the enthusiasm inspired by the Ringing Cedars books was high and sensations from the contact with nature, hitherto unknown, were fresh and unusual, a great number of remarkable experiences occurred. For instance, people would mentally call each other standing at opposite ends of a 50-hectare field (Ed.: 125 acres) and come together; or, our ecovillage girls would come to the highway and accurately foresee the color and model of the car which would pick them up and bring them to the city. So many amazing visions, unusual sensations and brilliant ideas occurred.

For those of us who remained on the land for their first winter, that winter became absolutely magical and unforgettable. I remember my own sensations then, in January 2006: fears vanished completely, I felt like I was all-mighty and was able to create everything from nothing. I began to have such bright, clear, significant and "memorable" dreams, that reading books began to seem a boring and pointless pastime. Cheerfulness, ardor, indefatigable energy and an inexhaustible sense of humor became my inseparable companions over a period of several months, and at that time everyone told me that something unusual was happening to me.

However, all these things occurred only until we began to be seriously preoccupied with our everyday life and developments of our Kin's domains. That is, as long as people lived in the tents, as long as I had neither floor, nor windows, nor furniture in the house - magic accompanied us almost everywhere. But now, when we have more or less completed our comfortable houses, have gas or electrical power tools at our service and bath-houses in the settlement, and even electricity in some houses, things have changed. Now that I can roam via three servers for a cellular network right in my house, and I can sit at my laptop computer, connected to a storage battery which is charged by my solar panels, while my neighbors buy chopped firewood for money, and get water from a drilled well with the use of an electric pump, when we no longer walk by foot into Yurgamysh (nearest town), but prefer to call for a taxi - now almost all magic has disappeared from our life in a mysterious manner. So, many settlers here are again concerned about "deeper spiritual issues" such as how to make money???

Understandably, if you have a cell phone at hand, you won't need to learn to send mental messages. Likewise, when one has the use of a car (and very many of those who begin to develop their hectare and have to come back and forth from the city, buy a car in the first or in the second year), that is hardly conducive for practicing and developing the ability for teleportation. And for some reason, nobody seriously considers living in a tent. After all, our purpose is to build a beautiful and rich Kin's domain, isn't it? ***The paradox is that when supernatural abilities appear, any specific arrangement of a Kin's domain becomes more and more meaningless***, and it is very difficult for our minds to accept this fact. And vice versa, when a comfortable and equipped domain is completed, supernatural abilities become somewhat pointless - and so they disappear. Although I do not exclude the possibility that at any further stage of the ecovillage development,

they might well return.

However, to be more correct, the dilemma does not lie with the comfortably equipped life in and of itself; not at all. It might be more correct to express it this way: ***Supernatural abilities seem to develop more easily when there is no concern about household demands, when thoughts are free from the concerns of household arrangements. But a fact of life is that with an increase in property and wealth of the landowners, their inner world becomes much more preoccupied with everyday life and household arrangements compared to the stage of "life in a tent." The more you possess, the more you think about what you possess.***

In this connection it is interesting to look at the Kin's domains ecovillage of Rodniki (The Springs) in the republic of Udmurtia. Although it is of the same age as our ecovillage and with about the same number of settlers living permanently, the relative frequency of "mystical moments" in thoughts, sensations and real events in the settlers' lives have seemed to be higher than those in our ecovillage. When I arrived at this ecovillage and participated in the round-table gatherings they have in the evenings and listened to their conversations, I was unexpectedly surprised how much their themes differed, for instance, from the themes of the conversations in the ecovillage "Chistye Istoki" (Pure Sources) of the Kirov region. For example, they talked a lot about the influence of thoughts on plants and animals - with numerous examples. They also discussed profound issues about Vedic history and cultural choices. In some sense Rodniki settlers have seemed to me to be more spiritual, whereas we have become much more practical. But again, the reasons I see here are still the same: our ecovillage is located close to the city, to a nearby village and to good asphalt roads. Everything can be bought from the city, there is not much snow in the winter, and it is possible to easily walk around the entire settlement by foot. In Udmurtia, the ecovillage exists under more severe conditions: no local roads, 5 km to the nearest gravel road and power line, 9 km to the nearest shop and post office. Waist-deep snowfalls in winter make it impossible to visit your neighbors or to go to the nearest village without skis. Another point is that most of the settlers are retired people on pensions, i.e. people who have an assured minimum of means for life and don't need to fuss about it. And lastly, it is necessary to note that the settlers in Udmurtia are simply much poorer than we are. They just don't have enough money to buy power-saws, tractors and solar panels. And because they don't have all those so-called conveniences, they don't have to worry about upkeep and repair of tractors, generators, purchase of new chains etc. So the same patterns mentioned earlier are confirmed here as well.

With this in mind, I want to repeat that if you are not prepared to change your life in a completely radical way, such as living in a tent, then you should not expect supernatural abilities to occur automatically. Therefore, you should carefully consider your future lifestyle on the basis of what is known about life in the various rural localities and in other settlements. Also, the layout of the ecovillage territory must correspond well with your own vision, as much as the selected location and the chosen community of people.

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Further discussion of the visioning process for the 'soul' of an ecovillage will continue in the next issue of SOL magazine via the following chapters: (4) Correlation of the ecovillage vision/design and its location; (5) The concept of a Kin's domain and its size; (6) Public spaces in a settlement; (7) The correlation of the vision of an ecovillage and its community; (8) The name of an ecovillage.

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