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The Global Movement Towards Eco-villages



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[Presentation Transcription]

I'm really glad to be here; this is my sixth international permaculture conference. I'm not sure how many of us would have been at the last conference in Copenhagen. I feel we have matured and permaculture has come a long way.

I had a letter from Ted Dragen at the University of NSW about a week ago. He says, "Would it be an exaggeration to claim that the emergence of the eco-village movement is the most significant event of the twentieth century?" He goes on to say, "I don't think so." However, and that's his opinion too, I want to argue that it is very important to think carefully about what sustainability means. He feels, and I agree with him, that the village movement is not going far enough – we have a long way to go. He quotes some disturbing facts, and Bill mentioned some disturbing facts earlier today as well, in regards to the greenhouse problem. If you cut fossil fuel by 60%, Australians and most of us in the industrialised world will only get one-eighteenth of the amount we are using today, which would mean we have to cut back considerably from what we are doing today. It is not sustainable. So, when I talk about ecovillages, specifically about Crystal Waters, we all must realise that we are only at the beginning; all eco-villages are babies, maybe juveniles, at best.

Tonight I would like to give you a summary of where I think Crystal Waters is as an eco-village, having been designed about eleven years ago, and having been settled about eight years and still being settled – not all the houses having been built on the available lots. I would like to show what has influenced me personally in my thinking when I design human settlements as I work as a consultant in different parts of the world. This then will lead into some slides from Crystal Waters.

I would like to give you some very basic facts about Crystal Waters. When I speak of 'we,' I mean the designers who were involved in the process of designing Crystal Waters. This includes Robert Pat, Geoff Young and Patty Woodman and myself. When we work on larger projects in permaculture or anything else, we must realize we must learn the working rules.

Crystal Waters is located near the east coast of Queensland. The climate is subtropical, but in winter we do get some early-morning frosts, which put some limitations on what we can grow. Our total land area is 640 acres, 259 ha. 14% is owned privately, in the form of 85 residential allotments of approximately one acre, 4400 square metres each. Six percent of the land area is cooperatively owned: this being the village lot and the visitors' campground, which has been partly developed. The rest of the land, 80%, is commonly owned by all of us living at Crystal Waters. This 80% includes a number of dams and small lakes which we have built, creeks, internal roads, environmental, agricultural, horticultural and forest areas.

For many people, mainly coming from densely populated urban areas, the number of people we expect to live eventually at Crystal Waters, 300 for 640 acres, sounds ridiculous. The fact is that under our local subdivisional laws, this is quite a high density. Originally, only a proposal of sixteen sites would have been accepted: now we have 85 sites. So we have to look at legal requirements and also cultural requirements. Here in Australia people still dream about the 5-acre allotment; in our case we have the 1-acre allotment.

The nitty-gritty details of the design process – how to finance, how we got it through council, how we decided on internal roads, on the dam work – will be discussed in my workshop tomorrow.

Things that I feel work well at Crystal Waters at the moment are that people do consider the altered landscape, that we developed, is beautiful, and that it is a nice place to live, comfortable, and recently was described as 'paradise.' I think it shows that development need not always be bad, as many people involved in green politics feel.

I believe that the infrastructure that we have established works well, too. We have an internal water system, a fire-fighting capacity at Crystal Waters, an excellent phone system, which is important for people who work at home. We have an internal electricity system which we connect into the grid. Our internal road systems are working too. I think we have been successful to date in the care of the old and the very young. It is a really good place for children to grow up in. Our cluster system, too, is developing and working better month by month. People who were looking at their own individual needs now are moving toward their cluster.

The buildings, too, have been innovative. There is no fixed style; they range from the conventional Queenslander style to domes to A-frames. The choice of material, too, varies considerably. You find traditional steel roofs, wooden shingle roofs, clay tile roofs, and so on. Innovation is alive and well at Crystal Waters. I can honestly say I have never heard anybody remark negatively about somebody else's religious or spiritual beliefs, or non-beliefs, for that matter. It is something we should not take for granted, and I am rather proud we have achieved this at Crystal Waters.

I think the potential is huge for Crystal Waters as an eco-village. I don't think we have fully utilised the potential. Most importantly, we have not destroyed the potential.

There are areas of difficulty, and I think we need to look at them as well. Conflict about perceived extremes are not common, but do appear from time to time. Such as, when is a chemical not a chemical? How extreme do you want to be about common substances? Or the tolerance or lack of tolerance towards smokers from non-smokers. We need to give from both sides, to eventually meet somewhere in the middle. I think we have a lot to learn about the care of teenagers: those not children any more, but not yet adults. I don't think it is a very successful place for young adults. We are not always willing to give them the chance to learn from their own mistakes.

Work is another issue I feel we have to do more about. While unemployment in our area is not quite as high as it is in the bioregion, it is still much too high. For people who don't have the ability, the talent or the will to be self-employed, the rural environment is not very supportive. It is very difficult to find someone to give you a job. We need to become more innovative in the field of job creation.

The use of the common land: at the moment it's held back by legislation which has not caught up with the reality that exists at Crystal Waters. The legislation was not written for a rural group type of development. It was really designed for a different, more commercial application. We need to work to get politicians and legislators to overcome that, too, rather sooner than later.

While we don't lack management skills, we lack people being willing or able, due to time or financial limitations, to apply these management skills to community issues, being our cooperative and also our body corporate. These are both business-like structures which need to be looked at as a business, not as something that can be handled on a part-time situation, otherwise we 'burn' people out.

While we have volunteers, I don't feel we make the best use of the willingness of people to give us time. It's probably part of the management of people to get the best out of the people who are willing to give that time.

In regards to environmental care, while this is a very beautiful place and wildlife numbers are high and very diverse, I think we have to watch the plants we introduce. We are permaculturists and would like to encourage diversity, but we have to be aware that most of the food plants we use are not indigenous to the area or even the continent. Most of the food plants are introduced. We have to make sure that plants that have any potential to be assets do not become problems.

Recycling: I think we all recycle at Crystal Waters, but to cut a long story short, the Council tip is still too close; it is too easy to pass the buck on, to leave it up to someone else.

Communication: sometimes I feel it is working very well. We have an internal newsletter, which I think helps, but I don't think we are the best communicators on the planet.

Distances are a main issue. I don't think we are lazier than other people, but we need to overcome our tendency to use the car. We need to learn to enjoy walking; walking is so much better than driving, not only for the environment but ourselves, as well. We have to make sure that our pathways are improved, not only by shortening distance but also by providing shade. When talking to people, you find that that's the main limitation to walking: it's too hot.

We are making improvements in food production every year, but we are a long way from being self-reliant. We have lots of social activities, but they seem to be centred on the clusters or individual families, groups of friends, and maybe what we need most is a community hall big enough for all of us to meet. We haven't, at the moment, a building big enough for all of us to sit down together and have a meal.

The design of Crystal Waters was very strongly influenced by my belief, and the belief of other people, that unlike common subdivisions, we needed to give the opportunity to satisfy all, or hopefully most, of the basic needs, the basic rights, of human beings.

To summarise in just a few lines: we sat down and brainstormed just what are the basic needs and basic rights that should be provided to people living here. Number one is the need and right to clean air, clean water and clean food. We must also include the freedom of spiritual expression, opportunity for social interaction, the right to meaningful activity, call it work, the right to safe play for children and adults, and adequate and healthy shelter.

Bunya trees are very numerous in our area, and the seeds were an important food source for Aboriginal people. Books tell us that they would leave the area with fat bellies; it is a high-starch food and obviously you could fatten up on it quite well. To us, the name is used in a different way. We have a local LETS currency, our alternative financial system. Again, try to make the connection between the old and new.

In talking about communities, they can never stand in isolation. Ecovillages are part of a bioregion. In our case, the town of Maleny is an important place. Maleny is a unique place. It has a strong LETS system, it has a credit union, a recycling centre and a food cooperative, and many other successful cooperatives, and I think Crystal Waters benefits by being nearby.

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This is a photo of a town in Switzerland called Raza. It is a place I used to visit with my parents when I was a child. As I grew up, it was a place that, to me, oozed sustainability. It is the place I thought about when I was talking about sustainability.

The land cleared is only the land needed for agricultural purposes. The people very much lived within the means of the land and themselves, they knew the limits. The population was 112, and never grew or shrunk much from that. I recently saw an aerial photo taken a few years ago. The caption read: Raza, formerly a population of 112, now 13 people. And I wondered what had gone wrong with this village which was sustainable for many hundreds of years. Next time I was in Switzerland, I went and visited. An old resident explained that in the 60s and 70s, men would take chestnuts into a bigger town to exchange for money and tools, and they observed that life seemed to be easier in the bigger towns. Education was better, and money easier to obtain. Slowly, they moved their families down. The only ones left were the old ones.

Times change. I think we need to be aware when we design a community, live in a community, that times change. We have to be ready for the change, move with the change.

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This is not an aerial photo of an African village; it is a stone from Noosa beach with a cluster of limpets. It is a natural system. If you try to go too far to the front, or on the steep side, you will not survive. The limits are given. It is a simple, natural example for the word 'enough.' The world has become our backyard. It is worthwhile, occasionally, to reflect, "What do I actually need? And when does need change in degree?"

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Another town in Switzerland that has had the heart taken out of it; sustainability has been destroyed. On the hill in the background, small houses have been built. It's a beautiful view over Lake Lucerne. My father was concerned about the amount of land which has gone under bitumen and concrete, the loss of security. I think you have to realise that any village, any community, can only survive and prosper in connection with a successful agricultural system. The two cannot be separated, as they are trying to do at the moment.

I do most of my work in rural environments, but we also have to look for solutions in urban areas. We have the choice of simply allowing cities to expand constantly, or we can look at cities as being a collection of ecovillages. If we choose the second thought, then I believe even cities can be made more sustainable. The suburbs lend themselves exceptionally well to being turned into eco-suburbs.

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Which brings us to Crystal Waters. I always show a slide of Old Dave. We call him 'Old' Dave simply because we had five Daves and he happened to be the oldest one. He is 86 and is symbolic of all the people of the world, young and old. When we talk of design of villages, design of structures, we tend to be more involved in infrastructure, the nuts and bolts, the roads, wastewater systems, the water systems, when, after all, what it is about is people. So I think we must always remember, that's where we start from, that's what it is for. Dave knows he's important, he knows he's important for many reasons. The most important reason is that we need to be a certain age,

maybe we need to be 80, before we have enough wisdom to pass on to the young. And if you haven't got the wisdom of the old, you need to go and make the same mistakes again, unnecessarily. You haven't got the old people to ask when you have questions

When we started Crystal Waters, we were very lucky. We started off with clean land. We also started off with clean air, and we started off with clean water. With that also comes a responsibility. Our responsibility is to make sure that not only the next generation, but many generations,... native Americans talked about the next seven generations, and I think that is the sort of scale we need to look at,... we have to make sure that the next seven generations will inherit clean land, clean air and clean water. If they can't, then we have failed all of the way.

It is a beautiful place for children. Last year we had a visit from a person from Hong Kong, specializing in the design of children's playgrounds. As I showed her around, she asked, "Where is the children's playground?" Probably, coming from Hong Kong, it is difficult to imagine that a playground could be 640 acres. That's exactly the point. To meet that responsibility of adults and children alike, it is very important not to be overprotective or underprotective either. We need to know how far the children can reach. We have to allow them to make some of the decisions.

We do develop, make changes. We build roads. We try to keep them as narrow as possible. We sealed them for a number of reasons. We wanted to reduce the dust and extend their life. We build houses and lakes. We can place the houses so they do not impact on the general landscape. We look at the impact the materials have, where they come from. We look at minimising transport and energy. What does the material do to us when we live in the house. Will it be healthy or will it be like living in a plastic bag? What will happen when we are finished living in the house? Will it become a burden for the next generation, or will it melt back into the soil?

Our lakes provide water for limited irrigation, possibilities for fishing and aquaculture, recreational aspects, habitat for birds and wildlife. They also have a real spiritual quality. I walk across the dam wall twice a day. I think I choose to do this because it is something like walking in a beautiful church. It is something which does touch you.

There are people successfully employing themselves and some of the others. We have to help each other, create ideas. That is where the village network, started a year ago, is really successful; learning from other communities what has worked and what is more difficult.

Our community restaurant is where we get together Friday nights and Sunday mornings. I hope, in the future, it will become even more popular. It is also used for courses. In the business area we have accommodation for 24 people in a bunkhouse. It is a good example of income generation; it has a good flow-on effect. Not only teachers are employed, but also cooks, cleaners, transport people, and those who grow food. Eco-tourism and educational aspects are really important and worthwhile in ecovillages.

We have 16 by-laws. One by-law that is most controversial is that we cannot keep cats and dogs. It is often interpreted as meaning that we hate cats and dogs. Not

so. Many of us love cats and dogs, but most of us can see that having cats and dogs would mean losing our wildlife. We have about 150 species of birds, some very rare, and a large and trusting population of wallabies and kangaroos. It is a matter of choice. I think it is a matter of right, as well, the right of native animals to continue to exist in their home territories.

It is often too easy to look at the big picture. I think what makes a difference between living in a subdivision or an eco-village, is that there are lots of little things to look at. There is a trend these days to advertise once-a-year holidays with nature. I don't think that is enough. I think we need to be in contact with nature on a daily basis. We are on the edge in our generation. If, in generations down the track, nature can only be remembered in the stories of the parents and the grandparents, we have done something very, very wrong. It is our responsibility to make it possible for as many people as possible to have that constant and daily contact with the small things which make it worthwhile living.

At Crystal Waters, we have no church, no mosque, no temple. But we have the freedom of spiritual expression. When we went through the design process, whenever we came across an area that was special, it was very tempting to design your own house block there. We know from the books we have read that to place a structure on the best view will actually destroy the best view. We totally support aboriginal people of any country who say we should protect their sacred sites. We too need to create and respect our own sacred sites.

To summarise, people living in ecovillages may make mistakes, but they also have successes. Many people learn from each other. We need to learn from history and nature. We need to seriously consider these, learn from them and combine them with the latest knowledge and wisdom available to us. My message is that ecovillages soon will be common in urban and rural areas, in poor and rich countries, north and south. It's up to us. I think the sky is the limit.