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Eco-village Networks, Activities in Denmark and Connections to Gaia Trust

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Summary text

The Global Eco-village Network, what it represents, how it functions and how people can become involved with it. The Danish communities association and its activities in relation to lobbying, informing, networking and fundraising. Gaia Trust of Denmark and its eco-village related activities, in particular Gaia Villages and Gaia Technologies.

Global Eco-village Network

The need for developing sustainable human settlements relates directly to the commitment by the world leaders at the Earth Summit in Rio (1992) to programs that will move humanity to sustainability in the 21st century (Agenda 21). To achieve the goals of sustainable human settlements, there is a need for pilot communities, and for an exchange of information between them and the mainstream.

The Global Eco-village Network (GEN) was set up to meet this need, and is now in the process of expanding. Three regional offices are located in Australia (Crystal Waters), USA (The Farm) and Germany (Lebensgarten). The offices are based in communities who have been part of the seed group which initially consisted of: The Findhorn Foundation, Scotland; Lebensgarten, Germany; Ecoville Nevo and Rysovo, Russia; GyuruSu, Hungary; Crystal Waters, Australia; The Farm, USA; The Manitou Foundation, USA; The Ladakh project, India; and the Danish Eco-village Association.

These seed projects represent eco-villages at different stages of development, the oldest established more than 25 years ago and the most recent being under establishment. Most of these projects are internationally well recognised, while the projects in Eastern and Central Europe are in the start-up phase.

Common to all of the projects is their focus on education and a desire for the integration of ecology, spirituality, and community and business development. Each of the

projects functions as an eco-village training centre for their area. The range of skills that are on offer is very extensive, covering all aspects of sustainable community living.

The following programme areas are specifically being developed by the eco-village network: Establishment and development of eco-villages; Eco-village training centres and outreach programmes; Development of sustainable technologies and businesses, a prerequisite for the economic sustainability of these projects; International networking enabling eco-villages to rapidly increase their knowledge through the sharing of information, work exchanges, training and outreach, with a special emphasis on youth training and exchange; and fund-raising.

Regional activities

A meeting of projects from Europe and Africa was held in August 1996 in Germany. Positive steps were taken towards developing the **GEN Europe / Africa** regional network and towards forming national networks of eco-settlements based on the experiences of countries like Germany and Denmark where national networks have been in existence for a number of years.

The present state of affairs is:

- Information on 1200 communities throughout Europe is being put into a database. Of these about 80 projects are identified as eco-village type.
- Existing national networks in Germany and Denmark.
- Upcoming networks in Israel / Middle East, and UK.
- Potential networkers in place in France, Turkey, Italy, Russia.
- Further contact needed to establish networks in Spain and Mediterranean islands, and countries not represented at the meeting, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Ireland, Greece and most of Eastern Europe.

Africa was represented by two persons from the Cameroons. It was decided that the next year or so would be used for information gathering so that making contacts to a potential African network would have a secure foundation.

The Eco-village network of the Americas (ENA), based at The Farm, Tennessee has been active in hosting training courses on eco-villages and permaculture, and in visiting communities in North America who could have an interest in the network. There is a close link to the Fellowship of Intentional Communities which links over 350 communities in North America. ENA has published the Design Exchange and is active in developing and updating the Eco-village Information Service on the World Wide Web (www.gaia.org).

GEN Oceania/Asia has followed up on the UN Habitat II conference held in Istanbul in June 1996, by sending information to local councils in Australia. There is an extensive correspondence with projects throughout this far flung region and there will be visits to projects in Australia and India in the coming months.

Anyone is welcome to join the regional networks, be they community, organisation, network or individual.

National network in Denmark

The Danish communities association, was started in 1993, and has now about 28 communities as members plus 150-200 individuals and other institutions. The situation in 1993 was that communities with different interests eg. ecological lifestyle, spirituality and social projects were not really communicating. The association therefore chose a focus of connecting these groups. The secretariat was at Gaia Villages for the first three years. And has now moved to Munach, a spiritual community.

The association publishes a quarterly newsletter. Membership dues are sufficient to cover costs of producing the newsletter. (Subscription: Individuals: USD 30 and communities DKR 75). Co-housing projects have their own organisation but are being approached by the association.

The association gets funding for special projects from government agencies and it is hoped that support will be obtained for the secretariats' administration costs through a special fund for financing charitable organisations. The main activities of the network are:

- **Financing of environmentally friendly houses:** The association managed to get a state guarantee for loans to environmentally friendly houses. But it is not having the desired effect of influencing the building societies to free up their lending policies. However the spin-off has been in getting an alternative bank and pension funds to cooperate on financing houses in a couple of projects. This may be a new model for the future.
- **Lobbying:** There has been lobbying at local and national levels and getting to know politicians (MP's) through visiting the parliament etc. Support for political lobbying has been a major help in influencing public policy formulation. The association is now consulted when the government formulates programmes eg. urban ecology programmes etc. and tries to respond whenever government agencies are looking for consultative input from NGO's.
- **Agenda 21:** The association has been working for 3 years now with CIBU (the Danish NGO who has spearheaded Agenda 21), and has held conferences, published manuals etc. with them.
- **Green entrepreneurship:** Projects in the association have also been working with Gaia Technologies, a green business investment company, and a working group of the association is also working with other NGO's to stimulate green entrepreneurship.

Forming national networks is very important in bringing projects and people together and for increasing the political visibility of the eco-village movement. It has influenced the ability of projects to get loans and brought about our consultative status with the government. Belonging to an international organisation of eco-villages has also given credibility to the eco-village movement in Denmark.

Slides were shown of some of the Danish projects.

Gaia Trust

Funding for the start up of both the Danish and international eco-village networks has come from Gaia Trust of Denmark.

The main theme behind Gaia Trust's policy is the support of ecological settlements, which can demonstrate that it is possible to live in harmony with nature and each other, to a much better degree than we do to-day.

Gaia Trust has two entities which support the development of eco-villages. Gaia Villages, a non-profit division, which supports the eco-village network, and Gaia Technologies which is a "green" venture capital company that invests primarily in Danish companies. The company is on the look-out for technologies that can provide decentralized production and jobs for eco-villages.

The daughter company Gaiacorp A/S operates in the field of currency investment and consultancy. Profits from the company are the primary basis for Gaia Trust's activities.

The philosophy behind Gaia Trust's involvement in supporting the development of the eco-village network is that most of the necessary knowledge for establishing sustainable settlements already exists. What is needed now is for others to see that the vision can be realised. We still need many examples where work, culture and nature are connected. Once people can see that sustainable settlements are a real possibility, further development will happen by itself.

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