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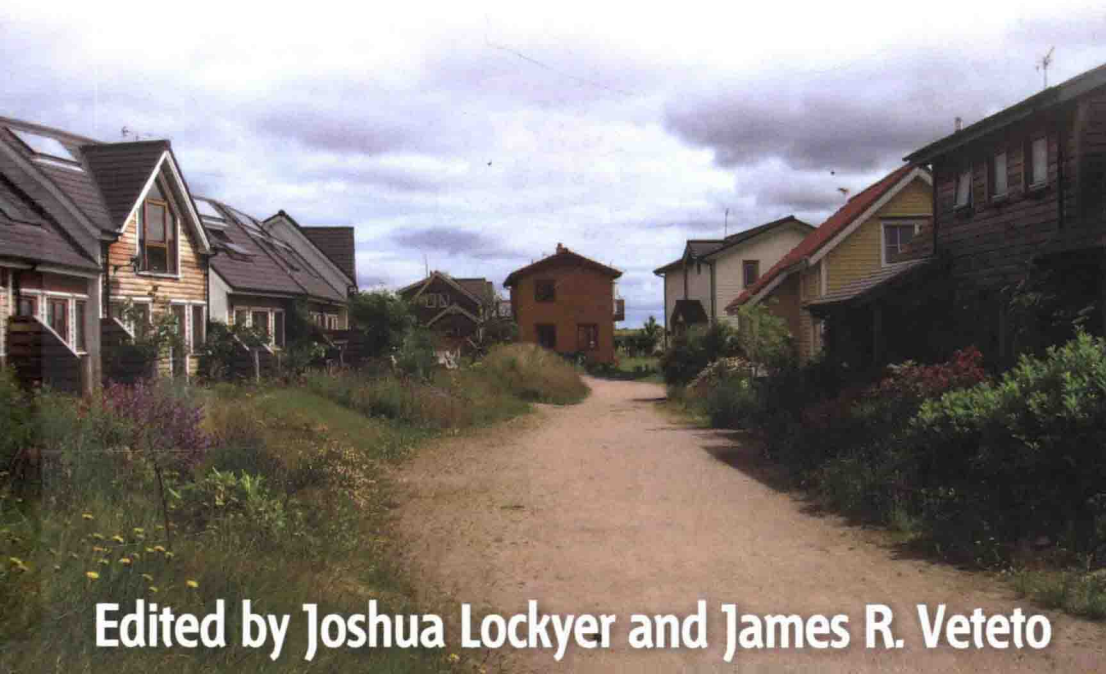
Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopia

Bioregionalism, Permaculture, and Ecovillages



Edited by Joshua Lockyer and James R. Veteto

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Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopia

Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology

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Joshua Lockyer would like to dedicate this book to all the people in Celo Community, Earthaven Ecovillage, Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, and other intentional communities who have inspired him with their true commitment to finding a way to live more sustainably.

James R. Veteto would like to dedicate this book to his first permaculture mentor and good friend Joe Hollis and to the wonderful plant sanctuary, Mountain Gardens, that he and his lively band of co-conspirators and apprentices have created over the past forty years in Katuah bioregion, USA.

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—Joshua Lockyer

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—James R. Veteto

Foreword

E.N. Anderson

My father grew up on a small, struggling cotton farm in a remote part of east Texas. The farm was sold long ago, and the land is now neglected, growing back to brush and small trees. Worldwide, millions of acres of such land—fine soil, easily recultivated—are unused today, waiting for better farming regimes that can use them to advantage.

Meanwhile, in spite of Rachel Carson's classic (1962), the "silent spring" advances. Throughout much of rural America, pesticides and fence-to-fence cultivation have virtually wiped out all forms of life other than the one or two crop species grown. No birds sing, no rabbits run across the road, scarcely a weed raises its head. The same is now true in China, and increasingly so from Mexico to Indonesia. The resulting increase in expenses, problems, and government activity has led to a decline of small farms and a rise in large agribusiness enterprises. Conservationists have succeeded in saving many wild lands, and urban environmentalism has cleaned up some cities, but the decline of the world's rural landscapes gets worse all the time.

A natural reaction began long ago with the organic farming movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, this was joined by several new movements, based on more comprehensive knowledge of science and technology. Bill Mollison's permaculture, which drew considerably on Chinese and Southeast Asian traditional practices, has been the most successful and lasting. Meanwhile, the back-to-the-land movement, always a strong one in America and parts of Europe, has survived and flourished.

I started using the term "ecotopia" in 1969. Ernest Callenbach, who of course deserves all the credit for making it famous, tells me (by email, 2010) the term was in the air; apparently, a European group independently coined it about the same time. At the time, I was involved with a wonderful group called the New Alchemists, who brought to alternative agriculture many of the new methods and ideas of the 1960s; some are mentioned in the present book. I somewhat lost touch when the leaders moved from California to Massachusetts, but the excitement never died. I had a tiny farm at the time, producing much of our family food and extra

avocadoes for sale. Like other small orchards in the Riverside area of California, it did not survive the "energy shock" of the mid-1970s. Since then, I have devoted my life to observing traditional societies that have managed to live sustainably on their lands. I try to figure out how they do it. The authors of the studies within this volume have addressed the question of sustainability in several communities around the world. Studies vary from urban garden projects to truly utopian—ecotopian—communities in remote mountain refugia. All these experiments, in one way or another, point the way to alternatives to modern industrial agriculture—alternatives to monocropping, to pesticides, to dependence on fossil fuels, and to a system that wastes fantastic amounts of fuel, water, and food in a world where over a billion people are hungry.

Many of the experiments are based on concepts from bioregionalism, permaculture, and ecovillage design. They explain these concepts and principles far better than I can. Suffice it to say that bioregionalism and permaculture since the 1970s have been critical in a broad rethinking of agriculture around the world. They have grown and spread widely, in spite of competition from industrial agriculture. Bioregionalism has much wider implications, having the goal and real potential to reform urban planning, education, water management, and indeed all aspects of human communal existence. It rather plays against the current tendency toward "globalization," but its time will come. Various tests of bioregional knowledge have emerged from the movement—tests that ask students to state where their water comes from, where their milk comes from, what the local plant communities are, and so on—and should be more widely used to challenge today's students, so expert with electronics yet so widely ignorant of local environments.

This brings us to the teaching function of the present book, and of the communities and projects described herein. Richard Louv, in his excellent and widely known book *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), has pointed out that American environmental education is in desperate shape. Children increasingly grow up with no contact with nature; their parents are afraid to let them play outside (snakes!), schools have dropped natural history, and almost all children now live in cities or in rural areas so transformed by industrial agriculture that they are actually more barren and unnatural than the cities. The world of sixty years ago, when most of us grew up familiar with wild plants and animals and with traditional mixed farming, is gone. Aldo Leopold's model farm in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), on which kids grow up trapping muskrats from the family pond and selling the fur for pocket money, seems like something from ancient Mesopotamia or Classical Greece. The first need today is to get the kids to have *some* contact with nature—any contact, so long as it is in a peaceful environment without too much to scare their parents. However, the children need

to be able to relate to it. Merely exposing an urban kid—or, increasingly, even a rural kid—to the wild may simply lead to incomprehension and inability to form any connection. The alternative farms and gardens in this book provide ideal environments. If nothing else, children can relate to the food and to any domestic animals present.

Science education in the United States has been sacrificed to endless drills in reading and math for standardized testing, and there is virtually no field science taught in American schools today (see education postings on my website, www.krazykioti.com, which review the problem). Some authors in the present book address this directly; more deal with cultural transmission, demonstration projects, outreach, and the simple and direct value of successful ecotopian communities, projects, and farms as teaching opportunities. No one can visit them without being influenced.

Traditional cultures, broadly speaking, teach through a process of guided performance. Children learning a skill learn by doing, with varying degrees of verbal instruction (often very little). Stories and similar verbal traditions are learned more passively, but often in ritual or ceremonial settings where the importance of the stories comes through clearly from the importance of the occasion. Managing salience is a major key to traditional, and indeed to all, education. Clearly, we need all these things in modern education. We have to escape the mindless drills, and the devotion to empty, decontextualized "facts" that such drills reflect and encourage.

Several authors herein address Karl Marx's contrast between utopian socialism and what Marx called "scientific" socialism. The former rested on experimental communities, the latter on developing mass movements. The former transforms the world one community at a time—hopefully with a snowball effect; the latter transforms the world one step at a time. The former runs the risk of gradualism. The latter runs the risk of transforming the world only to find out too late that the plan was badly flawed (as happened, indeed, with Marxism).

We need to try both approaches. Time is short; peak oil is expected any day now. Ecotopian projects and communities not only provide the world with alternatives, but also show that they are practicable. They are working in real time and in the real world. They have faced the problems of developing new systems; they have dealt with the bugs—real ones as well as metaphoric ones.

The history of alternative communities in the United States goes back to earliest settlement. Many of the original European colonies were founded by religious dissidents fleeing persecution: Puritans in New England, Quakers in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, Mennonites and other German and Dutch Anabaptist groups in the same two states, Catholics in Maryland, Huguenots in New York, Calvinists almost everywhere. The Anabaptists in particular formed intentional communities, many of which

survive today (the Amish, Hutterite, and Mennonite communities). Later sects, notably the Mormons, set up their own worlds. More radical and less religious communities emerged in the nineteenth century, and inspired, indirectly, our present eco-communities; classic histories by Charles Nordhoff (1875) and John Noyes (1870) are still well worth reading.

Countless later communities began and occasionally flourished, though two familiar to me in the southern California desert—the socialist Llano and anarchist Palm Desert—succumbed to shaky organization and a lack of water (they survive in more ordinary forms; Palm Desert is now a mere suburb of Palm Springs, but Llano retains a remote, free-spirited ethos). The rise of both religious and secular communes and alternative communities since 1960 has not found a definitive chronicler, but the present book details some of the most hopeful, well-planned, and successful of the efforts from this time.

This has taken me to the question raised by the chapters in the book at hand: what are the wider contexts and constraints—cultural, political, and economic—that surround alternative agriculture and alternative eco-communities?

Much of the answer lies in the motivation of the actors.

The authors in this volume are aware that alternative farming is not mere technology. It is done as a labor of love and as a passionate ethical commitment. No one does it to get rich. No one does it out of the economists' "rational individual self-interest." Environmental anthropologists are now aware of the importance of emotion, passion, and spirituality in human-environment relationships. Traditional societies often use religion as the social force for teaching and motivating moral and pro-environmental action (Anderson 1996; Berkes 2008; Milton 2002). Others, less explicitly religious, still have strongly conservationist and holistic worldviews. "Religion," a broad term, here implies—among other things—a reverent, respectful, caring, and responsible attitude toward the environment.

Even in the modern secular world, where religion is often an empty shell or is narrow and unconcerned with environment, ecological and environmental concerns are passionately held and deeply felt. Many, if not most, farmers and ranchers, even big agribusiness operators, are kept in business by love of the lifestyle more than profit (see, e.g., Hedrick 2007). Religion remains surprisingly common as a base. Secular values systems can work also, but with difficulty. Getting a really large number of people to internalize a values system is difficult, especially if it is a system that privileges the future over the present. Humans tend to discount the future; a dollar today is better than a hundred dollars a year down the line. Prioritizing long-term and wide-flung considerations over short-term and narrow ones is the heart and soul of conservation and sustainability, but it requires religion or some equivalently passionate personal commitment

to a moral program. Religion also gives people the excuse to feel the awe, reverence, and devotion that most people feel toward wild and semi-wild nature (however defined!); in our society, many people feel compelled to think of worries and work unless directed to "higher things."

The urban bioregionalists, ecovillagers, and permaculturists described in this volume are driven by such commitments. They are dedicated, often to the point of living with poverty, backbreaking toil, cold, heat, and heartbreaking setbacks. Many have dealt successfully with the emotional tensions that are inevitable when strong-souled idealists form communities. They are driven by a complex dream: creating a world that is not only ecologically sustainable but is also personally rewarding through community, richness, beauty, pride, and the real joys of self-sacrifice for a good cause. These immediate benefits may make it possible to prioritize, successfully, the long-term, just as the beauty and richness of ceremony and ritual helps religion prioritize moral claims.

The environmental movement depends on such passionate commitments. This was often seen by our forefathers better than by current writers. Here is William Hornaday writing in 1913, in *Our Vanishing Wild Life:*

> To-day, the thing that stares me in the face every waking hour, like a grisly spectre with bloody fang and claw, is *the extermination of species.* To me, that is a horrible thing. It is wholesale murder, no less. It is a capital crime, and a black disgrace to the race of civilized mankind. I say "civilized mankind," because savages don't do it! (Hornaday 1913: 8)

His use of the word "savages" is ironic here; he goes on to provide a very modern-sounding account of good management by Native Americans as compared to the terrible management by white Americans in the early twentieth century.

Hornaday was not a wild-eyed countercultural; he was a pillar of the New York establishment and head of the New York Zoo. His rhetoric was typical of that period. We need more like it today. Perhaps most interesting, though, was that this rhetoric—and a great deal more like it—was in a book that also buried the opponents to conservation in literally thousands of meticulous, carefully gathered statistics and other factual data. People in the age of Hornaday, Muir, and Leopold knew that humans think and act by combining emotion and cognition. This once-evident fact of life was only recently rediscovered by psychology and anthropology (Anderson 1996, 2010).

We should not be afraid of moral passion, of openly loving our lifestyles and environments, or of maintaining that good food, good land use, and good care for the future are not just matters of opinion or of "discourse." It is so easy to get bogged down in the details of toilet design, raised bed maintenance, and arguments about road building, and forget to remind the world that beauty and health are, in the end, better

than ugliness and sickness—even if the latter pay, under an outrageously corrupted economic regime. Only passion and enthusiasm, coupled with solid evidence, will engage the rest of the world.

We also need deep humility before the complexities of nature and of human society. As Hippocrates said 2,500 years ago, "the art is long, life is short."

Since permaculture and related small-farming methods are clearly superior to standard, contemporary, high throughput agriculture, why have they not triumphed long ago? Why do the intensive methods that inspired them—Chinese rice agriculture, Southeast Asian vegetable and tree culture, European mixed farming, and the rest—go to the wall in the face of "modern" agribusiness?

There are several reasons, but the most critical one faced by modern permaculturists and other alternative cultivators is the subsidy economy. Governments today pour fantastic amounts of direct and indirect subsidies into agriculture, and the money goes almost entirely to support large-scale farming that uses maximal amounts of fossil fuels—not only as fuel, but also as feedstocks for fertilizers and pesticides. The subsidy structure is the result of power politics. Large landowners, fossil fuel corporations, and chemical corporations have set the agenda, often with the direct intention of destroying small farms and organic farmers. It is no accident that politically conservative periods in American history—such as the 1920s and 1980s—were periods of unprecedented and extreme abandonment of small farms and expansion of large-scale agribusiness enterprises.

The result is not even remotely like the "free market," and is "capitalist" only by stretching definitions. In fact, the most extreme forms of government-funded chemical and heavy equipment farming have been in Communist countries, China being probably the worst case. The United States is strikingly similar; American agriculture is more socialist than capitalist, and it is a socialism devised by and for giant agribusiness. Thus, many trenchant and scathing critiques have come from genuine free marketeers (e.g., Baden 1997; Bovard 1991; Myers 1998; for a different, anthropological view, see Barlett 1993). The three hundred thousand largest farm enterprises in the United States produce 89 percent of the product and receive 76 percent of the direct subsidies to agriculture (Conkin 2008), and probably at least that much of the indirect ones. Most of the subsidies go to major commodity producers: staple grains and cotton. No smaller enterprise can really compete in today's political-economic framework.

The resulting landscapes are ugly. Our aesthetic sense, often disregarded in the (post)modern world as a frill or an arbitrary afterthought, is actually an evolved guide to good land and landscapes. The decline in aesthetic appeal of rural landscapes is an indicator too often ignored.

Subsidized production of monocropped "commodities," heavily subsidized oil, government-built highways, government-subsidized railways and shipping, public university research on chemicals and crops, and a whole host of other agendas dominate the rural economy. World development agencies have spread this gospel abroad. The Global South copies the Global North. The World Bank, World Trade Organization, and other bodies actively propagate an economic order dominated by large firms and their interests, unresponsive to local alternatives (on development, see Dichter 2003; Easterly 2006; Ellerman 2005; Escobar 2008; Hancock 1991; Stiglitz 2003; Yos 2003, 2008). To this must be added outright corruption, and the thuggish behavior of many governments supported by big oil and big agribusiness (cf. Anderson 2010; Ascher 1999; Bunker and Ciccantell 2005; Juhasz 2008).

It has been pointed out repeatedly that the real price of a gallon of gasoline is much higher than the pump price; various estimates of the real price vary from $20 to $200 or more. The low pump price reflects passing on the real costs of production and consumption to the suffering citizens of the producing countries, who are often murdered outright by oil extraction interests (Juhasz 2008), and the suffering citizens of consuming countries, who endure pollution and pay exorbitant taxes to build roads and subsidize oil firms. Obviously, if the real costs of fossil fuels were factored into its purchase price, agriculture would look very different—and much more like what is described in the present volume. On a level playing field, with any kind of reasonable discounting, alternative farmers would out-compete the wasteful, throughput-maximizing mechanical agriculture of today. But without altering the policies of virtually every nation today, the future of alternative farming is not assured.

Meanwhile, alternative farmers—permaculturists, organic farmers, or plain old small farmers—deal with economic and social realities. They are constructing new worlds within the shell of the old, in city lots, in mountain valleys, in abandoned small farm landscapes. They are creating models that everyone can actually see, and can thus learn how much beauty and value a rural landscape can have. They deserve our full respect as well as worldwide emulation.

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Contents