An investigation in the sustainable economic practices of ecovillages

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An investigation in the sustainable economic practices of ecovillages

Abstract
This 2018 research report represents Phase 1 of a small project investigating economic practices within one Australian ecovillage. Phase 2 of the same project (a longitudinal progress update) was completed in 2019. The 2018 report provides a summary of 'lessons learned' findings from a literature scan on ecovillages including the websites of 14 ecovillages. In addition, the report contains analysis of findings from mixed method research including an online survey, focus group, individual interviews and other qualitative data collection activities generated from interacting with members of the Australian ecovillage.

Keywords
dcovillage(s), ecovillage literature review, sustainability, economic practices, Narara Ecovillage

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UOW acknowledges that this research took place on Aboriginal land and we pay respect to Elders past and present and give gratitude for allowing us to be on the land.

This report draws upon insights from individual interviews, a focus group discussion and other informal interactions with Narara Ecovillage (NEV) members or advisors during August 2017–March 2018. These individuals volunteered their time, reflections and observations to share their perspectives about ecovillage living and experiences. The authors wish to thank these individuals for their invaluable assistance in helping us develop our findings, and to the leadership of NEV in approving institutional access. The authors especially acknowledge the assistance of John Talbott, Project Director and Joy Mozzi, Site Administrative Officer, in facilitating the scheduling of participant interviews, arranging site facilities and site visits and organising the collection of relevant documentation.

Any interpretations, observations and omissions in this document remain the responsibility of the authors.

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DISCLOSURES

None.

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1. Living an Ecovillage Life: Background and Study Approach

This section provides an overview of the background and research approach that the University of Wollongong and Narara Ecovillage members engaged to investigate and present possible pathways for sustainable economic practices.

The aim to ‘live lighter’ on the planet by adopting local approaches to economic, environmental and social sustainability recognises the aspiration we have as custodians of a world with unique yet rapidly declining natural resources. Ecovillages aspire to improve the quality of living while pursuing sustainability goals through intentional designs in physical infrastructure and housing, governance, community, skills development, and culture. In pursuing such aspirations, ecovillages are considered as types of ‘intentional communities’ (Christian 2003, Muldur et al. 2015) although all intentional communities are not necessarily ecovillages. Ecovillages emerged first in Europe during the 1980s (Dawson 2015) with current estimates of some 10,000 ecovillage communities of varying sizes thriving around the world (Global Ecovillage Network or GEN 2016). In Australia, there are about 20 ecovillages that emphasise different lifestyle approaches towards sustainability; for example: permaculture practice and education (Crystal Waters Eco-village), socially responsible rental/investments rather than home ownership (Bruns Eco Village) or co-housing (Tasman Ecovillage).

Ecovillages offer a lifestyle alternative to living in ‘mainstream’ residential neighbourhoods or retirement housing. On the surface, they role-model community sharing practices lived during simpler village times. Significantly however, Christian’s ecovillage research suggests that many ecovillages do not sustain longer-term existence with 90% failing after initial momentum and enthusiasm by their founders (Christian 2003, pp. 2-13). This raises the research question of what factors or practices tend to help sustain ecovillage life for the remaining 10% and in particular, what models are needed to sustain economic growth in ecovillages?

In 2017, Dr. Belinda Gibbons from the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong (UOW) held informal discussions with John Talbott, Project Director at Narara Ecovillage (NEV) regarding the feasibility of researching ecovillage economic practices. Funding was subsequently secured from the university’s Global Challenges Seed Fund to establish a small research project team and NEV’s leadership agreed to become a research partner in this effort and to utilise NEV as a research site.

The aim of this project is to explore the mix of local and introduced practices that support the development of emerging sustainable ecovillage economies. Understanding the business research aspects of an ecovillage emerging economy is significant as it can identify, refine and provide Narara Ecovillage with a model for sustainable economic growth.

The scope of this project included the following tasks:

- Review of published literature on ecovillages and research sources relevant to models for sustainability, governance, community and economic growth. About 100 articles were reviewed.

- Review and analysis of data on 14 ecovillages through their public internet sites and published academic articles, including researcher visits to an American and a Canadian ecovillage.

- NEV member completion of an anonymous online survey about NEV aspirations, demographics and practices. A sample of 62 completed surveys (including 1 paper survey) was analysed.
Individual interviews with 10 NEV members and an ecovillage advocate plus a focus group discussion involving 9 NEV members. All interviews or focus group discussions were recorded with prior permission and professionally transcribed.

Discussions at two NEV member meetings, researcher attendance at a NEV Open Day in October 2017, researcher field observations, and review of documents and photographs collected on site.

Analysis of all data collection sources among members of the UOW research team during multiple team meetings.

Research outcomes from the project are summarised in this report and a draft reviewed by members of the NEV Business Team for feedback and technical accuracy. The UOW research team appreciates the participation, openness and enthusiasm of NEV members in assisting us to develop these findings for the duration of the project.
2. Learning from Other Ecovillages: Ideas

This section summarises our review of external information on ecovillages, in particular using analysis of 14 ecovillage sites, to generate understandings about sustainable economic practices. Ecovillage information sources are summarised in the Appendix.

The formation of the Global Ecovillage Network in the early 1990s with subsequent establishment of geographic regional networks (North America, South America, Africa, Europe and Oceania) and a NextGEN youth movement, provides useful learning resources and implementation exemplars about ecovillage life (GEN Solutions 2018). In addition, individual ecovillages publish their visions, accomplishments and practices on local websites with further commentary on ecovillages available from practitioner and academic publications (mostly books, journal articles and theses).

IDEA 1: MORE COMPLEX THAN FINDING A HOUSE TO LIVE

An ecovillage represents a microcosm of society that must balance specific lifestyle intentions and aspirations to manage many complex decisions that have individual and collective implications. Decisions about individual housing designs/location and household sustainability through employment options (often known as private goods) must be interspersed with systems for shared infrastructure, community development, and decision making or governance processes (public goods often regulated by local or statutory authorities). Furthermore, an ecovillage operates as an open system that reacts to and interacts through inputs, flows and outputs, influenced by local economy characteristics and its geographic location. Figure 1 summarises these interdependent challenges:

![Figure 1: Interdependent aspects of ecovillage living](diagram)

Figure 1: Interdependent aspects of ecovillage living
Thus, becoming an ecovillager requires more than individual or household decisions to select a geography (town/city), local neighbourhood or to buy a particular house. Becoming an ecovillager requires these such decisions situated within and involving additional financial, social, design, operational and emotional commitments to become a cooperative member of a larger community that collectively negotiates to live acceptable sustainable lives together.

Nevertheless, the actual process of ecovillage establishment is fairly common (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Adapted from Christian (2003, p.5)

So where along this establishment process do some ecovillages succeed whereas others fail and why?

**IDEA 2: RESILIENCE IS STRUCTURED AND EXPERIENCED LOCALLY AND DEMOGRAPHICALLY**

The resilience literature (e.g. Biggs et al. 2015, Plieninger & Bieling 2012) suggests many principles that sound reasonable but seem rather abstract:

- Scale – appropriate growth/size of the built environment as well as short to longer-term timescales.
- Diversity – welcoming of differing perspectives and resident demographics towards social equity.
- Flexibility and durability – in building practices and designs using renewable resources.
- Adaptability – capacity to respond to changes in climate (e.g. weather conditions), non-climate (natural disasters), engineered (e.g. legislation) environments and many unanticipated and uncontrollable future events (e.g. hazards, rejections by statutory authorities, loss of available funds).

The capacity to persist from envisioning to implementation might also be considered as effective project management – applying the optimal combination of guidelines, processes, practices and personnel (Ayers 2017).

Practically as it applies to ecovillages, it takes significant patience, persistence, commitment, negotiation and compromise to deal with the many barriers associated with implementing an alternative model that breaks the conventional rules. Our assessment is that the type of resilience needed here is very much a local phenomenon – rather than universal principles, it depends on the particulars of the situational circumstances, local economy requirements and practices, and the demographic profile of the ecovillagers themselves.
Exemplar 1: Multi-decade enthusiasm but no long-term economic sustainability – The Farm, Summerton, Tennessee, USA

Initially conceived as a commune for free thinkers, The Farm was established in 1971 and became self-sufficient within four years. They implemented innovations such as a holistic midwifery centre and school (Dawson 2015). From an initial membership of 320 pioneers to a maximum of 1200 in 1980, The Farm had to stop taking in new members (capacity pressures), experienced a financial crisis, made some bad investments and had to cede the land. The original pioneers aged into their sixties by the early 2000s, lost the drive, energy and commitment to continue. Thus the leaders and membership were ultimately not able to manage ecovillage growth using management control or governance processes, financial/financing acumen or member capabilities to sustain the ongoing momentum.

The rationale for this ecovillage failure is less a failure of vision, more an executional weakness:

- ‘In certain ways, the economic structure at The Farm became its greatest strength and weakness’. The spiritual vision was to hold ‘no personal money’ and members were encouraged to pursue tasks that fulfilled them as people with material results being a lower priority. [T]his left the shared economic responsibility … and the role of earning money in an open and nebulous state’ (Stevenson 2014, p.35).

Exemplar 2: Localisation adjustments needed for long-term success – Ithaca, Finger Lakes, upstate New York, USA

Ithaca Ecovillage (EVI) is a semi-urban site located 4kms from downtown Ithaca and metropolitan services such as city water and sewerage. The ecovillage utilises only 10 acres for member housing within a total of 175 acres of open space and conservation land. In the 27 years of Ithaca’s existence, the ecovillage has adopted a ‘big vision, incremental growth’ approach (Walker 2012, p. 22). It has iteratively optimised a capacity to align its contributions to local economy characteristics and to learn how to negotiate with local institutions to achieve ecovillage aims.

For example, Walker (2012) noted the following factors that contribute to ongoing EVI thriving:

- EVI partners with Ithaca College to teach sustainability courses and with Cornell to teach novice farmers how to establish small farms.
- EVI is a demonstration site for visitor learning that role models low energy usage (40% less than the American average).
- Two farms generate 250 varieties of vegetables and other fruits, herbs which are sold to 1,500 customers in the greater Ithaca region. One of the farms, West Haven, was generating an annual return of USD220,000 (Walker 2012, p.15).
- Learning how to work with Tompkins County Planning Department to negotiate and to define new models for zoning codes based on EVI designs. This working relationship has prospered to an extent that EVI and Tompkins Planning jointly received a three-year ‘smart growth’ communities grant in 2011 to pilot new kinds of communities – hamlet, village and urban infill – and to test out innovative models for zoning codes and local development.

On this last point, Boyer (2015, p. 328) notes that EVI had to initially spend ‘a gruelling eleven months’ to reconcile regulatory, developmental and financing requirements with the municipality, banks and legal firms. These two exemplars suggest that ecovillage success cannot be pre-determined on generic business or project management principles alone. As Christian (2003, p.8) states: ‘Forming a community is like simultaneously trying to start a new business and begin a marriage … requiring many of the same planning and financial skills as launching a successful business enterprise, and the same capacities for trust, good will and honest, kind inter-personal communications as marrying your sweetheart’.

The significance of social learning and its implications are discussed further in the third idea from our analysis.
IDEA 3: SOCIAL COHESION AND SHARED GOVERNANCE ARE CRITICAL FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING PROCESSES

In 2004, GEN ecovillage educators formalised the Ecovillage Design Mandala, identifying that resilient futures and societies need systemic designs that encompass practice-based interrelationships among social, economy, ecology dimensions with an overall cultural or spiritual worldview (GEN Solutions 2018). The documented experiences of various ecovillages suggest that across these four dimensions, getting the social dimension right appears to be hardest to implement because of the following challenges:

- Ecovillage decisions involve complex human motivations, attitudes and interests that are magnified when making collective rather than individual decisions (i.e. impact of decisions, implications, and scope of commitments for common infrastructure).
- These collective decisions must be made with initial strangers who will become close neighbours with mutual and ongoing interdependent effects on one’s lifestyle and livelihood. Hence values fit, control or privacy (considered a tacit Australian cultural characteristic when discussing financial matters) can become issues generating conflict and tension.
- Individuals and families typically have little or no training in making decisions affecting lifestyle choices in contrast to work activities or professional development. Rather, social capabilities and style may be more influenced by family values or beliefs and adulthood experiences.
- Decisions to buy into an ecovillage require a certain level of financial affordability typically associated with an age range from mid-thirties or later with professional or vocational sources of employment. Such characteristics may shape biases, priorities and flexibility in later-in-life learning.

To assist member social cohesion, many ecovillages have adopted a dynamic form of governance called sociocracy (Aristizabal 2015, Christian 2016, GEN Governance 2018). Sociocratic principles aim for decisions to be made by achieving member consent (opportunity to present a reasoned ‘no, or agreement that you can live with the decision’), rather than consensus which aims to satisfy individual preferences. Change process techniques such as learning circles are used to obtain equitable and transparent input.

Learning governance together in an ecovillage can be a difficult social learning process because community policy decisions will have long-term effects on the entire community – e.g. housing designs, financial expenditures, utilisation of natural resources – that can affect utopian ecovillage imaginings by members that are not necessarily shared by others.

Table 3 on the following page summarises Exemplar 3, Earthaven Ecovillage learning its way through years of social conflicts by iteratively adapting its governance processes to accommodate blocking member perspectives and idiosyncrasies.

Such lessons learned seem to support Sanford’s (2017, p. 135) view that in order to live sustainably, relational intelligence (including emotional intelligence) ‘enables individuals to understand their own and others’ emotions … and the need to express both positive and negative aspects of our experiences in being accepted’.

Bruns Eco Village in Brunswick Heads, New South Wales (Exemplar 4) further reinforces this relational connection by stating directly on its home webpage:

- ‘We challenge the mainstream concept that success = ownership’
- ‘We advocate that success = connection; success = energy independence; success = interdependence’.

Unlike most ecovillages, the founders of Bruns Eco Village have chosen NOT to follow the sequential ecovillage establishment process (Figure 2) when they launched their vision in 2016. Priorities are to educate future members about social cohesion through comprehensive Village Development Days using sociocratic training. The ecovillage property has been identified but not yet purchased. The basis of Bruns Eco Village living is a model of long-term rental (99 year lease) and socially-responsible investment with viable economic returns – an innovative variant to traditional ecovillage design and home ownership.
IDEA 4: ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY MEANS INCOME-SHARING BASED ON COMMUNITY COMPETENCIES

In order to survive, most ecovillages must market and advocate externally for community fit and membership renewal. This is particularly important for ecovillages that espouse spiritual lifestyle visions (e.g. Auroville in India or Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka) or combined spiritual/educational aims (e.g. Findhorn in Scotland). Ecovillages often create visitor retreats providing short-term accommodation stays and/or educational courses that reinforce an overall ‘pray-eat-stay-learn’ (educational ecotourism) positioning. While these activities could potentially generate profitable ecovillage returns, our perception from the literature is that they are usually not designed as primary sources of commercial revenues to allow members to live well without resorting to supplemental external employment. That is, they are important for ecovillage reputational positioning (i.e. culturally attractive to visit and to consider for lifestyle and community reasons) but not necessarily targeted to be commercially successful businesses.

Instead, some ecovillages have generated community competencies that generate scalar returns or act as source capabilities that can be further leveraged into multiple future businesses. Importantly, there are two critical aspects to ecovillage-based business development that centre on the importance of relationality in joint efforts:

- Businesses are working practice means to learn together, to share past professional skills and experiences from multiple members and/or to reskill to create shared innovations where skill synergies exist, and
- Structural relationality, i.e. putting in place a clear income-sharing strategy with explicit principles for community businesses to generate commercial returns. Profits to remain community funds for future reinvestment purposes. This requires not only collective negotiation/agreement but a high level of mutual trust and acceptance among members regarding equitable or equivalent efforts.

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### Table 1: The governance experience at Earthaven (Source: Christian 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community size</th>
<th>Exemplar 3 Earthaven (near Asheville, NC, USA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Processes that encourage collaboration | • Checkin  
• Threshings  
• Heartshare  
• Gifting Circle |
| Ineffective governance practices that led to conflict | 1994-2006: Consensus-with-unanimity decision making (approve, stand aside, block)  
• ‘Gridlock’ due to frequent blocks  
• Entrenched stopping positions made by a few members: ‘tyranny of the minority’  
• Impact: Fed-up members, dwindling meeting attendance particularly by enthusiastic younger members who disengaged from the governance process |
| First change to governance practices | 2007-2012: Consensus-minus-one (criteria for a valid block needs 85% supermajority agreement) (proposal reworked and re-voted)  
• Considered sub-optimal but at least a way to move forward |
| Second change to governance practices | January 2014: Consensus with supermajority1  
(non-support views acknowledged and documented, valid block criteria, supermajority 61.8% vote of original proposal if no alternative offered)  
• Supermajority % a reaction to tensions eliminating the minus-one option |
| Third change to governance practices | June 2014: Consensus with supermajority2  
(non-support views acknowledged and documented, valid block criteria, supermajority 66% vote of original proposal if no alternative offered) |
The following four exemplars illustrate different ecovillage economic approaches.

**Exemplar 5: Regenerative bacteria development at Konohana near Mount Fuji, Japan**

Konohana is a small ecovillage (85 members) that mimics the close ‘working together’ activities of a traditional family in ancient Japan. It aims to live in harmony with nature. A principle to cooperate with rather than eradicate bacteria had led to the development of a fermented bacterial brew (Konohana-kin) when added to soil (and fed to livestock) has grown 260 varieties of vegetable, 11 different kinds of rice and side products of fertilisers, cleaning agents and preventative medicines. The additive was developed by a member with professional background as an agricultural scientist. This capability has resulted in Konohana producing 100% organic food (lifestyle positioning) and being 100% self-sufficient (all members work and live off the land with excess food sold locally) within a sustainable society philosophy of generating ‘just enough’ to live in harmony (Brown 2015). Furthermore, Konohana disseminates its agricultural knowledge practices across 10 Japanese ecovillages (ecovillage education) further contributing to enhancing national economy.

**Exemplar 6: Renewable research capabilities at Damanhur in northwest Italy**

Damanhur is located in a beautiful sub-alpine Italian valley and prides itself on being a sustainable ‘laboratory for the future of humankind’. Each neighbourhood community (called a ‘nucleo’ – 30 in all) aims to demonstrate one particular human capability, such as a molecular biology laboratory for researching genetically modified organisms (GMO) leading to seed saving strategies, solar energy developments, organic farming or playfulness/creativity training. Member expertise and business synergies emerge through ongoing review of outcomes and results. At 600 members in size, Damanhur exhibits a portfolio of robust development capabilities compared to Konohana that has a single focus on basic food production given its small size and Japanese dietary characteristics. Essentially, ‘skilled labour is transforming high-value raw materials into very high-value goods’ (Litfin 2014, Litfin’s italics). Further, Damanhur has created their unique ecovillage currency called creditos, a mechanism to keep consumer spending and value for services retained within the ecovillage.

**Exemplar 7: Commercial sales of hammocks at Twin Oaks in rural central Virginia, USA**

For over 50 years (established in 1967), Twin Oaks has successfully launched and sustained community businesses. Its top three businesses by commercial returns are selling handcrafted hammocks, organic foods (tofu, tempeh, soymilk) and book indexing services. In response to unsuccessfully farming tobacco (original property purpose), wheat or corn for profit, members experimented with hammock production and perhaps more likely, a happy coincidence, gained a long-term homewares contract with Pier One Imports (2017 net sales of USD1.8 billion) for all the hammocks members could produce. This 1967-68 commercial success enabled Twin Oaks over many decades to diversify customers and businesses by remaining focused on a pooled income-sharing strategy. All revenues earned by the collective are used for furthering community benefits through a shared treasury legal tax structure. Individual members receive only a small personal expenditure allowance (USD75 per month).

**Exemplar 8: Organic farming, building and lumber businesses at Svanholm in Skibby (60km outside Copenhagen) Denmark**

One of the largest rural ecovillages by property size (988 acres for 100 members), Svanholm has demonstrated a 30+ year commitment to organic farmland and related farm businesses using 440 acres of the property. Svanholm’s philosophy is not spiritual, religious or political but strongly emphasises ‘self-government’ (selvforvaltning) with direct input into community living choices and business development. A Svanholm practice is the extensive and selective member screening process to accept only people who are considered ‘economically capable and psychologically mature’ (Litfin, 2014, p. 95). Such criteria are linked to the following member and ecovillage income-sharing characteristics:
• All entering member financial assets are pooled into community funds. Members are paid a minimum
agreed salary (noted as USD47,000 in 2009) reviewed annually.
• Two-thirds of Svanholm members still work outside the ecovillage with the remainder working on
community businesses (this proportion may have changed since 2009). Everyone’s salary is publicly
known. The wide variation of financial contributions from members (ranging from professional
salaries to pensioner payments) is accepted as socially fair given diverse community contributions to
the ecovillage.
• Svanholm is legally structured as a commercial organisation, unlike many ecovillages who operate
coop-erative, not-for-profit or community association structures.
• Member gross income is split 80% to the collective versus 20% to the individual. The financial
performance results, forecasts and budgets are reviewed and finalised annually.

Summary:
• Long-term resilience and persistence are required from a critical mass of pioneer members to push
through the dream of living in a thriving ecovillage, given likely unanticipated barriers to this kind
of alternative lifestyle. Additionally, ecovillage sustainability requires complementary member
capabilities and a deep understanding of local market needs and economic priorities so that
adaptation strategies can be aligned. Even then, many events occur by happenstance or are
uncontrollable so considerable agility is needed from all members.
• Many ecovillagers regard social learning competencies as critical enablers through which
sustainable ecology and economic enterprises can be delivered. Relational skills and intelligence
must be learned together and infused into everyday working practices.
• An enterprise business strategy should conventionally apply universal business principles of
customers, markets, scale and capabilities to individual businesses. Further, a business portfolio
approach can distinguish different purposes of economic activity ranging from cost recovery to
commercial profits, justify rationale such as learning value or experimentation and manage risks.
• A useful characteristic adopted by other ecovillages for economic sustainability is an agreed
income-sharing strategy and structure to reward collective rather than individual performance.
Perspectives on economic ‘value’ and ‘success’ thus need to be interpreted and implemented
accordingly.
3. Living at Narara Ecovillage: Perspectives from Members

This section summarises the findings of data collection activities to understand NEV member demographics, member ecovillage aspirations and their perspectives on economic activities, business and sustainability.

DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

This section summarises the findings from four primary data collection activities:

- An anonymous online survey asking 32 questions regarding membership, economic practice and demographics. Overall, a total of 62 completed responses (including one paper response) were received from a NEV distribution list of 125, resulting in a response rate of just under 50%.
- Individual interviews with ten NEV members and interested parties. Each interview typically lasted for one hour, was conducted by two researchers, audio recorded with prior consent and professionally transcribed.
- Discussions from one focus group involving nine NEV members facilitated by two researchers.
- Researcher review and reflections based on a cross-section of NEV documents, field observations, photographs taken at the NEV site and onsite visits.

The research team obtained signed consent forms for individual and group interviews. NEV members (or potential NEV members on the distribution list) accessed the survey through an URL link provided in an email from a member of the NEV Business Team. No member of the UOW research team could access specific email addresses or the master distribution list. In this section and throughout this document, any quotations or comments from interviewees use aliases to protect individual confidentiality as required by university research ethics.

THE NEV STORY SO FAR

In 1999, founder Lyndall Parris and her husband Dave dreamed of living in a village community that aimed to ‘live lighter’ in the world and more sustainably, and together with a community of ‘like-minded individuals’ who supported and cared for each other. In the nearly 20 years that has passed, actual events indicate that reality is not as simplistic or sequential as Figure 2 might indicate. For example, uncontrollable external events such as the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, or different approaches to local government approvals due to local council mergers in 2017 have delayed the realisation of Lyndall’s vision – see Figure 3 for an abbreviated chronology of NEV events from 1999 to 2018.

Certainly resilience and persistence from the pioneers have been tested given the manifestation of various barriers preventing the full realisation of that initial vision. 20 years later, is there a shared collective understanding from remaining pioneers and newcomers about how best to develop and ultimately sustain this Central Coast semi-urban ecovillage.

The next section provides some indicative demographic characteristics and aspirations of existing NEV members based on our research findings.
NEV actual key events 1999-2018

1999
Lyndall
Parrish
ecovillage vision

2004
Sydney Coastal Ecovillage
(SCEV) Inc. Association established

2014
Name change to
Narara Ecovillage (NEV) Co-operative Ltd

2016
NEV Power Pty Ltd established

2017
NEV Water (WICA licence)
approved – division of NEV

2008
Semi-urban 150 acre property Tender of $9.65M unsuccessful

2012/13
Semi-urban 150 acre property Tender of $5M successful 36 pioneers

2012
Project Director hired

2014
Outreach program started (NELN)

2015-16
Governance committees and working bees established

2016-17
NEV Power (ARENA grants)
Smart Grid $2.5M for electricity supply
Application for WICA water licence

2017
Common roads built

2017
Council merger

2017
Target 160 households (Stage1 and Stage2)

2018
Housing subdivision approval received in March

Figure 3: Narara Ecovillage Key Events 1999-2018
Sources: Parrish (2016) and NEV website.

NEV MEMBERS: WHO ARE THEY?

Member survey findings suggest that NEV members comprise a relatively homogeneous group in terms of age, marital status, gender and education (Figures 4-7).

Figure 4: NEV member demographics: Age (n=61)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 26
Figure 5: NEV member demographics: Marital status (n=61)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 27

Figure 6: NEV member demographics: Gender (n=61)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 28

Figure 7: NEV member demographics: Education (n=61)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 30
**Age:** 72% of the NEV members who responded to the survey were aged 55 years or over (Figure 4). 13 respondents were from households with children under the age of 18.

**Marital status:** 72% of survey respondents were either married or living with a partner (Figure 5).

**Gender:** The majority of NEV members who completed the survey were female (Figure 6).

**Education:** 75% of survey respondents were educated to university degree level and 67% of these held postgraduate degrees (Figure 7).

**Residence:** NEV members were asked where they have lived during the past 12 months (Figure 8). Nearly half (48%) of the survey respondents reported that they live in the Central Coast area. A significant majority have been living in the Sydney metropolitan area (41%) and others have been living elsewhere in NSW, in VIC, in TAS and overseas.

**Commute time:** NEV members were also asked about their current commute time to work over a week (Figure 9). The largest group of respondents reported spending no time commuting to work. The next largest group reported spending 5-10 hours per week commuting to work.

![Figure 8: Place of residence, previous 12 months (n=61)](source: NEV member survey, Question 25)

![Figure 9: Length of current commute (time per week, n=57)](source: NEV member survey, Question 12)

**NEV Members: Ecovillage Aspirations**

The research team was interested in finding out what motivated NEV members to join the co-op (Figures 10 and 11 on the following page). Respondents were able to select more than one motivation from a list provided, or they could add other motivations. Community and environmentally sustainable living were the two factors that were most commonly selected in Question 2. However, under the following question ‘What is the meaning of ecovillage to you?’ The word *community* featured 20% more times in responses than *sustainable.*
Figure 10: What drew you to NEV? (multiple responses possible, n=90)
Source: NEV Member survey, Question 2

Figure 11 presents a word cloud illustrating the 50 most frequently used words in response to Question 3 within the NEV member survey.

Figure 11: Word cloud: What is the meaning of an ecovillage to you?
Source: NEV member survey, Question 3
The following are a selection of quotes taken from the responses to Question 3 in the member survey:

- A new model for human settlements that are sustainable environmentally, socially and culturally, economically and that also nourishes our human spirits. Life-enhancing rather than depleting.
- A testbed to figure out on a small scale how exactly people might live in a regenerative way.
- An ecovillage should have ethical values that recognizes we are all stewards of our planet and have the responsibility to model a way of living that epitomizes these values in a sustainable way giving a sense of ‘hope’ (especially young people) a successful tangible societal living model for the future. Applied principles of economics, permaculture, and regeneration are embedded in an economic ecological vision including design, buildings modelling health, well-being for all. Future proofing model.
- A place to live simply, enjoying the land and environment in a community setting with like-minded people. This includes producing our own food, community meals, interaction and support, living in a passive solar small footprint, dwelling constructed from natural materials.
- Model of sharing resources, especially sharing projects, e.g. growing food, living sustainably.
- This has changed since joining. I now realise people have to get along or it fails. Community.
- An ecovillage is a place to create a viable, healthy, thriving environment for all generations.
- Mutually supportive, cooperation, strong connections with neighbours

NEV MEMBERS: PERSPECTIVES ON ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, BUSINESSES AND SUSTAINABILITY

In order to develop possible pathways for sustaining economic practices at NEV, it is important to firstly establish what skills and knowledge already exist within the community. Second, understanding what working teams members are currently participating in and finally what economic activities members are currently considering as possible future options in or outside of NEV.

To understand what skills and knowledge exists within the community, NEV members were asked to report on their existing business management, financial management, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills within the survey. Figure 12 (on the following page) illustrates that the respondents predominantly felt confident in their interpersonal skills, but reported much less experience in financial management than any other area.
Figure 12: NEV member skills and experience (n=29)
Source: NEV member survey, Questions 19-22
The members who responded to the survey represented a number of the established teams at NEV (Figure 13). The largest numbers of respondents were members of the Business team and/or the Community and Development team. It is interesting to note that a high number of members are not currently participating in any teams.

Recognising the economic activity interests that members are considering is vital to analysing possible sustainable economic pathways for NEV. Of the 39 respondents who answered Question 16 (Describe the kind of economic activity you are planning to undertake), 62% intend to start a new economic enterprise when at NEV (Figure 14). From those who intend to start a new economic activity, and gathered from the interviews with NEV members, a list of proposed business ideas has been developed (Table 2). The ideas have been grouped under what have been expressed to the research team as the ‘Four Pillars’ of agriculture, food, education and accommodation, ideas which fall beyond these categories have been grouped under the additional categories of wellbeing, infrastructure, creative arts and other.

In the interviews, some members acknowledged that there are numerous and diverse business ideas, referring to ‘a hotbed of crazy ideas’ and ‘a telephone book of ideas’. While some business ideas have been developed strategically, by identifying both a gap and demand in the market, many ideas are based on member interests; one interviewee stated ‘if you want to grow beans, go and grow beans’.

Figure 13: NEV Team membership (multiple responses possible, n=91)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 8

Figure 14: Describe the economic activity you are planning to undertake at NEV (n=39)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 16
Table 2: Business ideas for economic practice at NEV
Source: NEV member survey, Q16 and NEV member interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Wellbeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>Cafe</td>
<td>Wellness centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquaponics</td>
<td>Food preparation</td>
<td>Co-operative health centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food growing</td>
<td>Dehydrating produce</td>
<td>Health and Wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat-keeping</td>
<td>Local farmers’ market</td>
<td>Physiotherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mushroom growing</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Infrastructure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AirBnb</td>
<td>Yoga studio</td>
<td>Management of NEV Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campground</td>
<td>Permaculture courses</td>
<td>Handyperson/property maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weddings</td>
<td>Tours</td>
<td>Community transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohousing</td>
<td>Seminars</td>
<td>Heavy metals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dormitory</td>
<td>Living Lab</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Office space</td>
<td>Earthship courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hemp construction courses</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bush school</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative arts</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Eco-funerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting studio</td>
<td>Funds Management</td>
<td>Circular economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second hand business</td>
<td>Farmbot</td>
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When asked about the likely business structure of the economic activity (question 17), 38% of respondents want to establish private ownership of a business within NEV compared with 34% of respondents who are interested in having part ownership of a NEV cooperative business. NEV members appear to be uninterested in being employees of either a private business at NEV or a NEV cooperative business. The remaining respondents who selected ‘Other’ are interested in consulting and opening private businesses outside of NEV (Figure 15). These results are significant in that while the data reveals that NEV members have come into an ecovillage for community reasons, when it comes to economic practices, a majority of NEV members are still operating with an individual mindset.

Figure 15: Likely business structure of economic activity (n=29)
Source: NEV member survey, Question 17
From our Section 2 discussions, the concept of ‘sustainability’ in ecovillages can be understood from several dimensions, at least spiritually, socially, ecological and economically. Hong and Vicdan (2016) highlight the tensions and uncertainties that can arise from balancing the ‘utopian re-imaginings’ of living in an ecovillage with the learning challenges of actually implementing communal practices in a membership environment (known as ‘heterotopia’ in human geography research).

Our research findings reflect some uncertainty in current business expectations or in advocating specific businesses that stretch beyond personal interests to contributing to ecovillage economic sustainability. This is possibly a timing/focus issue as most members are not living onsite given extended housing construction delays.

Certainly at this stage of NEV’s growth, members are reluctant to prioritise economic mechanisms or to create too much bureaucracy but see village sustainability as an important community economics task. In response to the last survey question (Q32) about how to develop sustainable economic practices at NEV, some members responded:

- ‘I’m wary of having fees charged for everything. I would like to see lots of free activity in the village. It brings activity and energy through the gates and I trust that economic benefit will come’.
- ‘These will take time to develop – need to be thinking 5 years out’.
- ‘We need a NEV level business strategy which individual businesses ideas can be checked against and slotted into’.
- ‘Many ideas have been before their time but could be good later on. The challenge is in identifying the time wasters and focusing on the most suitable right now especially those that will bring in money to help maintain the ecovillage’.

**Summary:**

- While *community* and *sustainable living* are the overriding reasons that NEV survey respondents joined the co-op;
  - There are a high number of members currently not actively participating in any of the working teams; and
  - A majority of NEV survey respondents want to start a private business at NEV or become a part owner of a NEV business in order to develop sustaining economic activities at NEV.
- With a vibrant and diverse array of business ideas for economic practice, the need for sustaining economic pathways that considers all NEV member needs and aligns with overarching community values is required.
4. Sustaining NEV Life: Economic Pathways to Consider

This section summarises the current perceived NEV business development approach and rationale alongside recommended NEV economic pathways for consideration.

Over the last half-century, we have all witnessed significant global change that is still transforming industrialised society and ecovillages. Unfettered economic growth and material consumerism in Western industrialised society do not necessarily improve human well-being (Jackson 2017), indicating definite limits to growth that should be addressed systemically (Meadows et al. 2004). In a world of finite and eroding natural resources, individuals and groups have been experimenting for numerous decades to find ways to live ‘lighter’, smaller and more simply (Assadourian 2010, Girardet 1992, Schumacher 2000). Ecovillages are similarly moving from what Dawson (2015, p.1) calls ‘relatively isolated counter-cultural experiments … [to creating alliances that are] transforming their surrounding bioregions’ in progressive ways. They are increasingly reflective of a new mainstream way of living that questions the effectiveness of individualism, consumption practices, materiality and classical economics/employment models by offering alternative options.

The lessons of embedded individualism are hard to unlearn (Becker 2005) but NEV members express a strong desire to become a demonstration ecovillage that role models innovative communal and communitarian practices. Our research interactions and interviews reinforce the enthusiasm with which NEV members (and the pioneers in particular) are tackling various ecological, social and cultural, and economic challenges to create a viable, thriving example of semi-urban lifestyle living at the Narara site.

Although economic success is not the dominant reason members choose to live within an ecovillage, economic survival (but preferably prosperity) fuels the engine and capacity to live good lives together. Apart from the capital-intensive implementation approaches to manage common utilities such as electricity and power, we perceive NEV economic activities are developing organically and somewhat haphazardly, rather than through any kind of formal business development process. They are mostly driven by certain members who have particular interests, skills and experience in those activities. This is perhaps appropriate at this formative stage of NEV’s development as members are not yet living onsite and collaborative planning difficulties can arise due to distance and communication challenges.

The issue that Figure 16 (on the following page) raises is whether NEV should be developing more substantial commercial, yet sustainably-sensitive, product/service ideas that can secure new annuity sources. Self-sustaining profitable businesses (e.g. hammocks for The Farm) relieve the financial pressure of pioneers and incoming members having to continually self-fund, increase member levies or seek external funding grants.
Figure 16: Perceived NEV business development approach and rationale
Sources: NEV member interviews and discussions

Our document review did not uncover the existence of an overall NEV business strategy document *per se* but our discussions with NEV members (from the Business Team and with potential leaders of individual businesses) identify a screening framework and preliminary ideas at various stages of discussion and specificity (Table 3). Under this construct, the NEV Business Team functions as a business incubator: initiating, encouraging, reviewing and approving the portfolio of businesses with individual leaders expected to develop, deliver and performance manage their own business plans. A future NEV Business Manager may be useful in providing portfolio integration, assessment or start-up guidance.

**Table 3: NEV business screening framework and preliminary ideas for economic growth**
Sources: NEV member interviews and focus group discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of potential NEV businesses</th>
<th>Member consortium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEV-owned co-operative businesses</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rationale - required utilities/services for common infrastructure or needs</td>
<td>• Rationale – member interest/commitment, common asset utilisation, co-operative policies (e.g. Safe Working Practices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Managed at NEV co-operative level</td>
<td>• Managed by each consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All returns to the co-operative</td>
<td>• Agreed income-sharing and investment model with co-operative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staffed using task-specific skills – from members and/or external others as required</td>
<td>Staffed typically with NEV members using shared skills development and synergies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Member business</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contractor/external manager</strong> to rent NEV assets and run commercial business(es)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rationale – member skills/interests/commitment</td>
<td>• Rationale – commercial returns, under-utilised NEV assets, lack of NEV skills, member benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some nominal contribution for usage of common assets</td>
<td>• Fit with NEV ethos and lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staffed dominantly by the member business leader, household members or a small number of other members</td>
<td>• Business plan returns and requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May or may not be staffed by NEV members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In conventional organisational business analysis, Johnson et al. (2008, p. 54) raise the importance of developing a rigorous Customer Value Proposition (CVP) – using the universal principles of targeting the market and knowing your customer – based on a clear profit formula (basis of financial success) and applying key implementation resources and processes. Our Section 2 exemplars highlight some examples of where ecovillagers developed CVPs suitable for their markets and customers and tailored around member capabilities that either existed or could be reasonably developed over time. Market/customer demand that is locally-achieved and integrated is further illustrated by Boyer’s (2015) diffusion/scale-up ecovillage case studies with Litfin (2014, chapter 4, pp. 77-110) cautioning not to underestimate the importance of financial value exchange as a basis of locally connecting people and resources (and also by allowing members to continue to pursue local employment outside their ecovillages).

At the micro small business level, we perceive initial NEV business ideas as mostly building upon existing personal competencies with varying levels of rigour around market and customer demand (i.e. they are being designed ‘inside-out’ rather than ‘outside-in’). This could result in members pursuing fulfilling businesses but at economic losses or missing emerging ‘big ideas’ due to lack of market scanning or networking. Business coaching assistance or affiliation with business incubators could support NEV members enhance their sustainability-oriented business skills and contacts. The University of Wollongong has its iAccelerate program and Regional Development Australia has a Central Coast Business Incubator based at the University of Newcastle’s Ourimbah campus. Interestingly, Question 23 in our survey identified a large set of desired skills from members, including one member ‘wanting to learn more about things vastly removed from my experience to date’.

In particular, having networking discussions and reviews of the Central Coast regional 2036 plan (New South Wales or NSW Government 2016) and Gosford 2025 community strategic plan (Gosford City Council 2013) could uncover mutually-beneficial ‘new economy’ needs with local demand. For example, market-driven NEV business ideas could link into the following regional plan priorities (NSW Government 2016):

- **Goal 1** (A prosperous Central Coast with more jobs close to home)/Direction 7 (Increase job containment in the region) – e.g. a vibrant working Arts precinct and/or food production practices that generate incremental income to the ecovillage, and exhibit new examples of home-based employment and skills development.

- **Goal 2** (Protect the natural environment and manage the use of agricultural and resource lands)/Direction 8 (Recognise the cultural landscape of the Central Coast) – e.g. experiential or stewardship activities to educate and protect the indigenous history, artefacts and biodiversity on the Narara site, generating property tax exemptions or other land benefits or allowances.

- **Goal 4** (A variety of housing choice to suit needs and lifestyles)/Direction 21 (Provide housing choice to meet community needs) – e.g. create new zoning codes or construction examples of co-housing/cluster communities similar to EVI practices at Ithaca. This could lead to new commercial arrangements with local property developers, builders and associated suppliers.

At the village co-operative level, we believe NEV needs to commence a high-impact planning task to agree an income-sharing strategy that drives the portfolio of future NEV businesses. Such a strategy must first determine a realistic financial baseline of ‘share economy’-based living in terms of annual expenses (levies versus salary equivalents). Figure 17 (on the following page) illustrates a potential framework for further discussion.
Populating such a guidance framework can help to educate and attract new members to NEV in clarifying the basis upon which this lifestyle environment will operate economically. Culturally, NEV may not want to go as far as Svanholm did in choosing members who are reportedly ‘economically capable and psychologically mature’ (Litfin 2014, p. 95). Existing members will shortly embark on housing construction as material (rather than passive investment) evidence of working together. These income-sharing principles form the economic structure of a share economy and will surely test individual-versus-collective tensions, and the persistence needed from the members’ communal spirit. Additionally, learning the micro and macro practices of making an ecovillage like Narara work will certainly address the ecological, social and cultural aims so commonly mentioned among member comments from the NEV survey.

Given the economic sustainability focus of this research project, we believe learning ‘how to live good lives’ together can also help to create a robust economic infrastructure for ongoing innovation and experimentation. Unlike ‘old economy’ practices in stable industrial environments with formulaic economic models and consumed/produced products and services, the share economy privileges new forms of capital that have different kinds of value. One such capital privileged by ecovillages is relational capital, an essential aspect of human interactions (Muldur et al. 2015) and exemplified by activities such as volunteering, timebanking and gifting approaches (Arkin 2017, Litfin 2016). The growing field of relational economics (Bathelt & Glückler 2011, Cederholm & Åkerstrom 2016, Stoltz 2017, Zelizer 2012) or integral ecologies (Mickey et al. 2017) recognises, essentially, that the basis of any economic action is embedded in a social relationship and its effects (Zelizer 2012). The alignment with ecovillage aspirations and communal practices would seem ideal if practically, business ideas based on interacting and collaborating together can also translate into bottom-line financial returns that fund the ecovillage’s ongoing prosperity.

In current times of uncertainty and change, continual refinement of approaches (Arkin 2017) and learning-based experimentation with open minds (with goodwill and a collective sense of humour!) appears to be how early-adopter ecovillages have endured over the decades.

**Summary:**
- Current NEV economic activities are developing organically, mostly driven by certain members who have particular interests, skills and experience in those activities.
- The current NEV Business Team functions as a business incubator, providing an initial screening framework for preliminary ideas at various stages of discussion.
5. Insights for Consideration

In closing, our research team appreciate the opportunity to conduct this preliminary research project with NEV members over the last few months and to provide some insights for your consideration.

**Insights for consideration:**

- The establishment of a business portfolio that prioritises, assesses, integrates and provides a holistic view of ideas for economic enterprises at NEV.
- Commence high-impact planning to agree on business frameworks and income-sharing strategies that drives NEV business portfolios in the future.
- Development of a Customer Value Proposition (CVP) to understand the market and customer demand – potential to align with Central Coast regional 2016 plan and Gosford 2025 community strategic plan.
- Harness a business incubator to seek further external grants to support becoming a demonstration site.
- Develop a stakeholder engagement strategy with younger generation members to enable broader diversity and involvement.
- Further develop new member orientation that engages members not only with the vision but also in the working teams and other NEV activities.

Despite the multi-year wait to build the ecovillage at the Narara site, NEV members are finally now at the starting point of constructing ‘a special place to live’ having recently received approval for housing construction from the local council. We wish the NEV members all the best for these exciting ecovillage endeavours imminent in your future and we look forward to an ongoing relationship between Narara Ecovillage and the University of Wollongong.
### Appendix – Ecovillage Sources Reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecovillage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Primary references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Auroville</strong></td>
<td>• Est. 1968 (universal township)</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.auroville.org">www.auroville.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Brunswick Heads EcoVillage** | • Est. 2015  
• Target 160 members  
• 105 acres of land                                                       | • [www.bruns.org](http://www.bruns.org)                  |
| **Crystal Waters Maleny Heads, QLD** | • Est. 1984  
• 200 members  
• 650 acres of land                                                      | • [www.crystalwaters.org](http://www.crystalwaters.org) |
| **Damanhur Vidracco** ITALY | • Est. 1975  
• 600 members  
• 3,700 acres of land                                                     | • [www.damanhur.org](http://www.damanhur.org)            |
| **Earthenhaven Blue Ridge Mountains NC, USA** | • Est. 1994  
• 60 members – target 150  
• 324 acres of land                                                        | • [www.earthhaven.org](http://www.earthhaven.org)       |
| **The Farm Summerton, WV, USA** | • Est. 1971  
• 320 (1971), 1200 (1980) members  
• 1750 acres of land                                                      | • [www.thefarm.org/](http://www.thefarm.org/)             |
| **Findhorn SCOTLAND**    | • Est. 1962  
• 600 members  
• 25 acres of land                                                        | • [www.findhorn.org](http://www.findhorn.org)             |
| **Ithaca** NY, USA       | • Est. 1991  
• 160 members  
• 175 acres of land                                                        | • [www.ithacaecovillage.org](http://www.ithacaecovillage.org) |
| **Konohana, Fujinomiya, JAPAN** | • Est. 1994  
• 85 members                                                      | • [www.konohana-family.org/for-non-japanese-speakers/](http://www.konohana-family.org/for-non-japanese-speakers/) |
| **Narara Narara, NSW**   | • Est. 1997  
• Target 160 households  
• 160 acres land on which 30 acres will be used for housing          | • [www.nararaecovillage.com](http://www.nararaecovillage.com) |
| **Sarvodaya SRI LANKA**  | • Est. 2004  
• 15,000 villages                                                      | • [www.sarvodaya.org](http://www.sarvodaya.org)           |
| **Svanholm Skibby**      | • Est. 1978  
• 100 members  
• 988 acres (prior wealthy estate)  
• 440 acres used for farming                                              | • [http://svanholm.dk/index.php?id=73](http://svanholm.dk/index.php?id=73) (English site) |
| **Twin Oaks** Louisa, VA, USA | • Est. 1967  
• 90 adults, 15 children  
• 450 acres of land                                                       | • [www.twinoakscommunity.org](http://www.twinoakscommunity.org) |
| **Tasman Nubeena, TAS**  | • Est. 2013  
• 16 members – target 100  
• 19 acres of land                                                       | • [www.tasmanecovillage.org](http://www.tasmanecovillage.org) |
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Dawson, J 2015, From islands to networks: An exploration of the history-and a glimpse into the future-of the ecovillage movement, Schumacher College, Totnes.


Parris, L 2016, Lyndall’s Story Narara, viewed 10/12/2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty8tSbDyxe0.


