

# Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations

**31 October 2011, Munich, Germany**

**Sponsors:** Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) & Research in Community e.V. (RIC)

**Conveners:** Marcus Andreas (RCC / RIC), Felix Wagner (RIC / University of Freiburg)

**Participants:** Johanna Alcantara, Marcus Andreas (RCC / RIC), Maria Daria Cojocaru (LMU Munich), Friederike Gezork (University of Marburg), Gayle Goldstick (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Andreas Koch (Lebensgemeinschaft Parimal), Julia Kommerell (Ökodorf Sieben Linden), Anna Kovasna (Njord / Lunds Universitet), Tara Johanne Liesegang, Geseko von Lüpke (Journalist), Claudia Maderer, Christof Mauch (RCC), Ronny Müller (Lebensdorf), Ursula Münster (RCC / LMU Munich), Peter Niedersteiner (LMU Munich), John Oleani, Jenny Pickerill (University of Leicester) (unable to attend), Kaidi Tamm (University of Giessen), Felix Wagner (RIC / University of Freiburg), Julie Weissmann (LMU Munich), David Wenzel (Capacity Consulting), Rebecca Zehr (LMU Munich), Jörg Zimmermann (Ökodorf Sieben Linden)

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This transdisciplinary workshop provided an opportunity to learn about and discuss ecovillages as contemporary expressions of environmentalism and social change endeavors. Different perspectives were provided by means of a variety of speakers with backgrounds in ecovillage activism, political journalism, and academic research. The aim was to foster the cooperation between activist and academic approaches towards ... a culture of sustainability?

RCC Director **CHRISTOF MAUCH** gave a warm welcome and introduced the RCC to the guests. Afterwards each participant introduced him- or herself. Not only the speakers but also the guests came from the fields of academia and/or activism.

Opening the workshop, **FELIX WAGNER** and **MARCUS ANDREAS** introduced ecovillages as unexplored territories for research and suggested understanding the endeavors of these intentional communities as 'transformative utopianism' (Lockyer). Although their specific utopian horizon may

not ever be reached, their journey will have a transformative impact on society nevertheless. This idea was reflected in Andreas's and Wagner's discussion of the prominent ecovillage definition by Gilman, which frames ecovillages as elaborate *attempts towards more sustainability, or what might be called a 'culture of sustainability.'*

**JULIA KOMMERELL** presented an 'emic' perspective into the inner-workings of the ecovillage of Sieben Linden. She was able to show a mosaic of practices, physical structures, and people—which together make up the fabric of this model ecovillage. Kommerell's fascinating presentation also included criticism of Sieben Linden and successfully enriched common perspectives on alternative livelihoods.

By making use of scenario-thinking, journalist and author **GESEKO VON LÜPKE** took the audience into an utopian future and then asked in return: What kind of 'great turning' (Macy) has brought us here? What seeds were already present at the beginning of the twenty-first century? In three tiers, he analyzed current environmentalism and positioned ecovillages right in the heart of the movement as 'islands of the future'.

Geographer **JENNY PICKERILL'S** paper was read by Marcus Andreas. Her case studies explored the conjunction of eco-housing and eco-villages. On issues like comfort and aesthetics, she discussed the importance of cultural aspects of a transformation towards sustainability and raised important issues for activist academics, which were taken up by **ANNA KOVASNA**. As the director of the Swedish ecovillage network, she is part of a large collaborative transdisciplinary research project in the Baltic Sea regions. However, Kovasna also works as an anthropologist researcher and in this combination of roles was able to address important questions about normativity, attitudes, and methods.

Following these presentations, the audience then participated in a '**World Café**' by discussing promising future research perspectives and best practices for collaboration in a transdisciplinary fashion. Most of the perspectives were geared towards establishing common ground between academics and activists first, before investigating joint research goals. Overall, the workshop was a very lively experience with vital discussions. Several participants expressed their wish for further networking. The RCC will develop a publication to further foster the successful line of inquiries of the workshop. Those interested in receiving information about this community-based sustainability research, please write to [contact@researchincommunity.net](mailto:contact@researchincommunity.net).

--Marcus Andreas