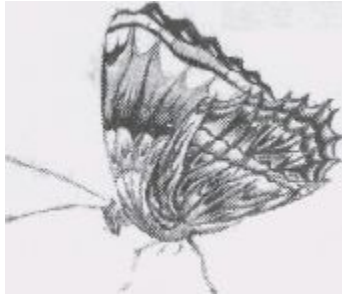


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Chapter 3.1



BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES IN RUSSIA

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ECO-SETTLEMENT NEVO-ECOVILLE

Eco-settlements in post soviet Russia began to emerge in the early 1990s. This period has been characterized as a time when the Soviet Union disintegrated and new national states came into being. These newly independent states were formed from former Soviet republics. The Russian state at this time found itself in a profound economic crisis and conditions of social instability. At this time Russian society had been living through an especially acute ideological crisis. The prevailing communist ideology was replaced by a pluralism of opinions and ideas. Diverse groups began to form with their own ideologies, world-views, and understandings of the process of transformation that was taking place. The time was ripe for the formation eco-settlements on Russian soil. This tendency was evoked by new ecological problems, new techniques and technologies, a new level of awareness, and understanding of the importance of a sustainable way of life (Gilman, 1994: 11).

The eco-settlement "Nevo-Ecoville" is located in the Republic of Karelia, not far from the settlement of Reuskula, Sortavala Rayon, on the site of an old farmstead. The project was started in 1995 on a territory of 29 hectares, on the north shore of Lake Ladoga. The main enterprise in the settlement of Reuskula is a stock-raising state farm; there is no industry and the population is less than 1000 people. The settlement belongs to the category of the so-called "dying out" communities. Since the basis of its population consists of pensioners, young people depart for larger population centres because in Reuskula they cannot find jobs and a good quality of life.

The project's ultimate objective is to construct on the territory of the Sortavala Rayon, a sustainable, economically self-sufficient settlement, consisting of a general cultural-consumer service centre and small settlements, located near private and cooperative, ecologically-oriented small business outlets (fruit sapling nursery, experimental kitchen-garden, a nursery forest, an ecological tourism centre, etc.). This project is supposed to become a model of the revival of rural life. This model is supposed to draw on everything progressive from the traditional Russian and Finnish village and raise the prestige of life in rural areas.

METHODS

Research on the ecological village Reuskula NGO "Nevo-Ecoville" was conducted utilizing these methods: autobiographical interviews, inclusive and

participatory observation, and analysis of documents. Expeditions were carried out in October 1996, in February 1998, in August 1998 (in conjunction with American researchers), and in October 1998. A total of 15 people were questioned during the expeditions. Six of these people were women, seven were men and two were children. Of the 15 people interviewed, there were five married couples. The spouses were interviewed together. A total of 21 interviews were carried out. During each expedition, researchers tried to speak with as many of the previously interviewed people as possible. These follow up interviews were used to follow the dynamics of the eco-settlements development.

During the first expedition, participatory observations were carried out (Poplin, 1972: 276). At that time, 4 adults were living permanently in the settlement. The leader and his family did not live permanently in the settlement. At the time of the second expedition, 11 adults and 8 children were residing in the settlement. Of the 19 people (including the children), only 10 adults were interviewed. At the time of the third expedition only participant observation was used. At the time of the fourth expedition, 6 adults and 6 children were planning to spend the winter in the settlement. One family (3 people) left the settlement for a time; two older people decided to remain in town, depending on the state of their health, one family (3 people) left permanently and one person left the village temporarily.

HISTORY OF THE CREATION OF THE SETTLEMENT

The initiators of the eco-settlement were former residents of large cities, who in the early 1980s, traveled to the Valaam island in order to work on a historical-cultural preserve. Valaam is the site of a major Russian Orthodox monastery, vacated under Communism by the church. In 1989, the monastery returned to the island and began to carry out a policy, which gradually forced the secular residents and organizations to leave the island. Around 1994, a group of 6 people who owned 2 cooperatives on the islands - a restoration co-op and a horticultural coop - decided to transfer to the mainland. They did not return to the megalopolis because they considered urbanization depraved, but decided to construct a sustainable community of a new type in a new place, uniting in itself the positive attributes of urban and rural life - "a cultural village", in their words. The leader of the group, Ivan Goncharov, had an unsuccessful experience in 1986-87 on the Karelian Isthmus in the Leningrad Oblast in building a community, based on Rerikh's ideas of Living Ethics or Agni-Yoga. From the failure he drew the following lessons: a sustainable settlement must be economically self-sufficient and the philosophical-religious views of its residents should remain their personal affair.

In Autumn 1994, after receiving compensation from the monastery for the land and buildings of the co-ops and private houses in which they had lived, the settlers moved to the place where they would realize their programme - to the settlement of Reuskula in the Sortavala Region. They spent the first winter in a house, which they rented from village residents. Most of the money set aside for building homes was "consumed" by inflation, and in principle there were no funds for building roads and electricity transmissions. Therefore, it was decided to postpone the construction of living quarters and invest the remaining funds in a productive basis, which, in the future, would permit them to earn money for building and to lower the cost of houses. Thus the construction-architectural workshops "Mir" were established.

In spring 1995 they started constructing the first house and laying out the fruit and berry nursery (the materials for the house and planting materials for the nursery were brought from Valaam). They registered the non-governmental organization, the

Centre for Ecological Initiatives "Nevo-Ecoville", for which a tract of land with an area of 29 ha was prepared. The future of the project was uncertain because the galloping inflation did not make it possible to make the work of "Mir" profitable. All funds were spent solely to save it from complete ruin and liquidation.

FINANCING

In 1995 "Nevo-Ecoville" became part of the worldwide network of eco-settlements and received a grant for \$50,000 from the Danish organization "Gaja Trust", which supports a network of eco-settlements all over the world with a structure of communications. With the funds received, they built part of the road from the settlement to the highway and electricity transmissions lines. In Sortavala (the regional centre) the office of the Centre for Ecological Initiatives "Nevo-Ecoville" was opened with communications equipment (computer, fax, etc.). Most of the funds were used in order to acquire 70% interest in the construction firm "Mir. This is an atypical investment of grant funds, but the settlers succeeded in convincing "Gaja Trust" of the tightness of spending the money in this way. This was the only grant, which "Nevo-Ecoville" used. Today, "Mir" maintains the office in Sortavala, divides up the money for common needs: purchasing fuel for the tractor, fuel wood for heating, the construction of common premises, road repair, the organization of the volunteer camp, payment for the cordless telephone, etc. However, the economic situation in the country is such that a small construction firm at present is not able to earn enough money to implement many programs and plans.

One of the aims of the settlement is that the organization itself should earn money and rely mainly on their own efforts and not on external resources. Each family has its own parcel of land, which does not belong to the organization and independently earns money for the development of their own household. Such structure of an eco-village has very much in common with the eco-villages and co-housing communities of the 1990s existing all over the globe (Metcalf, 1998) contrary to the much more communal way of living and financing in 19th century communities (Hinds, 1971; Bouvard, 1975:26).

PARTNERS

"Nevo-Ecoville" cooperates with the local administration and the government of the republic of Karelia. Currently, together with the administration of the town of Sortavala and the Sortavala Local History Museum, a project is being proposed to give part of the North Ladoga area the status of a historical-natural preserve. This status will permit them to develop ecological tourism and ecological educational focused programs on this territory. There are contacts, mainly in the area of informational exchange, with other ecological settlements in Russia and abroad. Nevo-Ecoville seeks to become part of a network of villages, self reliant in economic terms, but interconnected in terms of information as it was described by Robert Gilman (1983).

CURRENT SITUATION IN THE ECO-SETTLEMENT

Presently, 4 winter houses and 2 summer houses have been built in the settlement, a summer dining hall, a bath house, the foundation has been laid for a winter house, parcels of land have been cleared and laid out for 9 families for kitchen-gardens (on property of the families) with a general area of 8.5 hectare. One of the family holdings is a nursery of local types of fruit trees, seedlings and berry bushes. Another is an experimental orchard and garden, cultivated with the application of

alternative agro-technology (soil mulching, low-impact ploughing of the soil, application of forest humus, use of humus for fertilizer, produced by soil worms). Residents of the settlement, not interested to be engaged in agriculture can work in the architectural-construction workshops at "Mir", earning wages.

We can divide the eco-settlement residents' ecological views into the applied and the ethical. The applied views are expressed in the way of life in "Nevo-Ecoville" oriented toward decreasing the burden on the environment. The Nevo-Ecoville residents' ecological ethical views can be called internal ecology or the ecology of the person. Ecology is regarded as a state of harmony between the person and nature, between the person and people around him/her, and harmony with oneself. The same as Western intentional communities members (Bouvard, 1975: 29), the Nevo-Ecoville residents believe that living in harmony with nature and complete self expression is possible only in rural communities, and not cities.

The same as in other eco-villages, Nevo-Ecoville residents are seeking an environmentally friendly, sustainable lifestyle. Trash is sorted, that which can not be recycled is hauled away to the town. Glass and iron are set into building foundations, organic wastes are put into the compost piles. Paper is used for mulching or burned in the stoves. They also plan to arrange the re-processing of plastic wastes on site.

Water is taken from a spring and the stream. However, the spring is not certified. Drains from the bath house, toilet and the washstand are cleaned with the simplest septic filters, which are made from sand, pebbles, and glass. As a result, "grey", water remains in the settling tank, to be used for irrigation.

The electrical transmission line has been laid from the settlement of Reuskula. In some homes there is little electrical power (at the maximum 15 light bulbs of up to 100 watts can be lit at one time). To supply the eco-settlement with normal electric power, they need their own sub-station. In the future they plan to acquire an autonomous source of energy from a windmill or solar battery, but for the time being this is too expensive. Fuel wood is used for heating the homes. The stoves in the homes are well made and keep them warm. With a small quantity of wood the whole house can be well heated.

Contrasting to conventional farming (moderate application of chemical and organic fertilizers, plowing with a tractor), eco-settlement organic farming is developed without plowing, using mineral fertilizers and animal manure. The earth is loosened with pitchforks in order not to injure the worms. Since the quality of the soil is at very low level, forest humus is utilized. To produce humus a worm farm was built (a pit was dug out and the humus was filled with worms that were regularly fed with organic food remains). The product of the worms' re-processing (humus) is used as fertilizer for the plants. The soil is mulched for the most part with old hay, grass, or paper. This protects the soil from weed seeds. During winter, the earth is covered by mulch to prevent freezing. In the spring the layers of mulch are removed and the plants are planted in the prepared soil. The mulch is stored in the furrows of the garden beds, so that there will be no mud. Parts of the kitchen-garden that are not worked on are covered with turf and mulched. After the grass is burned the prepared garden beds are dug with pitchforks. Rotation of crops is arranged with periods of rest for the soil. The garden beds are drained, as damaged by the conditions of clay content in the soil to avoid excessive dampness.

The settlers' way of life is close to a traditional village life. They work a great deal on the land. Each member of the eco-settlement decides what activity he/she will engage in and how to earn his/her living. There are practically no common activities and rituals. Joint actions are undertaken in order to solve common construction and

maintenance problems (road repairs, bathhouse fuel wood preparation, construction of dams on the stream, etc.). Traditional holidays are celebrated together. The common bathhouse is heated up once a week. According to the schedule, men bathe first, women secondly and finally families.

Nevo-Ecoville is built on strong family values. This reflects the tendency of the contemporary communities movement, where much less sexual experimentation is accepted than in the communities of the 1960s (Metcalf, 1998). In Russia, sexual experiment is absent. Gender roles in Nevo-Ecoville are close to the traditional ones. In large part this is dictated by the women's way of life. For the most part, they manage the household, bring up the children, and work in the kitchen garden. Heavy physical labor is performed by the men. Families are structured on the egalitarian principle.

The leader of Nevo-Ecoville is the chief spokesman and administrator of the eco-settlement. Most of the residents of the eco-settlement are also dependent on him economically. Only household-economic problems are solved jointly. The base of the eco-settlement consists of the group, supervised by the leader, which transferred from Valaam and established "Nevo-Ecoville." These are people interconnected to each other by many years of friendship. The leader most often makes decisions aiming to protect the interests of the main group. Newly arrived settlers should consider the opinion of the main group on all questions. If it is not possible to reach a consensus, the "newcomer" has to leave. Many recent arrivals suffer from the insufficient social intercourse. They hope that the situation will change when there are more inhabitants in the settlement.

Currently, 12 people are living permanently in the settlement, including children. There are 33 members of the organization. Each summer a tent camp for volunteers is set up near the settlement. For two consecutive summers the community has taken in orphan children from the Sortavala boarding school who had a holiday and helped in construction. The office for communications continues to operate in Sortavala.

PLAN FOR DEVELOPING THE ECO-SETTLEMENT

According to the participants' plans, when the settlement is fully developed it should consist of a central farmstead (where the educational center, shop, hospital, communications center, premises for general activities, and places to accommodate guests will be concentrated) and several separate settlements. They plan to establish autonomous sources of electrical energy such as wind generators.

Most programs should be economically sustainable and should be able to pay for themselves (ecological tourism, fish farming, a nursery forest, handcraft workshops). A controlling package in these production centres will belong to "Nevo-Ecoville" (as is done with "Mir"), and proportional parts to the direct participants in the programs (residents of the settlement) or outside is who are ready to invest money. The funds earned by these enterprises will be used to implement the planned non-profit programs (such as the educational centre) and the social sphere of the settlement. Nevo-Ecoville is planning to develop itself as a service community similar to those described in North American society (Kanter, 1972:193) and Europe, for example, the Mondragon Cooperative group in Spain (Gilman, 1992). Gillman names such communities "full-featured settlements," where the economic, social and private spheres are not separated and is balanced in proportions (Gillman, 1991).

The slow development of the program is conditioned by the deficiency of resources, both material and human. "Nevo-Ecoville" at present is not in a position to

grant living quarters for free or even on credit to people who are prepared to move to a permanent place of residence in the settlement. New residents must pay the cost of constructing their houses themselves (approximately 10-16, thousand dollars). Many do not have these funds, therefore they come only for the summer, work their land, and live in tents or summer cottages.

In spite of the slow development of the settlement, its residents do not consider their experience as unsuccessful, saying that they came here for the long term and do not expect rapid results considering is sustainable-forward movement as success. This is what they say in reply to a comparison of their experience with projects which are more impressive for their short-term results: "Now you can't determine it, for example, looking at the title oak shoot with two leaves, and that gigantic, mighty burdock, with such a stalk, who has what kind of potential in him. The burdock dies in the autumn, the next spring a new burdock grows, but the oak ling hardly grows. Next autumn this burdock dies again, and the oak sprout grows a little more. But the moment will come when this will be an oak tree and these burdocks will be at its roots."

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