

ADDING INTENTION TO COMMUNITY

An RPCV discovers that the intentional communities movement offers opportunities for the Peace Corps community

by Jon Kohl

Like most Peace Corps Volunteers, when I arrived at my assigned country of Costa Rica, I inherited a local community. Tibás, like all urban towns here, expanded not through a communal compact of intentional values and goals, but rather through an ad hoc convergence of individual interests: for-profit developers, office-bound city planners, government-run housing projects and job-seeking migrants. Each neighbor lives in Tibás according to personal goals, frequently enclosed by high walls and barbed wire, with few embracing surrounding neighbors or living in an ecologically or socially responsible style. In short, the neighborhoods grew *without* community intention.

Now, 16 years later, I again live in my Peace Corps-assigned country. This time, however, I have an opportunity not to inherit a community, but create one.

My Costa Rican wife, son and I, along with three other Costa Rican families, are co-founding Querencia Costa Rica (www.querencia.co.cr), an ecovillage that contrasts sharply with all intentionally created communities sprouting here. Most fall into two general categories: 1) rich foreigners buy land, divide it into lots for other well-off folks who then try to live a responsible lifestyle, often with token Costa Rican participation. Or 2) a rich outsider buys a conventional farm to convert it into an organic permaculture farm, spa or spiritual retreat center that then accommodates transient foreigners. Both types usually seclude themselves in distant mountains, jungles, or along beaches far from most Costa Ricans, and offer little to community development.

Querencia, though, envisions itself near Costa Rica's urban heart, peopled largely by middle-class Costa Ricans and some foreigners, demonstrating for rich and poor, urban and rural, green building

and energy conservation technologies, as well as social and cultural construction methods. To me this is the true meaning of citizenry. Not just voting or singing a national anthem, but using individual and group skills to create the community in which one truly wants to live.

GLOBAL INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT GROWS QUICKLY

We are, it turns out, part of a rapidly expanding movement that seeds communities around the world, many of which serve as repositories of local intentional community-building experiences and skills. Given Peace Corps' First Goal of helping other countries meet their need for trained people, these communities—many in countries where Peace Corps serves—offer numerous opportunities for Volunteers, Returned Volunteers, and the agency.

But first, a definition. A common vision, set of values and goals lend communities their "intention." Their members together envision, design, plan, build and co-manage their communities. Although they come in many different ownership schemes, all have some common property, shared responsibilities and give voice to all members in decision-making.

An ecovillage falls into the larger category of "intentional community" (IC) that includes the commune, kibbutz, monastery, cohousing community, ashram, some agricultural cooperatives, Amish village, co-op housing and other experiments that evade simple classification. While some date back centuries, many more establish every day. Worldwide the movement—driven by economic, social, and environmental insecurity, loss of belonging, sense of purposeless, disappearance of sense of place and loneliness—has caught fire.

The *Intentional Communities Directory* (<http://directory.ic.org/book.php>) listed 700 communities in 2000 and 1,200 this year. Costa Rica has 29 and many aren't listed at all.

PEACE CORPS HELPS FORM CITIZENS THAT CREATE COMMUNITY

We could restate Peace Corps' First Goal as *helping countries to form citizens that intentionally create communities they truly desire*. This is no easy task. All too often neighbors, whether in my hometown, Foxboro, Mass. or Tibás, expect others to do for them. We depend on government to supply our basic needs (water, electricity, security), Hollywood to package our entertainment, non-profits to fight our causes, and supermarkets to prepare our food even before we've decided what to buy. In short, we have become nations of consumers.

To create an intentional community, as I'm discovering, requires that its members create community, not consume it. Founders must envision a future they really want to create, organize people and survive reality's obstacle course to get there. As organizational consultant Peter Block says, being a citizen has little to do with voting, a consumer act of choosing among competing products (candidates) in a political market. Being a citizen isn't about banding together only when we're angry or threatened by a NIMBY development. Being a citizen certainly isn't about just following laws. Being a citizen is about creating the society in which we truly want to live. Sometimes that comes through resistance, most of the time through inspired and painstaking creation.

Isn't that then what Peace Corps' First Goal is all about: helping nations improve their skills to intentionally create healthier and more desirable communities?



Jon Kohl

Members of Querencia research a potential community site this year. Jon is on far right while his wife is fourth from left.

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES

Volunteers

Intentional communities are in many countries where Peace Corps works and can serve as sources of inspiration and locally appropriate innovation. One famous community is Colombia's Gaviotas. Starting in the 1970s PCVs arrived to participate in efforts to develop new methods of agriculture and energy production that Gaviotas shares with other countries in a unique South-to-South technology transfer (see Alan Weisman's book, *Gaviotas: a Village to Reinvent the World*).

In general, volunteers can apply lessons that work locally in these communities to their assigned communities. They can also tap into regional community networks in Latin American, Africa and Asia by visiting <http://gen.ecovillage.org>. The Intentional Communities website (www.ic.org) has links to other networks, extensive reading lists, articles, the world directory of communities and its own ICWiki site.

Returned Volunteers

The tools and professional contacts of the IC movement can be valuable resources to the many RPCVs promoting international development. I work with developing country protected areas and have integrated tools and concepts from the IC movement, such as participation and empowerment, formation of stakeholder communities and consensus rather than voting, into my park planning capacity building program.

Agency

Peace Corps could train volunteers

at and assign them to intentional communities such as Gaviotas or Senegalese ecovillages where volunteers have served, thereby potentially leveraging learning to many other communities. As a Third Goal-activity the agency could facilitate sister community relationships between intentional communities in volunteers' hometowns and Peace Corps host communities. In fact, there are 900 ICs in the US alone, so volunteers might be surprised to find communities close to home. I was shocked to learn that my home state of Massachusetts has 61 listings.

COMMUNITY WE MUST CREATE

Certainly many people in Foxboro and Tibás participate in associations that have yielded admirable and citizen-worthy gains for their towns far in excess of anything I can inscribe on my tombstone. I still don't see a citizen when I look into the mirror, only when I look into my dreams. Yet I do realize now that creating community with others requires far more energy, patience, inspiration, open-mindedness, creativity—and especially persistence—than consuming community.

Seen this way, then, community isn't a place that we inherit. Community is a place that we create.

Jon Kohl served as an environmental education volunteer at Costa Rica's national zoo as well as in a local school in Tibás from 1993 to 1995. He is a freelance writer and consultant in protected area management and invites readers to visit him at www.jonkohl.com.



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