

Intentional “Colonies” and Tropical Sustainability

By Jon Kohl

Though Copenhagen negotiators wrangled and wrestled over cap-and-trade, technology transfer, mitigation funds, and other large-scale, multi-billion-dollar proposals to tackle climate change and move toward (energy) sustainability, they did not pay much heed to community transformation. Despite the lapse, many communities have transcended concern for merely their own environmental impact, and now reach regional and even international audiences with a sustainability message. Consider the ecovillage BedZED in England, Findhorn in Scotland, EcoVillage at Ithaca in New York, The Farm in Tennessee, Dancing Rabbit in Missouri, Lost Valley Educational Center in Oregon, or any of a host of others.

Despite the ascending role of intentional communities (ICs) in developed countries, intentional communities in developing countries require a different model for them to become both socially relevant and active promoters of sustainability.

In such countries, for ICs to be sustainability educators, they must offer more than educators, education centers, and a group of people dedicated to implementing sustainable technologies in their communities. In fact, the model often transplanted to developing countries makes such projects seem more like intentional colonies than intentional communities. And perhaps no country better demonstrates this phenomenon than Costa Rica.

By virtue of its high ecological attractiveness among foreign tourists and retirees alike, and its proximity to the United States, Costa Rica makes the perfect destination to study how development requires more than transplanting a successful northern model into southern waters where the concept of intentional community still strikes people as a foreign, perhaps even zany, idea.

The Intentional Colony

What then constitutes this transplanted model, the intentional colony, and why can it preclude sustainability education? The model exhibits the following characteristics, though any real IC may only exhibit some.

Strangers in a Strange Land

In Costa Rica we have several dozen ICs founded by foreigners and populated principally by foreigners, especially from the US.

Distant Shores

Foreigners often seek beaches, distant mountains, or secluded forest retreats, far from major population centers, to build their

own “little paradises” as marketing materials often boast.

A Lot Different

As in the US, a common model to finance such communities is for one person or a group of partners to acquire a property and then subdivide it into heritable lots which they then sell to those who value the concept and can pay—most frequently foreigners. As site plans distribute lots along roads so that each landowner can enjoy a chunk of forest or beach frontage, lot layout inhibits resident interaction.

For the Rich and Mobile

Just as in the US, this model largely excludes those who cannot pay, and Costa Rica does not require low-income housing within IC projects. In fact, most municipalities have no master plan at all to influence their development.

Where Are the Locals?

Consequently, except for local caretakers or those who earned the beneficence of owners, Costa Ricans remain excluded from such projects.

Local Benefits for Foreign Members

Most well-intentioned ICs import quality sustainability and spiritual practices to Costa Rica. Communities here specialize in yoga, spirituality, biodynamic agriculture and permaculture, human potential, conservation, holistic healing, and other laudable perspectives. Some communities have innovated the use of biodigestors, tree houses, natural building technologies, and solar power. Yet many communities restrict these activities largely for their own members.

Furthermore, some communities cater almost exclusively to foreigners in marketing abovementioned services, partially because local populations do not yet appreciate the value of holistic cleanses, natural medicine, group meditation, or even nonconventional agriculture, and also because they could not afford such services in any event.

The English Way

The communities often operate mostly or exclusively in English (with some notable exceptions), and their websites are completely English-oriented to the United States or Europe. Last year I attended the first conference of intentional communities in Costa Rica. Everyone spoke English, while the only Costa

Rican participants were those who worked on the host farm.

Community educational materials are largely in English because, in general, most educational materials in environmental and sustainability matters are produced in the US with very few being adapted to the Latin American context. My wife is a professor at the University of Costa Rica in environmental education and interpretation, and her students regularly struggle to obtain educational material adapted to Costa Rican reality.

Hardware over Software

IC advertising often focuses on the more tangible and attractive tropical rainforests, solar panels, rows of organic tomatoes, and other aspects of community hardware. They much less advertise a community's capacity to resolve conflicts, cooperate in the management of community buildings, or make consensus-based decisions. My wife and I contemplated buying a lot in just such a community project where the developer (a great guy with great intentions) was selling an IC concept and the first time we potential buyers met each other was to settle lingering doubts before settling our down payments. We felt no sense of community, trust, or transparency. The developer's

lawyer even refused to meet with us. Consequently, and with the recession's dissuasions, the deal fell apart.

Intentional Colonies Make Sustainability Education Difficult

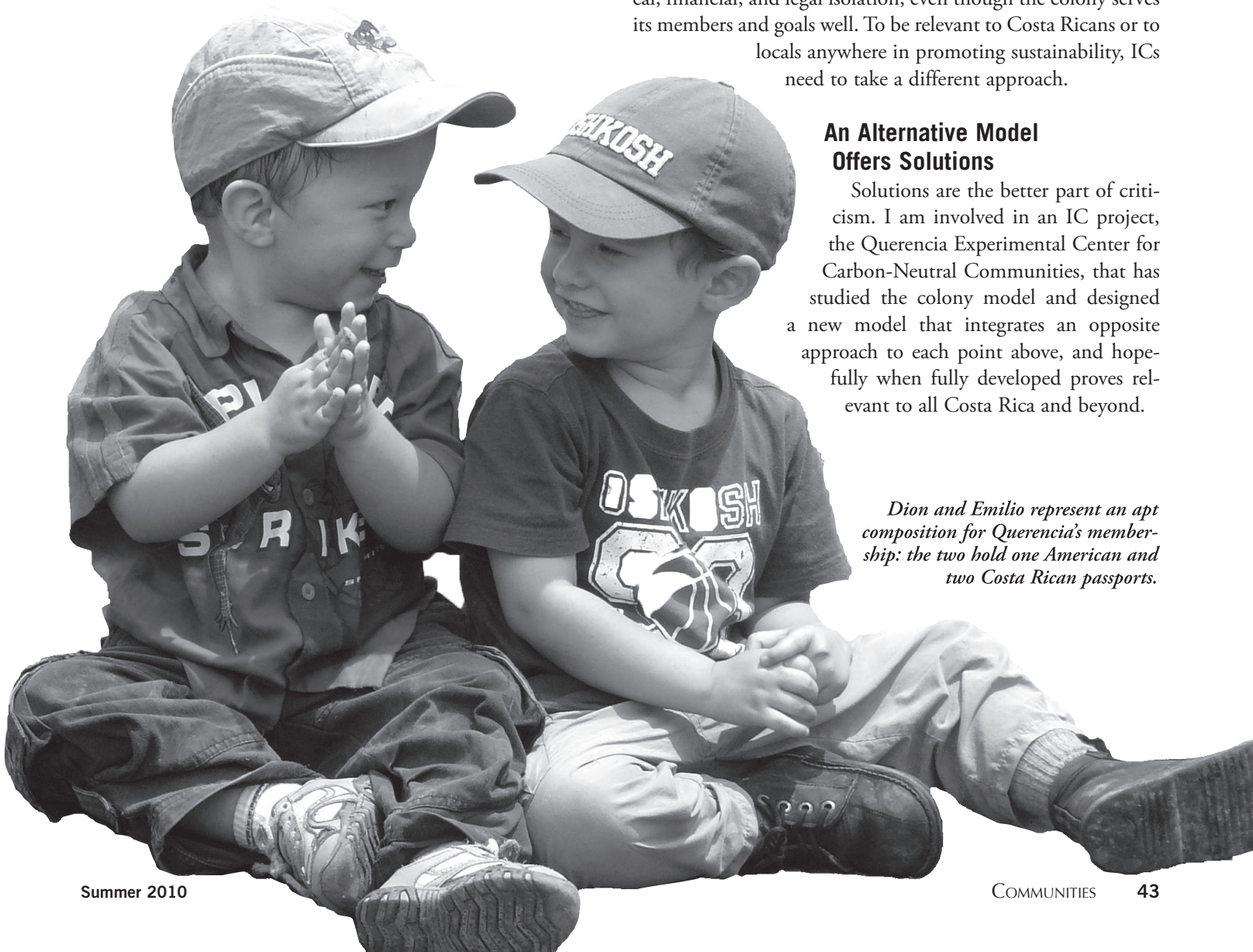
My assumption of sustainability in an IC context means that the IC nudges the region's place and people (not just its own property and its own people) toward sustainability. Otherwise the IC is little more than an intentional outpost, oasis, enclave, or colony. Some will argue that such well-intentioned communities assist foreigners in foreign lands to adopt more sustainable practices, and that the community itself, through wise land management and food production, is in fact sustainable with its concomitant educational value. Those definitions are fine and understandable, but to be generators of sustainability education, ICs must offer something more. Localization is key to sustainability and an IC can't promote localization if the locale doesn't benefit and integrate into the community's value chain.

Thus this environmentally sensitive model presents a hard sell for sustainability education, given its sociocultural, geographical, financial, and legal isolation, even though the colony serves its members and goals well. To be relevant to Costa Ricans or to locals anywhere in promoting sustainability, ICs need to take a different approach.

An Alternative Model Offers Solutions

Solutions are the better part of criticism. I am involved in an IC project, the Querencia Experimental Center for Carbon-Neutral Communities, that has studied the colony model and designed a new model that integrates an opposite approach to each point above, and hopefully when fully developed proves relevant to all Costa Rica and beyond.

Dion and Emilio represent an apt composition for Querencia's membership: the two hold one American and two Costa Rican passports.



Because intentional communities are still new to Costa Ricans, it has been challenging to convince Costa Ricans to join.

Composed Largely of Costa Ricans

Querencia starts out largely as a project of Costa Ricans with some foreign members who are committed to keep the project largely in Costa Rican middle-class hands. My criticism in this article is with community development models, not with individual foreigners.

Nearby Shores

For Querencia to be relevant to Costa Ricans, it must locate where most Costa Ricans live. Therefore we seek land within an hour and a half of the capital city. If our community locates beyond the distance a school bus would readily travel on a day visit, then we are too far.

A Lot Different from Lots

Our project must be accessible to middle-class professional Costa Ricans, a socioeconomic class, as in the US, that finds itself frequently left out of both assistance programs and commercial capital availability. Instead of a private corporation, the ecovillage portion of the Querencia Experimental Center may be managed by a cooperative owning the land and houses. Members own shares and build equity rather than own private lots.

Capitalization through Social Benefit

Private communities must capitalize through private means, thus raising costs and excluding Costa Ricans; a project that has high social benefit, our assumption goes, means that we can mix donor funding with private capital to finance our project. We also will provide social services, mainly educational, interpretive, touristic, training, and community outreach, as additional income streams.

Benefits for All Audiences

Our community will be the principal teaching tool for interpreting and educating about low-carbon and sustainable living. In a sense, the ecovillage is a living museum, and everyone who lives there necessarily contributes to the cooperative's business. Querencia has already formed an agreement with one Costa Rican-based school that offers sustainability courses for foreign university students and credit (www.earthedintl.org).

Spanish First

Spanish is the first language of Querencia. Our website is in English too because we are part of an international community to better leverage our social mission. We have also initiated discussions with a local university to develop a Costa Rican-centered curriculum for studying climate change and community.

Hardware and Software

Sustainability, just like a computer, requires both hardware and software to operate. Querencia thus focuses on building and energy technologies (inspired by Colombia's Las Gaviotas community) as much as the social and cultural techniques necessary to have a sustainable and functioning community (inspired by Mexico's Los Horcones community). In fact one of our founders is a Costa Rican psychologist who specializes in behaviorism and behavior change.

To summarize, the Querencia Experimental Center for Carbon-Neutral Communities is a nonprofit organization that researches and promotes sustainability techniques specifically adapted to developing country communities, both rich and poor, rural and urban, intentional and non-intentional. The ecovillage will be in effect the center's laboratory (in a similar way to B. F. Skinner's classic *Walden II* community), accompanied by a robust interpretive program (three of us founders are professionals in heritage interpretation and environmental education) that aims at a wide variety of audiences within Costa Rica.

Not without Its Challenges

Though the project has not yet capitalized, we already grapple with a number of challenges inherent in the model.

While the concept has attracted significant foreign interest, because ICs are still new to Costa Ricans, it has been challenging to convince Costa Ricans to join. This places us into the semi-vicious cycle of needing money and members to get land, and needing land to gain the credibility necessary to get money and members from within the country.

A corollary is that somehow we must maintain a balance between interested foreigners and Costa Ricans, to ensure the project remains largely Costa Rican.

Because spending capacity is lower for Costa Ricans than foreigners, we still have the challenge of financing houses. While we feel confident the concept and the NGO can garner exterior funding for land, for nonprofit projects, and even for the visitor center, no donor will likely contribute to our houses.

We strive to use transparent, participatory legal entities such as an association and a cooperative, but we also feel a strong pull to use a less transparent corporation that can much more rapidly get things done. Likely the secret is to forge the right mix of legal entities.

We hope in addition to work with many institutions throughout Costa Rica, especially its ICs, to better leverage and adapt their vast well of experience to Latin American society. Costa Rica has already committed itself to carbon neutrality by 2021, so if its ICs can help it reach that goal, then we can truly demonstrate the value of intentional communities, not colonies, in a post-carbon world. ❁

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