

ECOVILLAGE LIVING in RUSSIA

Fedor Lazutin and Dmitriy Vatolin outline how their ecovillage in the Kaluga region of Russia has developed

Cultural Philosophy

People in Russia traditionally have a strong connection with the earth, with nature. Even after industrialization, technological progress and the current 'market economy', this connection has not been lost. Moreover, this attraction has practical implications – tens of millions of people in Russia have small summer cottages and country houses with kitchen and fruit gardens.

For the short summer season, many people (working in parallel with their main job) grow vegetables and fruit, which are used throughout the year for

family meals. So it is not surprising that in Russia we produce many potatoes, carrots, all kinds of pickles and jams – all of excellent quality and grown with good compost without any fertilizers and pesticides. Also, large farms in Russia traditionally tend not to use chemicals, more widely preferring to use organic and natural fertilizers.

Above: Kin domain with house, beehives, orchard and vegetable garden.

Right: Cat framed by a beautifully crafted window surround.

The Birth Of The Ecovillage

In the spring of 2001 a group of environmental enthusiasts introduced the head of the administration of Maloyaroslavets district in Kaluga region to the idea of founding an ecovillage. At first he did not understand what we meant, and we got around the word 'eco' by focusing instead on the creation of a village. There were additional requests: plots should be large – one hectare per family – allowing for the possibility of growing a variety of trees, shrubs, and hedges, and the creation of a pond.

In our ecovillage we have a requirement for permanent residency and there are general principles of both an environmental and social nature. We want to be surrounded by like-minded people and implement community projects. "Well, now it has become clear", was the response during our next visit to the administrator, "it's like old Russian community, but with modern technologies". We agreed, and as a result the land for the ecovillage (former agricultural fields) was provided, and the project began.

Way of Life at Kovcheg

Our ecovillage 'Kovcheg' is located in the Kaluga region of Russia, 140 kilometres southwest of Moscow. We don't have many rules, and those we do have are subjective. Therefore people live very differently. Most aspire towards simplicity and minimalism: a small warm house made of natural materials (wood, clay and straw), furnace heating (using wood from neighbouring forest clearances), water from a spring or well, composting toilets and a traditional Russian sauna. But we also have houses with all the 'urban amenities', though only a relatively small number. Some people continue to





Our field was divided into 79 one-hectare plots, eight hectares in the centre were reserved for community activities and wide roads were planned between plots, with about 20 hectares reserved around them.

Our few rules are strict, but reasonable and attractive, so in the last eight years the community has grown very fast. Currently more than 40 families live in the ecovillage permanently (about 120 people) and we have built more than 100 houses from scratch.

During the first year, the community house was built on the common land to support the community. It was used for common meetings, lectures by invited specialists, the school, the study of useful arts and creative work. The second floor was also used as a living space for those who were building their private houses.

During the first eight years we developed documents for legal village status on our land. In February 2009

trees and bushes have already been planted (at least 30% of the plot is planted with trees – we feel this is important for permaculture). Every plot has many fruit trees and an organic vegetable garden.

- ❖ Every family has everything necessary to create a happy, simple life (their own house, organic food, fresh air, pure water and clean environment – this makes the place ideal for our children, our future).
- ❖ Community decisions are made at meetings with 75% majority voting.
- ❖ Co-operation makes our life easy, effective and environmentally friendly.
- ❖ Different people are responsible for different tasks in community living: education, government relations, operation of machinery, snow removal etc.

commute to work in a previous job (for example programmers, scientists and musicians) and others develop a variety of projects within the ecovillage itself like growing food for sale, beekeeping, handicrafts and woodworking.

What unites us? Ideology, common projects, the joint education of children, mutual aid, good and neighbourly relations. We believe that living on one's own land is a normal, natural state for humans, because only the land and the surrounding environment can directly, without intermediaries and complex technical systems, ensure our most important needs: water, air, food, and warm housing. Such an environment gives a person health, confidence in the future, strength and optimism. We support progress, but we are against harming humans and nature. Our good friend once said after a week in Kovcheg: "It is strange to call you 'downshifter' – this is obviously 'up shifting' in comparison with city life." We fully agree with this opinion!

General Description

The Kovcheg ecovillage spans 120 hectares (300 acres) of former agricultural fields, far from the main roads. About 400 hectares (1,000 acres) of forest surrounds the fields and a small river flows near the northern border of the ecovillage.



we received regional approval and at the end of August the head of Government, Vladimir Putin, signed the final document with our village name approval. Currently, by federal law, we can organize a one kilometre eco-protection area around the ecovillage (restricted hunting, restricted wood cutting etc). Also it is now easy for us to legalize our work in the forest.

The Founding Concepts

The main ideas of our ecovillage are very simple:

- ❖ Every family or every member has their own piece of land (1 ha) to create their 'Kin Domain'.
- ❖ On these plots tens of thousands of

Top left & far right: Celebrating the Spring solstice.

Above: Cellar for winter supplies.



Our requirements for community members are:

- ❖ Permanent residence.
- ❖ Organic gardening (no pesticides, no herbicides – permaculture or traditional agriculture are welcome).
- ❖ No smoking, no alcohol.
- ❖ Composting toilets.
- ❖ No animals for meat, vegetarianism is welcome.
- ❖ No walls between plots.

Kovcheg Projects

We have several common projects which people join by group or by community to make something useful. For example, we have a saw mill workshop that is very useful for planking, wood beams and timber preparation for our houses. This workshop essentially helps us to speed up the house building process. We get our wood from the forest thinning project. Also we have a woodworking workshop with special processing machines like a planer, milling machine and cutter machine. Many wood doors, windows, tables, benches, bookshelves and other wood furniture are created there.

Several joined wells were created on common ground and on members' plots there are about ten Russian baths (saunas).

Education

With a growing number of children, we created a school with regular lessons in 2007. A great deal of energy was put into the school and it has



become a very attractive environment for children. For example, even when they are sick, they try to recover as fast as possible to return to school. In 2008 an additional three-room extension was added to the community house especially for schooling.

We have had a professional house builder in our community from near the beginning, and many other ecovillagers have since also become professional house builders. All the same, we have had as many mistakes as successful experiments – it has been a very interesting experience.

During the last three years, our ecovillage has organized several three-day seminars to share our experience of several aspects of eco-life. The first and most popular seminar is eco-house construction. Our most successful experience is with light adobe (straw and clay) house construction. We have

Above: A community draw-well.

Below: Part of the ecovillage site showing the surrounding forest.

13 light adobe houses now. We also have houses of many other types – round timber, square beam, and frame houses using different insulation materials – and every seminar is given in a house of its corresponding type. It is now possible to show houses at different stages of construction.

We also run a beekeeping seminar to share our experience of natural beekeeping without using sugar or drugs, with minimum interventions, with a Central Russian bee variety and with new, or more correctly, old forgotten beehives.

Ecovillage Meetings

During 2005, 2008 and 2009 Kovcheg organized ecovillage meetings for our part of the world. In 2005, 12 ecovillages met here. By 2009, this had grown to 25 ecovillages from six ex-USSR countries and 60 people. Overall, we have had many challenges but have had good results and many



good experiences. We urge everyone to move forward in this life towards a more stable and sustainable way, together! 🌍

For more information and picture galleries see:

English

www.eco-kovcheg.ru/index_en.html

Russian

www.eco-kovcheg.ru

A 38 page pdf booklet about Kovcheg ecovillage can be downloaded from:

www.eco-kovcheg.ru/files/Kovcheg_Ecovillage.pdf

