



Think Tank of Sustainability Educators and Designers gather in Thailand to plan Gaia Education 2007/2008 programmes

Gaia Education Meeting Wongsanit Ashram, Thailand, Feb 2007

Gaia Education Educators for a Sustainable Earth (the GEESE) flew from the 4 corners of the world into Thailand to meet in a beautiful, curvaceous mud building surrounded by lotus ponds and bamboo groves. Inspired by Gandhian ashrams where social change meets spiritual practice and working with the land, Wongsanit Ashram is a hub of sustainability and grassroots leadership training in South East Asia. Wongsanit is also an idyllic eco-settlement complete with organic gardens and traditional thatched and cob houses. This was a wonderful base to come together to discuss the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE). In keeping with the diversity of the group the Southerners revelled in the sultry, humid tropical days whilst Northerners were challenged by the heat!

The GEESE are a think tank of sustainability educators from 13 nationalities building on a common stock of wisdom and best practice from Ecovillages around the world. They have been meeting since 1998 through technology as well as face to face to conceive and birth the EDE programmes that are spreading the message of low impact and carbon neutral activities across the globe. The EDE has been piloted in settings as varied as urban Sao Paulo, Lotan a desert Kibbutz in Israel and Findhorn, a spiritual eco community in Northeast Scotland. The 26 participants were representatives from these and other pilot EDE centres and Ecovillages as well as the Gaia Education Board and other interested parties.

During the meeting the above mentioned centres as well as Tamera Ecovillage in Portugal, Ithaca in upstate New York, Instituto Tonantzin Tlalli in Mexico and Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka gave presentations of their versions of the EDE pilot activities that had taken place the previous year. It was inspiring to see how the four faceted EDE curriculum of World View, Economic Design, Social Design and Ecological Design were woven together in such diverse environments. Several EDE courses were based on a strong foundation of permaculture with Max Lindegger contributing his resourceful skills to the Tamera, Sri Lanka and Mexico programmes. In Sri Lanka the course was based on a real design for an Ecovillage. In Tamera permaculture was balanced with a very experiential social component with activities in visioning, theatre work, sharing circles and discussions on love and sexuality. Lotan used their extended experience of permaculture and ecological living to sustain their very practical 10 week programme where planting and harvesting crops, creating recycling waste systems and building mud houses were a hands on part of the curriculum. Findhorn had a packed one month training that incorporated their unique social and spiritual rhythms entwined with experience of local right livelihood initiatives and



ecological design. In addition they incorporated a comprehensive training of trainers using an experiential empowering approach and daily meditation sessions in the framework of world view. In Sao Paulo the EDE took the form of weekends and evenings over a longer period of time allowing 100 city dwellers working in or interested in the complex challenges of urban sustainability. Many participants were in a position to take the learning and apply it in their place of work in and around the city such as the group of Public Parks Caretakers that joined the training. Next Steps in Sao Paulo include working with teenagers, involving public administration and creating a distance learning programme and university courses.

Most of the EDE courses had challenges with participants from diverse backgrounds having different expectations and where possible flexible participant centred approaches adapted activities to respond to this. It is however a real issue in the curriculum design and certification of such an inter-disciplinary course attracting people as diverse as highly skilled technicians, experienced group process workers and visionaries and dreamers from many roots including in the Findhorn course an educator who built labyrinths in New York City parks and an Iraqi architect inspired to rebuild peace villages in his devastated country.

Next year several more centres have been certified to run EDE programmes including two Asian courses at Auroville in India and our hosts Wongsanit; El Poncho, Hue Hue, UMAPAZ and Asociacion Gaia in Latin America and two in Europe. In conjunction with the ongoing EDE courses a series of Four Keys text books are being compiled in the four core areas that will serve all future EDE hosts. This has been a huge amount of work for diligent Geese and is on the final run with publication of the first two books expected later this year. It was decided that a fifth key on process and how to deliver the EDE in an appropriate empowering and creative way will be added to this wealth of educational materials.

Issues of being carbon neutral were a huge challenge both as a meeting and as educators of sustainability. How can we really walk our talk? In an effort to offset the carbon of the flights to Thailand as well as supporting Wongsanit Ashram to be more sustainable the group calculated their emissions and in response planted trees and, under the guidance of Max Lindegger, contributed a grey water cleaning plant to the ashram. The heated and continuing debate in this area ensured that all participants left with real food for thought and creative impulse about how to offset the carbon of our own lifestyles as well as the footprint of the upcoming EDE programmes.

The meeting flowered under the skilled and graceful facilitation of May East, the programme director and Hide Enomoto, a Japanese friend. The participants came full of experiences to share, responsibilities to report on and left with new inspiration and plans to continue this evolving work for the planet. As part of the activities of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development the Gaia Education EDE pilot projects and emerging curriculum are truly a leading light and inspiring prototype for future similar initiatives.

For more information on Gaia Education 2007 programmes visit www.gaiaeducation.org