

**Narara Ecovillage, Australia**

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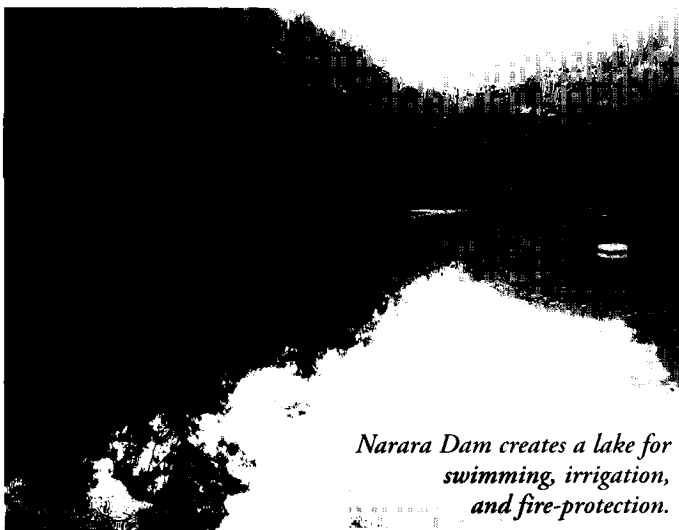
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# Narara Ecovillage, Australia

Photo courtesy of Bill Metcalf



*Narara Dam creates a lake for swimming, irrigation, and fire-protection.*

Photo courtesy of Lyndall Parris



*Members unwind over dinner after lengthy discussions.*

On a sunny Australian winter's day I meet with 40 people who are creating a large, dynamic, and diverse ecovillage about 60 kms north of Sydney.

We meet on 64 hectares (158 acres) of prime coastal land which they already own, and sit in a modern brick meeting room quite obviously of government creation, surrounded by industrial-scale greenhouses, scientific labs and offices, numerous sheds and workshops, plus two large houses. This was Gosford Horticultural Institute, a large agricultural research station that closed recently, and one of the agenda items is to decide what to do with their excess buildings.

I am in Sydney to research and write about Narara Ecovillage as well as to wrap up my research into The Manor, Australia's oldest urban intentional community, established in 1922. On

one level, these two are as different as chalk and cheese—while on another level they face similar challenges and offer similar potential.

Narara members have already invested about \$7 million to buy this site from the State Government, and pay for the numerous consultancy reports needed by their local government before lots can be sold and house-building commence. This money was raised from member loans, but extra bank financing is now being sought to help develop the expensive infrastructure.

This land became a State Experimental Farm in 1907, having been selected because of its “deep, rich soil, easterly aspect,” and its location “close to two railway stations”—features which make it an ideal ecovillage today.

Narara Ecovillage's land is gently rolling, northeast-sloping, partly cleared for agriculture but still with extensive native forest. It has a stream running through it, a large dam creating a lovely lake for swimming, irrigation, and fire-protection, and is within walking distance of a train station, a little over an hour's commute from central Sydney. Their creek flats will facilitate intensive gardening and food production, and there is ample land for other farming activities.

As with many Australian place-names, Narara is probably of Aboriginal origin, but its meaning is uncertain, with suggestions of “black snake,” “rib,” and “bones.”

Occasionally, I wonder about some of this ecovillage's promotion: “Here, there is an opportunity to build with the ‘we’/ the ‘us’ in mind. Not in any self-sacrificing way but in joyful, focused recognition that in what we are developing, the whole is definitely greater than the sum of its parts. The project is fulfilling and quite humbling in its gloriousness.” Is this semi-utopian rhetoric? Perhaps. But it *is* true—even if emotive.

Why do people join Narara? Geoff, a scientist in his 50s, and Gail, a woman in her 60s, both tell me it is because their families have left home, they don't wish to live alone, and they see this ecovillage as a positive way forward.

Lesley tells me, “I was attracted to Narara Ecovillage as a community consciously living sustainably, with small water and carbon footprints. After reading about peak oil, climate change, overpopulation, and resource depletion, I'd concluded that moving from city life to a rural, locally-based village economy was ‘the answer’ to the impending ‘unravelling of post-industrial civilisation.’ However, after reading *The Great Disruption*, in which Gilding suggests it is too late to rescue our western lifestyle, I question whether it would make any difference. I remain a member of the Narara Co-op, but I'm unsure

if I'll live here."

More optimistically, some members are primarily attracted to the land, some want to escape the city, some want to live in community, some want a cleaner environment, some see it as the best place for their family, while others want to design and built their dream eco-house.

At today's monthly meeting, the passionate interactions between members, almost all light-hearted and sincere, suggest a dedicated group of well-educated, astute people who are not yet sure of their direction. Tony suggests they follow council regulations as closely as possible in their Development Application, while John suggests they should be more environmentally strict than required, to demonstrate their ecological ideals and strengthen their moral bargaining position. Some want to enforce small house sizes—but would that perpetuate environmentally-destructive, single-person households? Mark is confused by the agenda process, then Joey objects to the term "rules," instead preferring "guidelines." One of the proposed community contracts is to follow "Permaculture Principles" but Steve asks, "What are Permaculture Principles?" When no one responds he wisely asks, "How can we agree if we do not know what those principles are?" To this, Richard describes inherent conflicts between such principles and other economic, aesthetic, sustainability, and conservation goals. Eckard throws in a joke to which Kate responds. While this might suggest pandemonium, everyone stays polite, good-natured, and on-track.

The story began in 1997 when Lyndall Parris, this ecovillage's undisputed "mother," spoke at a women's function about her dream of communal living. By 2004, Lyndall had morphed this dream into Sydney Coastal Ecovillage, an incorporated association with the vision to "research, design, and build a stylish, inter-generational, friendly demonstration ecovillage near the coast not too far from Sydney, blending the principles of eco and social sustainability, good health, business, caring, and other options that may evolve for our well-being." Attracted to this vision, members joined Lyndall, who then left the workforce to devote herself to its realisation. She toured ecovillages around the globe including Torri Superiore and Damanhur in

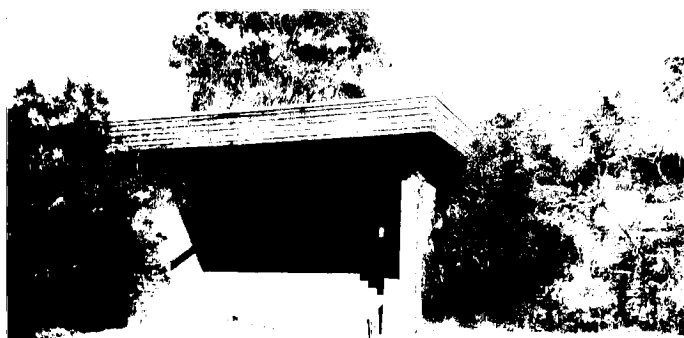
Italy, and Sirius, Earthaven, and Ecovillage at Ithaca in the US. Lyndall was particularly inspired by Liz Walker (from Ecovillage at Ithaca) and Diana Leafe Christian (from Earthaven Ecovillage), well-known to COMMUNITIES' readers.

In 2008, members learned that this agricultural research station at Narara was coming up for sale, and opened negotiations to buy it. When the Global Financial Crisis hit, however, their funding collapsed as did negotiations, and the State Government withdrew the property from sale. Lyndall and Sydney Coastal Ecovillage members continued to meet, develop social networks, plans (and dreams) for intentional community, and, most importantly, their own competence.

In April 2012, this land came back on the market and, over a frantic few months, they created a legal framework and raised \$5 million from members to buy the land. Interestingly, this is about \$4 million less than they had offered to pay in 2008.

In some ways, buying the land has been the easy part. The hardest work then began—to get local government approval for the ecovillage design, create a legal and financial framework, agree on infrastructure design, future governance, and, most importantly, create a cohesive communal group out of the disparate "dreamers" who are attracted to the project. This phase is ongoing, and the meeting I am attending is part of that.

Seven adult members and two children already live in the existing houses on site, and while members own all the struc-



*One of the many large buildings left over from when this was an Agricultural Research Centre.*



tures, most can't be inhabited until their development application has been approved. Preparation for this development application has already cost over a million dollars for consultant reports, legal expenses, etc.

Their first stage has 55 lots for sale (mostly claimed), while plans for stages two and three will provide for more homes, increasing both density and affordability. Several members intend opening businesses on-site, using existing buildings. The main building, for example, could provide over 20 large bedrooms plus several large meeting and eating spaces for a conference/workshop centre, after minimal alterations, and their laboratories and greenhouses could be converted into commercial uses. Being within walking distance of regular commuter trains to Sydney means that residents can, if they wish, maintain urban careers.

Lyndall tells me, "I'm so thrilled that we finally own this gorgeous site. We first saw it five years ago and immediately felt it was perfect for us. From the existing research orchards and glasshouses, to the established buildings and dam, and the surrounding State Forest, it ticked all the boxes. It's taken us this long to buy it, and now our plans and dreams have a home."

Members meet monthly as a large group as well as more often in small working parties, as they aim to "transform the site into a model of sustainable living" and "a living resource demonstrating practical methods and technology for securing long-term social, environmental, and economic sustainability." They are exploring the most sustainable ways to generate their own power, provide their own water and at least some of their food, and dispose of their wastes. They are exploring governance models, currently following a modified form of democracy, including aspects of Dynamic Governance.

Narara Ecovillage has attracted world-class consultants. Australian architect Philip Thalys, noted for his sustainability and urban design projects, says, "This is the kind of project we dreamed of as students, so it's just a fantastic opportunity to work with owners rather than developers to create a place that focuses on human needs and aspirations first, rather than, say, car access."

Their landscape architects, McGregor Coxall, base their work on biomimicry—using natural templates and approaches to solve human problems, and this aligns with the ecovillage's "inspired by life" motto—as well as with permaculture.

Narara Ecovillage's Project Manager, John Talbott, who managed major developments at the Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland, says, "We see this village, so close to Sydney, as the chance to model developments that we hope will become the new 'normal.' And so far we've got over 80 people already on board who want to be part of the village, from young families to singles to empty-nesters."

I wish them well. With a project like this, on an ideal site, with inspiration and guidance from their members and leaders, Narara looks set to establish a new high-water mark in ecovillage development, not just in Australia but globally.

Or will it?

To follow Narara Ecovillage's story see [nararaecovillage.org](http://nararaecovillage.org).

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*Members involved in intense one-to-one discussions about future directions for Narara Ecovillage.*



Photo courtesy of Lyndall Parris



Photo courtesy of Lyndall Parris

*Members and guests enjoy a picnic.*



Photo courtesy of Bill Metcalf

*Late afternoon shows off rolling landscape of rich colours.*

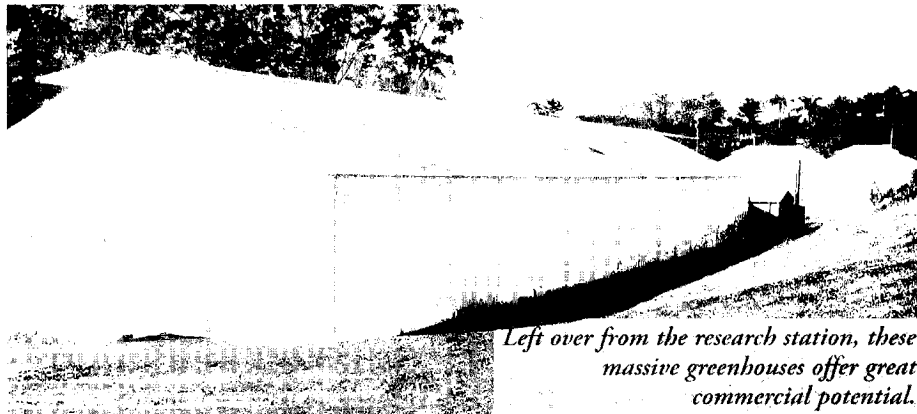


Photo courtesy of Bill Metcalf

*Left over from the research station, these massive greenhouses offer great commercial potential.*