



Ecovillage members pitting plums from their orchard.

Scientists are telling us that we need to reduce our average per capita carbon emissions by 90% if we are to avoid the catastrophic effects of global warming. About ten folks at Maitreya Ecovillage are doing just that, according to a carbon calculator recommended by a University of Oregon climate change class. They choose to live with a dramatically reduced environmental footprint not just because they care about the Earth, but because they're creating a lifestyle that they say makes them happier. So what are they doing right, and what might make their lives-better?

Located amongst a plum orchard on a vacant lot a mile from downtown Eugene, Oregon stands a grove of 2.74m (9ft) diameter dome shaped bedrooms. The domes, built from \$50 in new materials, scrounged wood, cardboard, straw, cloth, cement blocks, and even old political signs, were erected by the 'Dome Villagers' with guidance from master builder Finn. "It's my own personal bubble where I feel completely at home," says Laura. "I love the roundness of my dome," says Coral. "I can reach everything I need from my bed. I've reduced what I own so it all fits in, and that feels great." If their hfe styles were legal, dome dwellers could afford to make even better homes for themselves, investing in metal roofs, for example, instead of relying on tarps to keep out the abundant Oregon rain. They would like to see zoning codes change so that more of this truly sustainable and affordable lifestyle could be made available to the many people who come by asking if they can live there.

In addition to their dome bedroom, Dome Villagers share a small one-bedroom apartment with a kitchen, bathroom, dining room and office. There's no heat in the

# ALTERNATIVE AMERICA

## How One Community Thrives, Not Just Survives

Melanie Rios explains how the residents of a small community in Eugene, Oregon radically reduced their ecological footprint and improved their quality of life.

domes, where they stay warm with layers of blankets, but on cold days and evenings there's a fire going in the wood stove inside the apartment. There's often soup on the stove, made from vegetables grown where they tore up the old driveway between the domes and the apartment, or in a community garden.

Besides agreeing to keep a vegetarian kitchen, the only formal rules of the house are that there's no drug or alcohol use, in keeping with the wishes of the guy



Building a dome in the eco village orchard.



Audrey and Eliza in their domes frame.



Partly built dome showing construction method.

who had the original lease on the apartment who invited everyone to live there. But even without those forms of socializing available, there's enough interesting things happening at home that most of Dome Villagers say they don't go out as much as before. When they do travel, they get around mostly by bicycle, pulling a bike trailer if needed. No one owns a car.

Dome Villagers say what they value most about their home is their relationships with their fellow villagers, and they seem to have created a culture where people contribute generously to each other. "Whenever someone needs help, I offer," says Jesse, "and folks help me when I have a need, whether it's to build a dome or bring in firewood." On one recent evening, a few people traded massages on top of sleeping bags rolled out in front of the stove. Coral said she was hungry for calzones, and Rafael offered to cook enough for everyone, even though he is personally eating a raw vegan diet. Laura played guitar quietly, and Jesse read out loud from Derrick Jensen's *The Culture of Make Believe*. After dinner, a few people painted a sign illustrating an ecovillage to hang on the fence. A neighbor came by to ask if anyone wanted to help make a brochure informing our urban neighborhood about a 'city repair' project he's organizing, and John volunteered. Later, a visiting traveler from Germany started playing some upbeat music, and some folks started dancing.

In the midst of all this interaction, I interviewed people about their lives before and after moving to Dome Village. Two Dome Villagers had been homeless before moving here, couch surfing with friends, or living in the park. Two others had lived in trailers, and others had come from lonely or crowded apartments. So for some of them, Dome Village is an improvement in material living conditions, which would help explain their happiness in living here. "Couch-surfing was a drag," Coral said. "I felt like I was invading someone's space, and that I might be kicked out at any time." "I slept on the living room floor in a trailer I shared with my brothers," said Jesse. "I couldn't get to sleep until late even though I had to get up early for my job, because my brothers liked to play music at night. Living here with my own dome for a bedroom is definitely a step up."

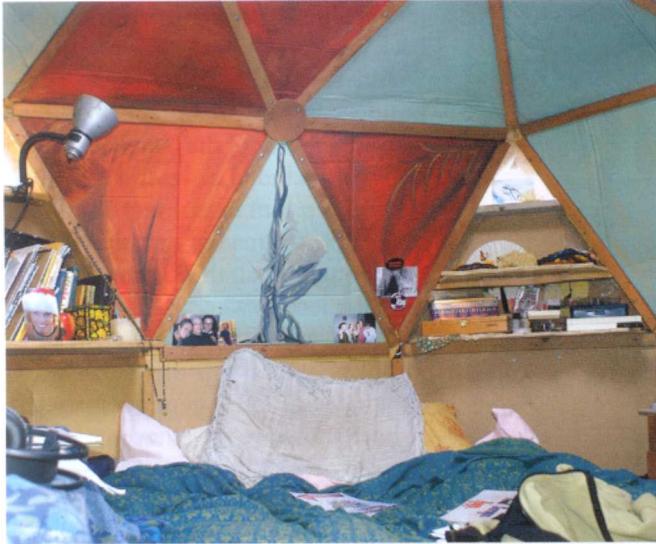
### LEARNING PERSONAL SKILLS IN COMMUNITY

There's an adjustment period for some new dome dwellers, as they learn to share a small space harmoniously. One skill they learn is transparency, to talk about what is going on for them, and to listen with compassion and respect for others. "I'm not a mind-reader," says Laura, "so folks have to ask for what they want." "If you have a problem, then say it," adds Jonathan. "That gives us an opportunity to figure out what we can do together to support everyone's needs."

One issue that became a problem for some Dome Dwellers recently was how many friends, acquaintances and random people off the streets were hanging around a lot, eating food and not contributing much to the community. "We're an ecovillage, not a mission," said John. So the community agreed that if people who didn't live there had two dome dwellers sponsor them, they could stay a couple of nights in the guest sleeping space, but then had to move on.

A factor that many people said contributed to their positive experience at Dome Village was being around other people who care about the Earth. Before moving here, most Dome Villagers said they felt depressed about planetary destruction, and tried not to think about it much. "I had a sense that I was supposed to be a leader," Laura said, "but I didn't feel like I had anyone to lead. People ignore the destruction of our society. We don't think for ourselves. The knowledge of what to do is out there, but we don't have eyes to see it."

Now, ironically, while the Dome Villagers are learning more details about the extent of the danger to our planet, at the same time they're feeling more hopeful about possibilities for change. They talk often about the complexity of the world's problems, and what might be done to address them. And they are doing things together to address global problems, such as producing a play about global warming, going down to the city council to give presentations on that topic, and reducing what they consume. They report feeling more secure with whatever might happen in the future knowing that they have friends to support them. This, combined with learning such skills as gardening and carpentry, has helped to create a very real sense of both interdependence and self-reliance.



Inside Laura's cheerfully decorated dome.

Dome Village is only one viable way to live, and it's not the ideal place for everyone, but it is working for those who live there. Almost every dome dweller said they'd choose to continue living there even if they earned \$50,000 per year. The village provides affordable housing and meets basic material needs for food and shelter. **It** is also a healing, loving place where the emotional human needs for growth and learning, contributing to community, and expressing uniqueness appear to be better met than in today's 'normal' social structures. And if everyone lived with a comparable carbon footprint, we'd have a lot better chance of avoiding catastrophic effects from global warming.



Finn and Melanie outside one of the dome houses.



Community gardens and shared support building.

Dome Villagers are demonstrating one way to drastically reduce our impact on global warming while simultaneously preparing for its effects. When refugees from areas affected by hurricanes, droughts and floods flock to more habitable regions, the experiences of Dome Villagers can provide insight as to how we can graciously share our homes. They've created a lifestyle that helps them to thrive, not just survive, while living under conditions that may be part of the future we are creating by our overuse of fossil fuels.

*Melanie Rios is a mom, musician, mediator, urban farmer, and community activist. She is also a Certified Permaculture Designer who is currently creating a new ecovillage on 1.2 hectares (3 acres) a mile from her home at Maitreya Ecovillage in Eugene, Oregon. She teaches and writes on the topic of 'Permaculture for the Inner Landscape,' sustainability and culture change, and has lived in community for 35 years.*

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