Chapter 4

The Ecovillage: Concept and Applications

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ecovillages in the context of tourism and research development. Four ecovillages from Bangladesh are selected as cases of this study. Data were mainly collected by focus group discussions harnessing a cross validity check of the given statements and arguments. A critical explanatory type analysis illustrated and evaluated the ecovillage concept application. Ecovillages are validated as an idea, a useful concept and as a practice resulting in tourism, research and sustainable livelihood practices. The concept also found as providing substantial and supplementary economic opportunities for its residents.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ‘ecovillage’ concept in the context of tourism and research practices. Conceptually, ecovillages are purposefully built settlements recognizing the existence of positive relationships between the environment and the society while in most cases, underpinned by the moral imperatives of their proponents (Trainer, 1998). Ecovillages are diverse in contents, including permaculture, renewable energy production or environment friendly community buildings. This type village concept practically affects host communities by increased employment opportunities, income generation and well-being of residents through improved living standards. In principle, ecovillages are built within a participatory process relying on indigenous knowledge and local practice capacities. In cases, ecovillages attract innovative technologies supported by foreign funding mechanisms, and promote ‘clean and green’ environments in ways that are culturally appropriate. Ecovillages as such create ap-
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peal to a range of tourists either for leisure or having research interests in underpinning the creation, the operational activities, the environments and the resident lifestyles that result from this defined concept.

The development of ecotourism concept is attached to the community based movements that dated back as early as in the 1960s and 1970s. At a later stage, such movement literally was promulgated in many development initiatives including tourism. Eventually, in 1996, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was established as a network of ecovillages and ‘intentional communities’ to share ideas and promote the ecotourism concept. In custom, GEN initiated the diffusion of this concept. Since then, this concept has been applied in more than seventy countries. The building of ecovillages tends to follow an established set of guidelines addressing the environment and surroundings in designing, implementing and operating stages. The ecovillage concept evidently gets support from the non-government organizations (NGOs).

Very often, the ecovillage concept is aimed for ensuring the betterment of its residents’ livelihood within its outside neighborhoods. Ecovillage residents are described as the ‘Intentional communities’ that proponent the common success of this concept. Such communities in their historic origin perspective can be traced back to the Utopian communities of the industrial revolution or even farther before (Holloway, 1951; Hardy, 2000). In an ecovillage, the resident members are normally like-minded, having common social, religious, spiritual, geographical or ethnic visions (Gilman, 1991). Typically, residents of an ecovillage adopt responsible behaviors towards the environment. In return, Ecovillage offers them a safer, better and sustainable living environment with adequate resources to maintain their dependents as self-reliant.

Characteristically, the ecovillage concept varies enormously in the orientation and degree of success. General tourists in ecovillages are often driven by the common motive of curiosity. Still, its divergent features attract tourism researchers having diverse motives and research goals (Christian, 2003). However, the extents to which the ecovillage concept can achieve goals are debatable. The ecovillage concept is often preceded by discussions of sustainability and, in a tourism context, the benefits that this concept application could bring to destination communities, resident-tourist relationships and tourist satisfaction. The ecovillage concept, though not widely discussed in the tourism literature, has the potential to enrich discussions of appropriate development and associated policy initiatives, as well as the sustainable use of resources. However, given the imprecise nature of the ecovillage concept, there is a need to explore the meanings of this concept in greater detail, as well as to investigate its success in stimulating the creation of sustainable communities in reality. Accordingly, this paper examines the nature of the ecovillage concept. It then explores implementation aspects of this concept in Bangladesh leading to a critical explanation of the notion as a potential construct to inform tourism research and development.

CONTEXT

The exact meaning of the term ‘ecovillage’ is obscure and a wide agreement on its meaning does not exist. A group of academics and practitioners suggested that the concept was first used by Diane and Robert Gilman, founders of the Context Institute based in Seattle, Washington, in the United States. The concept appeared in 1991 in the Gaia Trust’s commissioned report on sustainability (Gilman, 1991). However, others believe that Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson coined the term as early as in 1985 (McLaughlin and Davidson, 1985). A simple basic and generally acceptable definition of the ecovillage concept was offered by Gilman (1991) as the human settlements aimed to generate less damaging impacts for nature and the environment. Bang (2005) argued that ecovillages are human settle-
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