

The Carrot in Front of Our Nose: LESSONS FROM ZEGG

By Tobias Bayr

In September 2016 I was in Potsdam at a summer school about climate change. I heard in a talk that at the moment we humans use resources at a rate that would take one-and-a-half earths to supply in an ongoing way—with our western society lifestyle requiring four or five earths if it were adopted worldwide. In 2016 the earth overshoot day, the theoretical day by which we had used all our resources for the year, was August 8, so after that we were living over our budget. This has shifted a lot in recent years; in the year 2000 this date arrived at the beginning of October.

But we have only one earth, so we are miles away from a sustainable way of living. We are not talking about only a few percentage points that we have to reduce our footprints to get sustainable. It is not enough just to take the bike instead of the car to get to work or to use renewable energy sources, even though these are important steps in the right direction. In our western culture the main strategy to become more sustainable seems to be the adoption of new and more efficient technologies; this is part of a general trend to more technology. To be honest, I am very doubtful that we can get sustainable this way.

After hearing a lot of theoretical stuff at the summer school, I was looking forward to the excursion to the ZEGG ecovillage, to see an example of what living in a more sustainable way could look like. Achim from the ecovillage showed us the constructed wetland, the wood chip heating system, the edible landscape, and how they make Terra Preta, a very nutrient-rich soil made out of charcoal and compost, which takes CO₂ out of the atmosphere and stores it in the soil. Cherries, peaches, apples, kiwis, wine grapes, and all different kinds of berries grow everywhere in the ecovillage. Many things done there are low tech—everyone could do the same in his/her own house or garden.

And then Achim said something which was etched in my mind: The gardens of kings and nobility grew only plants that one could not eat, to show that they were so rich and did not need to have edible plants to survive. Suddenly the scales fell from my eyes! We as western society have been trying to mimic the lifestyles of kings and queens in so many ways to show our wealth: We want to live in our own flat/house (my home is my castle), where I am king/queen, but loneliness is a widespread disease in our society. We build houses in which everything is done automatically by fancy technology that you can control from everywhere in the world with your smart phone.

Why? Just to be served like kings and queens? We use perfume as kings and queens did. Why is it bad to smell like a human? I like the smell of my body! We apply make-up to our faces. Why? I like the natural beauty of humans. We need to wear clean clothes without any holes or tears. If we are in business we need to wear fancy, expensive-looking suits. Why? Just to look like kings or nobles? Our cars become bigger and heavier and need the same amount or even more fuel than they used 10 or 20 years ago, even though engine technology has made lots of progress. Why? Just to have the biggest coach and to show your wealth?

I could continue with this for a while, but I hope the point is clear. Just because the kings and queens showed us what luxurious lifestyles are possible, we are running after the carrot dangling in front of our nose and hope to become happy when we have the beautiful villa, the fancy car, the stylish clothes. We don't notice that we do not get happy, as there is someone who has a more beautiful villa, a more luxurious car, and more stylish clothes! And on top of that, nature and the rest of the world have to pay for that, as serfs did in former times. So we



*Terra Preta
vegetable garden.*



*Terra Preta,
a very nutrient-rich soil.*



ZEGG garden.



ZEGG from a bird's perspective.

are running blind with the focus on the carrot, not noticing that we are running straightaway into an abyss.

The time in the ZEGG ecovillage opened my eyes. I saw that less can be more, that it is possible to live more sustainably without affecting life quality. I have a desire to lead a more simple lifestyle, to reconnect with nature again, to live closer to nature, to live closer with other people and not isolated in my own flat, not knowing my neighbors. And therefore I do not need high tech. I think it would be good to reconsider our lifestyle. In my eyes the most important things in life are the ones that we cannot buy. So I stopped running after the carrot and now go my own way. And I am happy to notice that I am not the only one who stepped out of the hamster wheel, that there are more and more people who go a different way, live a different lifestyle, do not care so much about money, and avoid consumption, or live together in ecovillages, cohousing projects, and other communities. Places like ZEGG inspire me a lot and grow my hope that we can make the great turning and mitigate climate change to a level so that we pass on a livable earth to our children and grandchildren. 🌱

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Photos courtesy of Tobias Bayr