

“Ecotopia” in Japan?

Meet back-to-the-land communitarians with the goal of “sustainable happiness for all.” Do they live like people in that fictional country, “Ecotopia”?

By Ernest Callenbach 4600

My wife Christine and I visited Toyosato, an agricultural intentional community in Japan, because an ecology-minded professor friend told us it seemed to him reminiscent of the sustainable future society I had described in my novel *Ecotopia*. Ecotopia’s citizens conducted their agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy production, land use, transportation, and much else on principles that would ensure the long-term survival of their society. At Toyosato we saw a unique approach to a sustainable future: 500 residents living in the flagship village of a nationwide network of 34 such villages—raising hogs and cattle and huge numbers of chickens; tending abundant fruit orchards and greenhouses and fields; producing almost all their own food; and generating cash by selling high-end largely organic products through retail outlets including 40 of their own stores. They were composting animal wastes for use as fertilizer, utilizing only energy-conserving light bulbs, minimizing water consumption in toilets and urinals. Living in an income-sharing commune according to the tenets of their Yamagishi movement, they also minimized the ecological impacts of their housing, their communal dining hall, their vehicles, their “stuff,” and even their clothing. While they were still hooked up to the national energy grid, and using lots of gasoline, they were certainly moving in Ecotopian directions.

A year later, as part of a conference trip to Japan, we wanted to learn more. Could this obscure movement actually be demonstrating much of what it means to live sustainably? Yamagishi people are eager for scholars and journalists to examine their ways, since they believe they have found solutions to most of the underlying problems of modern society—they believe their practices can bring happiness, prosperity, and peace to the world. So they invited us participate in *Tokkoh*, the introductory orientation week for anyone considering either membership in the movement’s Association or residence in a village, and a visit Toyosato for two weeks. Our three weeks amid Yamagishi people proved an

astounding and thought-provoking experience, and changed the way we look at the world—and in particular, at its prospects for a sustainable future..

Tokkoh

The Tokkoh course lasts eight days and is held at a special school located amid remote farm fields. Our total immersion program included eating together, spending the days and evenings in discussion sessions, and sleeping Japanese-style in large gender-separated tatami-mat rooms. The program aims to detach you from your habitual ways of thinking and entertain the possibility of seeing the world differently, acting differently, and living differently.

The role of the group’s facilitators is mainly to persistently ask rather unsettling questions, which function like Zen koans: as participants jointly mull them over, unexpected new understandings may occur. And by the example of lengthy difficult discussions, participants experience *kensan*, the Yamagishi term for patiently getting deeply into problems or situations.

Tokkoh also includes discussions of the thinking of Yamagishi Miyozo, founder of the movement (1901-1961). Participants thus become familiar with key concepts that are central to the emotional and practical life of Yamagishi villagers.

Toyosato

Toyosato is located in Mie prefecture, a fertile, temperate, mostly agricultural area east of Osaka and Kyoto. Most Yamagishi villages, called *jikkenji* (which means something like “demonstration communities for the world”) are much smaller, numbering two or three dozen people, except the nearby original village of Kasugayama, with 163 residents. The *jikkenji* are communal societies, even more rigorously so than present-day kibbutzim, with shared dining, limited individual living spaces, children residing in a separate dormitory after age five, a strong emphasis on equality and distributed decision-making, and all members participating in productive work.

Toyosato’s residential sector looks like a small college campus, with clean, orderly, massive architecture. There are many residence halls, an auditorium building, a bath house, a dining hall, and some accessory buildings. Soon after arriving, you notice a pervasive, not entirely unpleasant smell: pig manure. It’s a reminder that Yamagishi communities are basically agricultural. In fact, in the livestock sheds that cover substantial parts of its 183 acres of fields, Toyosato is a massive operation currently housing about 40,000 chickens, thousands of hogs, and hundreds of dairy and beef cattle. (There is also

a Toyosato forest of more than a thousand acres.) Yet this is by no means conventional commercial agriculture. In Yamagishi terms it's "social" agriculture. As it turns out, the underlying goal for the founding and evolution of the Yamagishi movement is not merely material prosperity but "thriving with others."

The thinking of the movement's founder began, not with religion or politics, but with chicken farming. Yamagishi worked initially on nine acres, and he imagined sustainable, self-supporting farms which, through the liberal application of their own chickens' manure and a small addition of fertilizer from outside, could produce abundant meat, eggs, vegetables, and rice—enough to feed the farmers but also to sell—with enough rice and plant wastes to support a lot of chickens. Yamagishi's first farm had only 200-300 chickens. Crucially, he argued that the number of chickens should be determined by an ecological criterion and not by commercial opportunity. A farm's chicken population, he declared, should be set according to the amount of chicken feed the land could produce. In other words, Yamagishi envisioned farms based on synergistic mutual support among chickens, humans, and land. Through careful record-keeping he proved to his own satisfaction that this was easily possible, and soon legions of fellow farmers followed his lead. The movement evolved to have the overarching aim of nothing less than humans becoming an integral and inseparable part of one total natural system, creating a society that would be "at perfect ideal peace and harmony within itself, with anybody in the present and future, and with everything in nature."

Yamagishi had been a rebellious youth under surveillance by the wartime Imperial secret police. On the run, he took refuge in a chicken house, where he passed the time observing what made chickens happy. As a boy, Yamagishi had idly thrown away a peach-pit which hit a man nearby. Enraged, the man chased him; safe at home, Yamagishi asked his mother why the man had become so angry. "Why indeed do people get angry?" mused his mother—setting the young Yamagishi off on a lifelong quest to answer the question. These two incidents apparently became the twin pillars of Yamagishi thought: If chickens could be made happy (or we might prefer "contented"), why not people? And if people were to get along happily, they would not only need appropriate social surroundings, but they would have to control anger in order to avoid the chronic personality conflicts that plague modern society. We met several pioneers or "founders," now in their seventies, who had known Yamagishi; they emphasized that he seemed modest, kind, and much interested in other people.

The movement's pioneer period, like that of the Mormons in Utah, was arduous. We spoke with several founders who had participated in the first village construction at Kasugayama, not far from

Toyosato. The soil was sticky red clay, needing much amendment. Forest had to be cleared. Milk was scarce for the children, and there was not even good Japanese rice, only millet and a little foreign rice. But exactly how the basic social structure was devised is not clear, though some people still alive somewhere probably remember it. We were told only that “Yamagishi and his associates worked it out,” according to his vision of an ideal new society.

With the exception of bananas in a fruit salad, a tiny smoked fish, and a festive sashimi plate, everything we ate during our Toyosato visit was Yamagishi produced: meat in quantities and frequency much greater than in standard Japanese cuisine; eggplant, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, yams, tofu (superb!), blueberries, rice (from another village), and so on. Annual sales of Yamagishi eggs, milk, yogurt, green tea, chicken meat, pork, beef, pear-apples, grapes, strawberries, sweet and regular potatoes, vegetables, and other products total about \$120 million—through a network of 40 Yamagishi shops and through contracts with supermarkets and department stores. So far, there is no Yamagishi fishing or fish farming, although the village in Thailand raises shrimp.

Yamagishi agriculture, like modern agriculture elsewhere, is quite mechanized and enormously productive with limited human labor. However, due to the communal structure, labor costs are not directly reflected in pricing—an edge in labor-intensive products. (After Peak Oil, higher energy costs will be a growing burden on productivity, but the Yamagishi system should retain substantial labor advantages over commercial agriculture.) Japanese land costs are high, so all livestock are housed in compact quarters; the “free range” concept is almost unknown in Japan, even among the many people exploring alternative agricultural techniques. Abundance of Yamagishi labor power permits elaborate trellising of fruit trees and grape vines, tomatoes, and even eggplant—leading to harvests unbelievable in my own gardening experience. And the collective spirit has a charming side: on the bulletin board of every village is a yearly schedule of major harvest and compost-spreading times, when young volunteers go for several festive if hard-working weeks to villages needing help.

Daily Life

“Comfortable” is a frequent term in Yamagishi thinking and today Toyosato living is indeed comfortable. Since the population has dropped from an earlier peak of above 1,000, living space is in surplus. Dining and bathing facilities are spacious and uncrowded. For the past seven years, air-conditioning has been normal; Mie’s climate in the summer is hot and humid. Single or married residents have a modest main room in which they usually have couches and chairs, TVs, desks, shelves,

and so on—with a fair stock of miscellaneous small stuff. Across the hall, they normally have a sleeping room with no furnishings except for a lightweight table; there are also cabinets to store the futon mats and bedding brought out at night for sleeping. Families with young children may have a third room, too.

On joining a Yamagishi community, members contribute to the Association all their private property (if they have any) but thereafter they're entitled to share "abundantly" in the community's resources. However, Toyosato life is materially simple. This actually seems very relaxing: no ostentatious display of consumption power, no competition over status-symbol possessions, and not even much sense of clothing style. Dress, a reliable sign of social distinctions, is informal—everybody wears similarly modest shirts, pants, skirts, and sandals. Residents' clothes are kept in cubbies in a giant locker room, washed by the communal laundry service, and replaced when you feel like change from a communal supply. Going barefoot or with socks is common inside living areas. People have their hair cut or styled—quite conventionally—in the communal salon. Most people have watches, and many have cameras. Anybody can requisition the use of computers and cell phones, which are in frequent use to coordinate the complex life of the community. Nobody owns a car but, knowing of Toyosato's ecological reputation, I was shocked when I was first driven onto the grounds to see a parking area with about 50 vehicles, and people use them quite a lot.

Informality prevails, with none of the evident status anxiety that pervades outside Japanese society. In Toyosato there is little physical privacy in the closed-doors, separate-dwelling Western sense that we design into our neighborhoods and even our cohousing communities. And in general Toyosato people cannot escape each other. Their major decisions are all matters for joint attention; apparently, anybody can call a Kengan meeting about anything, and these meetings are regular features of the day.

Because money in the usual sense is virtually absent from the Toyosato scene—we never saw anybody handing over cash for anything—it takes a while to grasp the financial aspects of life there. What we came to understand is that everybody works, but nobody is paid directly.

Each person is credited with something like \$120 a month, which is apparently thought of as "pin money," and children get a regular allowance. This money can be drawn on whenever you feel like buying a book, CD, etc. If you don't use it, it just stays in the general fund, most of which is generated by agricultural product sales. People who work in the agricultural production are credited with a salary, and about 60 percent of the Toyosato population are involved, for an average of some 40 hours of productive work. Work hours vary depending on the seasons, and apparently people can alter their schedules quite easily. Since living collectively is extremely efficient, the system appears to generate

substantial surpluses. (Money received by the Association from residents as they join goes into a capital fund used for building new villages.) If you develop a need for substantial funds, say for a trip to Europe—surprisingly, many Yamagishi people are big travelers—it has to be dealt with through meetings of a Kensan committee, but we were told that most such requests do get granted. Still, it's not clear just how rich the movement is.

Yamagishi residents prepare meals through specialized and highly efficient crews and people usually eat in the communal dining hall, though they can also cook in little kitchens at the end of each residence hallway. Toyosato food is extremely fresh, abundant, nutritionally well balanced, simple, and tasty. It's also quite varied, and of course changes with the seasons.

Work and Play

Life in Toyosato is slow-paced, simple, relaxed; day by day life is stable, safe, routine, easy-going, with little variation. The economic and psychological stresses that make much of contemporary Western life so painful are absent. The Toyosato people we met were a friendly, frank, and jolly lot, laughing at the ironies of trying and failing to avoid anger, of missing the conveniences of outside life (and having to walk perhaps 200 yards with an umbrella to take a bath, or to eat in the dining hall), of constant Kensan meetings. Many seem sharply observant and thoughtful: you can easily see them coming up with plenty of ideas for improvements in how things are done. Yamagishi people work carefully, and they claim to love their tomatoes, or pigs, or whatever. It's harder to tell if the food preparation people, or the laundry people, also love their work, but when we visited the kitchens of the dining hall building we found the 14 department members relaxing in their lounge, finishing lunch and a Kensan meeting. Bottles of 0.0 percent beer stood empty, and the group seemed in a jovial mood.

The village office provides mail boxes, supplies, a public computer room, photocopying machine, and so on. However, though people often cross paths there, they don't hang about, so it does not serve as an informal social center. Nor do the two lounges. One with a nice view and an ice-cream dispenser is a popular stopping place; another offers a kitchen and facilities for parties, with benches and coffee tables, but people generally use it only as a meeting spot, and to read the many newspapers available on a reading rack. Nothing in Toyosato functions as a social hub like a village cafe in Mediterranean countries or even like a coffee shop in Northern European societies or the US.

Toyosato has its own clinic with a doctor and two nurses. Drugs are paid for by the

community. If operations or other specialized care are needed, members are sent to the nearby university medical center and hospital. Residents can also go directly outside for medical care, since every Japanese citizen has a national health insurance card. There is also a dentist, a hygienist, and a dental fabricator. Acupuncture and herbal medicine are available. Everybody we saw looked trim and healthy, even people in their 80s.

For amusement and supplies, Toyosato residents do go into the neighboring small town, which has a cinema, a bookshop, and other stores, though shopping in the Western sense of a consumer diversion is not a feature of Yamagishi life. Yamagishi people do not seem to drink even sake, and it's doubtful the young men get much into pachinko, the game addiction of so many Japanese youth. But young and old are curious about the outside world; like foreigners elsewhere, many of them know a startling amount about America. People around 20 who have grown up in a Yamagishi community often decide to try life in the outside world. Many stay there, although they may do Tokkoh and remain members of the Association, coming home only for holidays; apparently they prove prized employees. Others return after a year or so, unimpressed or distressed by what they saw.

Some people who live at Toyosato—especially when wives have pushed for joining in order to bring up children in the Yamagishi manner—continue working outside at professional jobs in aviation, medicine, or business; their salaries go into the pool of village funds (and are kept confidential). And in some families, spouses or children may live elsewhere. People move from village to village at different times of life—after due Kengan consultation. In many respects, Yamagishi life is surprisingly flexible. “We can do anything we want” was a frequent refrain. And for some people, life in a Yamagishi village is one stage in a life that may include quite other styles, before and after.

Is Toyosato life, overall, a bit like the life of well-cared-for chickens? We have no clear picture of those people who fly the coop, but perhaps they are the more ambitious or adventurous or reckless ones, willing to sacrifice contentment for outside challenges of success or failure—or perhaps the easily bored, who may not find contentment anywhere.

The Sustainability Perspective

On balance, how does Toyosato look to an Ecotopian? It does universal recycling and composting in its agricultural operations. Waste water from hot baths and kitchen use is

combined with some pig urine and after treatment is used on plantings. Soil fertility is carefully maintained; plants are so healthy that pesticides are virtually never needed. Feathers and other wastes from chicken processing are sold or composted. Compost produced from animal and chicken manure is used on Toyosato's fields and grounds and a lot is bartered with neighboring farmers in return for rice straw used in bedding or feed, and some is sold in bags.

A great deal of thought goes into improving all production operations from both an efficiency and an ecology viewpoint. In its "household" operations, Toyosato is ecologically advanced in many ways. Lighting is universally provided by energy-efficient fluorescents. Drinking water comes from on-site wells, as does livestock water. Toilets are low-water-use (with no-water urinals); waste is pumped out and trucked to the local government treatment plant. In all these ways Toyosato approaches the closed-loop, zero-waste ecological ideal.

Toyosato is much more self-reliant than most of our ecovillages and in many ways a model of "circulatory agriculture," though Toyosato and other Yamagishi communities are not ecovillages in the Western sense where sustainability is the primary goal. Still, I was surprised to learn that it's a heavy importer of about 30 percent of its livestock feed—mostly from Australia and Canada.

Interestingly enough, Yamagishi and his colleagues justified imports from outside on the ground that they were counterbalanced by a flow of exports—eggs, meat, fruit, and so on. Moreover, the current situation reflects Yamagishi's own early practices: he too imported about a third of his little farm's fertilizer and feed. Thus the ratio, although insufficient from a rigorous sustainability viewpoint, has at least remained constant. What drove the movement's evolution to large-scale operations? It was probably a response to the desire to support growing populations in the villages, in a context of expensive land.

In any event, Toyosato is far from energy self-sufficient. It brings in from outside a lot of gasoline, gas, and electricity. So far, vehicle fueling is conventional—though they're now studying biodiesel. Biogas from pig manure is a promising possibility. Discussions and small experiments are taking place concerning solar photovoltaic and solar water heating; Japanese baths, as well as food preparation, food processing, and dishwashing consume huge amounts of hot water, and Mie has a sunny climate. Ironically, because Yamagishi operations are large, compared to individual households, the sliding-scale utility rates set to favor corporations minimize the community's motivation to conserve energy.

Yamagishism and Us

Ideally, of course, the Yamagishi movement would like to expand worldwide, bringing its vision of shared happiness and peace to all humanity. And some members are ardent recruiters. So far, there are small villages in Brazil, Thailand, and Australia, made up of people of Japanese origin. In southern California, two Japanese families growing oranges have formed a community. But except for a well-established village in Korea, to date non-Japanese are only represented in the movement among the 30,000 members of the Association, not as village residents—although 11 Swiss members run a very small farm.

Whether Yamagishism can develop a broad international appeal is unclear. My own guess is that it's unlikely. Japanese culture provides a substrate of cooperativeness which makes collective living comfortable for quite a few people. Moreover, Japan is full of serious and idealistic folks willing to walk their talk. But outside Japan, individualism is a formidable force. Worse still, in the West, even groups with strongly egalitarian ideals can turn into unacknowledged fiefdoms or become feud-ridden, contentious failures.

What can Westerners, and particularly North Americans, learn from the Yamagishi movement? Personally, my experiences at Toyosato forced me to recognize that meeting the ecological challenges of a future sustainable world is in a technical sense comparatively easy—what's hard are the social prerequisites. Thanks to our permaculture movement and even to some enlightened commercial developments, we know how to do sustainable agriculture, and for that matter, sustainable forestry and fisheries. We can build structures with small embodied energy and very low operating energy needs. We know how to design low-impact cities and transportation systems.

In 1975, when I published *Ecotopia*, I thought that we don't do these good, sensible things to any serious extent simply because those who now control our political and economic system see no way it could further their interests. But after studying the Yamagishi example, I suspect that, much more profoundly, we lack the necessary social framework, a framework in which sustainability makes sense to large numbers of people. We are captives of the market ideology, which has turned out to be an ecological self-destroying machine. The Yamagishi movement, on its limited scale, has been able to escape this trap by creating new social institutions that look on survival in terms that must sound laughably naive to economists:

“sustainable happiness for all.” Yamagishism thus may be only a small, bright, improbable lighthouse, shining out from a rocky coast on which our industrial society is about to go aground. Still, it demonstrates that an equalitarian, secular, democratic social order is possible, and sustainable ecologically, and it thus deserves to be studied very carefully.

The final lesson from Toyosato is that, as the regime of oil-driven industrial consumerism goes down, we Westerners must seek a social basis for sustainability which is indigenous to *our* culture. The cash nexus (another way of saying the market) is a corrosive that has been busily eating away all bonds between us save buying and selling—leaving the social playing field to greed and corruption. If the West is to be saved, it must locate in itself social models which can contain and tame the market. We might benefit greatly from experiments directly inspired by Yamagishi ideas. But it’s also conceivable that in America only some kind of quasi-spiritual evolution can make possible the social cohesion needed for a sustainable social order and a sophisticated eco-economy. Yet the Yamagishi movement, full of people “thriving with others,” tells us that it *can* be done in a secular way.

Ernest Callenbach is author of the ecological science fiction novels Ecotopia and Ecotopia Emerging. He also wrote Ecology: A Pocket Guide and Bring Back the Buffalo! A Sustainable Future for America’s Great Plains. He was especially intrigued by Yamagishi thinking because his father, a professor of poultry husbandry, helped to invent industrial chicken-raising.

Pull quotes:

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Sidebar:

Some Yamagishi History

Although Yamagishi strongly advised his followers to keep religion a purely private matter in their movement, Yamagishism nevertheless incorporated echoes of Buddhism, Shinto, and early Christianity. Loving thy neighbors as thyself (sharing everything with them) became a central theme. Material possessions were to be given up for a higher calling. Although no one speaks of “turning the other cheek,” violence and anger were to be abjured. What was Caesar’s was rendered unto him: Yamagishi communities pay taxes, are subject to government regulations about fire safety, schooling, food preparation sanitation, and so on. Misunderstanding from the outside world was expected, understood, and transcended, not resisted. In 200 years, Yamagishi predicted, erroneous ways would vanish and everybody would accept the soundness of Yamagishi ideas and practices.

Unlike religions, Yamagishism has remained astonishingly egalitarian. Indeed, in its proliferation of committees diffusing and counterbalancing power, its institution of every-six-months elections to its many governing boards, and its constant offering of opportunities for every member to be heard, the movement seems uniquely democratic. Its only even half-way equivalent in the West would be employee-owned, employee-controlled companies. This form of governance was evidently laid out during a big meeting of 50 or 60 adherents from all over Japan, including Yamagishi himself, in April 1958. They pooled all their assets and worked up the member contract that has been used until recently. Membership and enthusiasm grew. In 1968, Toyosato was established, and gradually other villages were begun in Mie and throughout Japan.

Over the years, the Yamagishi movement has retained its unique communal social structure, and yet it is quite dynamic. While the present Yamagishi population is diverse, there have been distinct phases of membership growth. Through the 1960s, members were rural people almost entirely—a few were evidently like the urban-refugee radicals who took up chicken-farming in New Jersey and in Petaluma, California during the late forties. Through the 1970s,

new members were mostly veterans of the peace and leftwing student movements who had become disenchanted with large-scale campaigns and felt that Yamagishi ideas offered the chance to embody a new ideal society in smaller, more practical terms. During the 1990s, many members came from white-collar circles. These were office workers, “salary men,” and professionals seeking to escape the overwhelming pressures of conventional Japanese living and find a more meaningful life for themselves and a better upbringing for their children. Currently, new full members are mainly young people who have grown up in Yamagishi villages. Overall, 30 percent of the membership have some higher education, and in the last decade the proportion is around 40 percent.

Relations between *jikkenji* and the outside world have traditionally been distant if friendly. For one thing, most of the villages are relatively isolated in agricultural regions. For another, despite deriving much of their cash income from product sales, villagers have a spirit reminiscent of 1960s-era back-to-the-landers: they seek to minimize connections with the surrounding society. But in recent years they have been forced into legal contact: a number of members who wished to withdraw sued to recover the funds they had contributed upon joining. This was, of course, specifically not provided for in the entrance contracts they had all signed, which made clear that members joined “without conditions” and donated their money permanently.

After several years of litigation, the Yamagishi Association, which is the movement’s overall coordinating body, agreed to revise its contract so that courts would accept it as proper under Japanese law; this is not yet in final form, but it will apparently be lengthy, lawyerly, and accompanied by an informational brochure. Entrance steps into the organization now seem fully transparent: (1) experience a once-in-a-lifetime Tokkoh training/orientation week, such as we participated in; (2) attend a General Kengan two-week training course, which includes half days of work—and can be taken again at any time; (3) after a several-month waiting period and lengthy Kengan meetings with a village committee (spouses must also participate) apply to join, and execute the contract; (4) live for a year on probation in a village, after which the would-be members can withdraw or the community can reject them. If either side rejects, the whole contribution is returned.