

Eco Vista in the Quintuple Crisis¹

John Foran (19th May)



The interlocked triple crisis of capitalist globalization-driven inequality, bought-and paid-for democracies, pervasive cultures of violence – from our most intimate relationships to the militarism of the United States – has for a long time been bound up with the truly wicked fourth of climate chaos. And now we have the wake-up moment of the coronavirus breaking upon these structural, systemic burdens.

Suddenly, it seems like we might have a quintuple crisis on our hands!

So, how do we connect *this many* dots?

Does less global trade and use of cars to commute mean less greenhouse gas emissions?

Will there be less (or more) militarism and violence as the dangers of the virus reduce the health and maneuverability of armies?

¹ An [earlier version of this essay](#) was published at [Resilience.org](https://resilience.org) on April 21, 2020.

Might this economic crisis of unprecedented scope lead to universal health care and sky-rocketing unemployment lead to a guaranteed basic income for all, even in a place like the United States?

And how can we adapt our movements and systemic alternatives in the time of the Corona crisis?

Every movement, organization, systemic alternative, and countless activists, theorists, and intellectuals are asking questions like these (and better) as the crisis unfolds.

Everywhere, there is evidence that people are rethinking and imagining things like alternatives to our outmoded educational systems, an economy that works for all to meet real, basic needs, a new and better kind of politics for the purpose of radical social transformation, the shifts in culture and affect to design the whole ways of life we desire, the fair, ambitious, and binding global approach that the unfolding climate change will force on states and other elite institutions...

* * *

This is the story of a systemic alternative that is new and young, emergent and hopeful, and rooted solidly on the ground, yet informed at the same time by the [pluriverse](#) of such alternatives.

“[Eco Vista](#)” was the name chosen in 2017 by a group of students at the University of California, Santa Barbara acting together with long-time community members to describe their vision of turning their rather unusual community of Isla Vista into an ecovillage in the next ten years. Unique because 23,000 people live together in an area of .54 square miles, with eighty percent of them between the ages of 18 and 24. In March 2020, the Eco Vista Transition Initiative became the 169th member and the newest link in the Transition US network.

We aim to encourage and inspire the foundation of an eco-village with renewable energy, a flourishing and regenerative agro-ecology of public urban gardens, cooperative, affordable eco-housing, a circular eco-economy based on solidarity and capable of meeting the real needs of the inhabitants, and radical self-governance and community priorities determined by all who reside here, all within a vibrant web of imagination and cultural creativity.

We know that to achieve this aspirational aim will require significant political organization, social movement building, and visionary policy proposals, including the design of strategies for achieving a systemic alternative and perhaps even the invention of [a new kind of party!](#)

Isla Vista, a 50-year experiment in community built on five centuries of indigenous dispossession in the Americas

The land on which Isla Vista and the adjacent university and city of Santa Barbara sit is Chumash land, and the crime of their dispossession by white settlers is a history we are acutely aware of, as seen in this [video](#) on Eco Vista's real foundations made by Sierra Emrick. There will be no climate justice in California or anywhere in the Americas until this monumental injustice is overturned by making common cause under the leadership of indigenous and other frontline and fence-line communities everywhere.

Built on this tragedy and sold again by the Regents of the University of California to unscrupulous private landlords in the mid-1950's and early 60's with the inception of the UCSB campus, for the past half-century the unincorporated college town of Isla Vista has been a site for radical experiments in alternative ways of living, civil disobedience to authority, community governance, and environmental stewardship. As an epicenter for both youth culture and intergenerational solidarity, Eco Vista consciously draws on these histories of struggle, which are well narrated in the book [Isla Vista: A Citizen's History](#), written by Carmen Lodise and a number of other community members who lived there from the 1970s onward.

Today, the community presents many opportunities for active engagement that touches upon some of the most critical issues facing U.S. society – food insecurity and injustice, landlord rip-offs, houselessness, and tenant struggles, mental health, sexual violence, free speech, and police-community interactions.

After a forty-year battle against landlords, college administrators, and the county of Santa Barbara, in late 2017 Isla Vista elected its first local government – the [Isla Vista Community Services District](#); two years later another referendum empowered the new government to tax utilities, drawing revenue to a \$1 million annual budget by 2019. This would soon be followed by an even more surprising development as community interest in carbon-neutrality, just transition, critical ecological post-sustainability, and systems change from below has grown deep roots.



The Eco Vista Project

In 2017, two UCSB undergraduates, Jessica Alvarez Parfrey (now a member of the permanent community) and Valentina Cabrera (who graduated and moved on to do this work elsewhere) conceived a project whose goal was to lay the groundwork for an ongoing effort to turn their community, Isla Vista, into a model “eco-village” through a thoughtful bottom-up process of engagement with others.

Over the summer and fall of 2017, the project was named Eco Vista, and activity began. Since then, students and community members, both inside and outside classes on topics such [The World in 2050: Systemic Alternatives](#), [What’s Wrong with the World? How Do We Fix It?](#), and a regular group studies called, simply, Eco Vista – have worked in the community on projects around food issues, housing, energy, transportation, local cooperative start-ups, a [newsletter/zine](#) and a [website](#), community outreach, and a burst of cultural creation. In the fall of 2019 my Environmental Studies/Sociology 134EC class “Earth in Crisis” engaged in a two-week exercise that produced the beginnings of a [Green New Deal for Eco Vista](#) and resulted in a 27-page list of projects for aligning Isla Vista’s next community development planning process with the most progressive versions of the concept, such as the [Red Deal](#), the U.S. Green Party’s [plans](#), [feminist](#) and [labor](#) GNDs, Bernie Sander’s detailed [platform](#), and [ecosocialist ideas](#).

There are now more than 250 people on the Eco Vista e-list, with bi-monthly General Assemblies that have continued to meet on-line during the corona crisis. There are on-going working groups involved in projects including a food forest, community gardens, tenants’ rights (including UCSB-owned housing), and more. As we imagine the future, we also have the precious legacy and ideas of the late resident scholar and activist Michael Bean, who just before his

untimely death in February created an [Eco Vista Sourcebook](#) of imaginative ideas and detailed proposals for bringing about Eco Vista on which to draw. Our collective grief at the passing of this shining spirit could only be borne because he had helped us discover each other and our collective strength.

Conceptually our efforts draw on the latest thinking about Transition Towns, degrowth, *buen vivir*, just transition, radical climate justice, and the many worlds to be found in the path-breaking [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#), edited by Alberto Acosta, Federico Demaria, Arturo Escobar, Ashish Kothari, and Ariel Salleh. Another approach that guides our thinking and practice is adrienne maree brown's [Emergent Strategy](#), which counsels working from the bottom up in an inclusive and un-predetermined way to generate a collective analysis enabling members to articulate their desires and dreams for what could be.



Image by Charlotte Götze, www.charlottegoetze.de

This image from the work of Extinction Rebellion is so vivid and beautiful that I have stolen it openly for it resonates deeply and expressively with the feel of what we are doing with our own project. Some of this comes through in the

community values we have embraced and our invitation for participation, open to all who agree with them:

Community values and principles

We are inclusive.
We are democratic.
We are non-violent.

We work collectively whenever possible, and all are free to organize their own activities and projects.

We are open to all points of view that are aligned with these values and supportive of the Eco Vista Mission.

We act and live out of love for the dignity of all living beings, and base this love on social and climate justice, and on radical hope.

Corona crisis

And now our worlds have been shaken by the coronavirus. How has this crisis impacted our efforts in the past three months? We last met face to face on March 13, 2020, just before the two-week spring break at the university.

When we returned to start a new ten-week quarter on March 30, we found ourselves beset by the challenges of continuing the work of system change as did all of the world's peoples in movement.

And like many of these organizations, we moved our work to the Zoom space. We have used a regular Friday meeting starting at noon and often continuing till 3 in the afternoon to keep our projects moving forward, to rebuild community and support each other's struggles in the new environment, in a community that was reduced to half its size as many students elected to live at their non-university homes all over the state of California.

We have probably fared better than most organizations in these changed circumstances, and the students among us have probably coped better than most of their peers around the U.S., both of these outcomes effects of the community we had already built and the possibilities we have found of working in the remote on-line environment.

We hosted an Eco Vista community event on Earth Day, April 22, and [a webinar](#) on our work for Transition U.S. We launched an ambitious new project, the [Eco Vista Climate Justice Press](#) this month and published the first in what we hope will be a long line of inspiring and cutting-edge free offerings to the world, a work of climate fiction by local novelist Maía with the beautiful title [See You in Our Dreams](#).

We have continued to pursue a project for the food forest, to help feed the community with Food Not Bombs, to bring out a weekly [newsletter/zine](#) for the first time, to deepen our knowledge of our own history with the help of Carmen

Lodise's book and a conversation it has started between the activists of the 1970s through 1990s and ourselves, to prepare a synergizing proposal for consideration by the local government that would create a position for an Eco Vista organizer to draw our projects more tightly together with the many other popular initiatives and institutions of Isla Vista, and to seek the funds to pursue them.

There are ongoing collaborative research projects this spring involving over 200 students engaged in conducting interviews, designing surveys, and unearthing the archival record of the past to further the transformation of the community. There is [a household carbon-reduction program](#) underway, and plans for continuing to meet over the summer, which would be a first for this student community!

We are seeding the future of our community and the network of communities with whom we hope to be in alliance as this "decade of decision" unfolds, in all its uncertainty.

Conclusion: a far-reaching significance?

We are aiming high: to assist in and lay the foundations for the establishment of an ongoing, multigenerational, student-community project for an equitable and just transition in Isla Vista, California, and to put the result, Eco Vista, forward as an experiential model that other small towns with college students might want to try in their own communities. We consider what we are trying to do as experiments in sustainable, resilient, participatory development, in a space we call Eco Vista, a very real place and also a timeless, cosmic community of radical visionaries and seekers.

I close with this passage from our mission statement:

In the end, Eco Vista is ... a promise, a pledge, a dream, a future.

The promise of Eco Vista is that together we might create a place that is life-affirming for all its inhabitants and that might inspire others elsewhere – particularly young people in their own communities – to use their imaginations to create the innovative future communities we all want to live in, right now!

Our pledge to each other is to co-create, imagine, dream, and transform our community into a place that matches the name of Eco Vista. We want to dream and make manifest this vision together with you!

The Eco Vista dream is a communal, shared, joyful adventure – may it transport us to a place worthy of the love we feel for it.

The future of Eco Vista is ... well, that's what we hope and aim to find out!



About the author

By day John Foran teaches sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Most of the time, he lives the life of a scholar-activist in the global climate justice movement, at the center of the struggle for achieving social justice and radical social change in the 21st century. He also feels that far too much activism falls short of its potential for liberation because groups and individuals fail to acknowledge and work on the inner transition and nurturing of relationships that the best spiritual practices enable in us. Some of his work along these lines is available at www.resilience.org. He can be contacted at [jforan5 AT gmail.com](mailto:jforan5@gmail.com).

