

# A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

## The ZEGG community in Germany finds its place in the climate movement

By Annik Trauzettel

With hotter and drier summers in Germany in recent years, we realized once again how the climate crisis was something that concerned us all. With all the steps for sustainability we had taken at ZEGG, we were still part of an environment that faced drastic changes. A hundred mature trees, mainly pines and birches, died in the years 2018 and 2019 on our plot of land. Around us a new international climate movement emerged, with Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future among its manifestations. Where was our place in all of this? Was it still okay to sit around in circles and put time and energy into someone's troubles with his or her relationship? Communication has always been our strength. We had created and shared the method of ZEGG Forum not only in our community, but worldwide. It meant not just sitting around in a circle; it was a deeply human experience to be able to offer a secure space and to see both the uniqueness and the universality of a person's own journey. And it was our contribution to being the change we want to see in the world. But was it still enough?

Near a small town in Eastern Germany, 80 kilometers southwest of Berlin, ZEGG was started as an ecovillage almost 30 years ago. Formerly used by the secret police of the German Democratic Republic, the place had scarce vegetation and lots of concrete. Decades after, it has changed a lot—it is now visibly greener, with more trees and plants, a healthier soil, many different wild animals sharing the space with the 110 human inhabitants. From the beginning of the project, ecological questions were discussed and solutions implemented. Solar panels were installed long ago; the heating is based on woodchips, designed to be both highly effective and low on emissions. A very important point is water—the Brandenburg region, where ZEGG is located, is a dry area. Therefore, the sewage system is plant-based, with the water trickling back into the ground. All these measures were taken while establishing the community—building a new culture, personal growth, community-building, and ecological measures always being important at the same time.

With so much attention on the climate disruption in the last years, we wondered if we could do more. We were seeing and experiencing a drought. While planting new trees we discovered that a few centimeters below ground the earth was still dry even after heavy rain.

What could our contribution really be? We were already living in a far more sustainable way than many people around us, but would that in the end “save the world”? How could we contribute part of the new climate movement? And so we took a closer look at exactly those questions.

### Are we doing enough?

When we look at how many resources any one of us is theoretically allowed to consume, we do not live in a sustainable enough way in ZEGG. We would need more than one earth to sustain our lifestyle, even though we have a smaller footprint than the German society on average. We decided to take the matter seriously and had a discussion about ecological measures we wanted to introduce. As mentioned above, we already have “green” energy and heating, an almost closed water cycle. On top of that, our main kitchen cooks vegetarian and vegan dishes for our guests and community members, we grow a large part of our food, we use permaculture, we share washing machines and cars, have a gift table to exchange clothes and other items. On a community level



Photos courtesy of ZEGG



we try to lead a sustainable life. But so far we never dared to determine what community members do in “private.”

There are around 30 private cars—that is still pretty good for 110 people, but why would we need those fuel burners anyway? Also peeking into private refrigerators has been a strange experience at times, revealing meat and animal products of non-organic origin. And people do fly, be it for recreation, be it for work. How do we deal with that? Is flying okay, as long as we spread ZEGG Forum around the globe? Is it all right to visit your relatives in a faraway country? Where is the red line for justified flights and can a flight ever be justified?

So we decided to look into individual decisions also. More than once, we addressed the topic in our community intensive periods. Those take place a few times a year when we come together for days or a week to focus on community-building and our seminar business. We let people propose what they thought were feasible and effective measures. Some months later we had a meeting to give ourselves precise rules based on those proposals. It was a heated yet successful debate, with 10 of 11 points passed in the plenary. For example, we introduced two vegan days a week in our main kitchen serving the community as well as the seminar guests, and we decided to document private flights and talk about our travel plans beforehand with other members of the community.

### **We are already living more sustainably than others—so let's show it**

We have established good connections to our neighbors and work together with other people interested in change, but we still have the problem that we are often regarded as an island. People come here for

a retreat from busy city life or for the courses we offer, but does that really make a difference on a greater scale? We realize more and more that it is not enough to offer good organic food to our guests and use ecological detergents. We also need to present our answers to environmental questions.

So we made a list of things we already do to post it on social media. We wrote articles about the trees we plant. We participated in conferences where we exchanged ideas with other communities and individuals. We marched in protests holding banners for a culture change that we see in ecovillages and intentional communities. This also means that we take part in the current movement of Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, among others. Last September, 45 members of our community went to Berlin for a global climate strike day. And we are not only supporting the emerging movements on the street. With an alliance of ecovillages (Global Ecovillage Network) we offer retreat spaces for activists taking a time out from their protests. We invite speakers for our camps and festivals, giving the ecological crisis an important place in our agenda. We want to reach more and more people by actively showing what has been important to us over all these years.

### **System change means inner change**

Culture change, a change of paradigm, has always been important to us, going hand in hand with ecological measures. We want to let go of the old patterns of thinking. We work on inner change and relationships, building community among humans—this is the core work of ZEGG and a necessary base for outer change. While looking at the climate crisis we realized once again the importance of our work. To build healthy relationships means that we do not need consumption to fill our needs. To work on thankfulness allows us to see a rich world around us, one that consists of the gifts of nature and all the beings around us. We choose simplicity over a never-ending stream of products, information, and ideas when we enable ourselves to focus on what is really important to us.

The world needs immediate action, as the dying trees have shown. We need to think about our lifestyle and consumption of resources. AND we will we need to have a culture change towards a more empathetic world, towards a new sense of community, towards more awareness. So in the end, we realized what the world needs is the new culture we are building in ZEGG as well as in many other intentional communities worldwide. Ultimately, that is how we can best contribute to a sustainable future. So yes, sitting around in circles was and will still be important—for the sake of our children and grandchildren. 🌱

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*ZEGG has scheduled an international Summer Camp from July 22 to August 2 entitled “Experiencing and Living Culture Change.” It offers the above-mentioned combination of looking into the necessary outer change and work on the needed inner change. For more information, have a look at [sommerncamp.zegg.de](http://sommerncamp.zegg.de).*

*Annik Trauzettel worked with young people and migrants, in journalism and in project management, before she joined the ZEGG community. There she seeks a life that is both more balanced ecologically and more connected to the people around her.*