

June/July 2023

# Horizons

Your RAC member magazine

Member benefits + Your feedback + Ten of the best

## Perth to Broome by road

FOLLOW OUR  
EPIC ITINERARY

### Car scams

As used car prices have soared so have the scams

### Camp cooking

How to take your campsite cuisine to the next level

### It takes a village

Inside WA's first fully developed ecovillage



For the better



# It takes a village

**IN A SMALL SOUTH WEST TOWN, A UNIQUE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IS CREATING A VIBRANT NEW COMMUNITY IN WA'S FIRST FULLY DEVELOPED ECOVILLAGE.**

By Ruth Callaghan

**Following the film industry for nearly two decades saw former Perth residents Jodie Passmore and Aron Dyer living in the Eastern States and travelling the world for different jobs.**

It was an exciting life, that taught the pair and their two young children to live happily on a smaller footprint than the average four by two home on a sprawling block.

"We found ourselves in Japan rolling out tatami mats and thinking we don't really need as much space as we thought we did, and all the time we were visiting places where people were living more sustainably and more consciously," Jodie Passmore says.

The couple now call a unique project in WA's South West home — living in one of the state's first fully developed ecovillages in the small town of Witchcliffe, 10km south of Margaret River.

## Building the dream

The Witchcliffe Ecovillage is a grand initiative founded by Sustainable Settlements Director Mike Hulme, who first identified the 120-hectare site as a potential ecovillage location in 1994, finally acquiring the land 16 years later with joint venture partners the Perron Group.

After significant time spent master planning and establishing the ground rules for a more community-focused property development, nearly 200 ecovillage residential lots have sold in what is designed to be a model not only for sustainable living but for more connected communities and healthier lives.

Some 65 homes are currently under construction and the ecovillage's communications and marketing manager, Jo Thierfelder, says 40 families, couples and singles have already moved in.

Ecovillages have been a concept for about 40 years, occurring more frequently in Europe than in Australia, and offer a way of living rarely found in urban environments.

RAC acting general manager Social Impact, Marion Morton, understands the appeal, noting that the desire for increased social connection is a common theme among RAC members, as is the growing focus on finding a more sustainable way to live.

"We have noticed that sustainability and community are becoming increasingly important to our members, and that many are becoming more conscious about the environmental impact of their actions and looking for services and products that align to their values," she says.

"Ecovillages aim to be 100 per cent self-sufficient through renewable energy, the sustainable use of water, growing organic, fresh produce and taking care of the local ecology.

"People appreciate being able to get around easily by foot or by bike and participating in community life.



It's great that we've got these examples where people can build social connection and also interact with the environment and their community."

## A vision of a complete community

Many ecovillages start as small communities who decide to band together to share resources and live more sustainably, using their collective strengths to achieve more than they could individually. They might begin by sharing food resources, for example, and evolve over time into generating renewable power for the village.



*“People appreciate being able to get around easily by foot or by bike and participating in community life.”*

TOP: A community gathering around the firepit in the ecovillage; INSET: Jodie Passmore and Aron Dyer in their Witchcliffe home with their two children.

In contrast, Witchcliffe Ecovillage has started with the end goal in sight, and Jo Thierfelder says the developers see the project as a way to demonstrate the possibilities of sustainable development and community living.

Although WA has something similar in the co-housing initiative Decohousing in Denmark, few property developers are prepared to adopt such sweeping initiatives.

“When we talk about sustainability here, we focus on the triple bottom line — an environmental focus and an economic and social component as well,” she says. “We are a lot more than a group of residential homes. There’s a whole public realm with a village square and a commercial precinct, and a really good spread of residents from young families through to retirees.”

Sustainability runs as a thread throughout the design and development of the

ecovillage, both for individual homes and sub-groups of houses known as clusters. Many of the initiatives are focused on reducing household energy and emissions, with homes required to be built to passive solar and energy efficient designs, with the incorporation of household solar panels, rainwater tanks and the use of natural and sustainable building materials.

But the design also leverages the commitment of residents to shared sustainability projects, from 11 community gardens with vegetable patches to encourage food production, to a small orchard and shared tool sheds, to microgrids and battery storage.

Electric vehicle charging stations are also a priority — with a clever business model that looks to capture additional solar energy from households and use that to power two EV fast-charging stations in each cluster, the income from which in turn offsets residents’ strata levies. ▶



*Affordability has also been part of the planning — a portion of lots have been dedicated to cottage blocks suited to singles or couples who are on low to medium incomes.*

BELOW: The Witchcliffe Ecovillage community; INSET: Some of the vegetables picked from Jodie and Aron's garden; TOP RIGHT: Sunflowers in full bloom; BOTTOM RIGHT: Karen and David Millar were regularly helping around the ecovillage gardens before moving into their home in 2022.

### **Making it economically sustainable**

Economic sustainability is also a focus. Homes are connected to the NBN to enable home-based working, but there is also a push to keep jobs local. Within the commercial precinct and village square, building lots have been specially designed to allow a ground floor studio or shop and upper floor living to encourage businesses to the ecovillage.

"Each of our residential clusters has between 19 and 26 homes, and there's been some great social research on what the perfect number for a good community is," Thierfelder says.

"They are laid out in a semicircle around a central community garden, so while the lots themselves are freehold title lots for all intents and purposes, they are strata, so all lot owners also own the community

garden in common, with shared infrastructure like a little meeting house, covered orchard, play spaces and fire pits.

"For me, I feel like it straddles the mainstream idea where you want your own private space, but you also have shared community facilities."

All up, about two thirds of the ecovillage site is dedicated to public open space, agricultural lots, community gardens, conservation areas and Ecovillage Commons land. Winter creeks have been included in the landscaping, flowing into three dams that collect storm water for later use in irrigation.

### **Accommodating a diverse community**

Properties are also carefully designed, with a range of pre-designed homes that already meet design criteria, which can be





built in timber, hempcrete, straw bale or reverse brick veneer. Custom homes are permitted but, like all designs, must meet high environmental standards and pass a life cycle assessment on their total impact.

Affordability has also been part of the planning — a portion of lots have been dedicated to ‘groupie’ blocks suited to singles or couples who are on low to medium incomes, with the goal of creating small sustainable housing with low ongoing costs.

Jodie Passmore and Aron Dyer turned to family friend and architect Adrian Welke to develop a 96sq m home within the ecovillage and say they haven’t looked back.

“The idea of growing some of our own food and living more sustainably, being near other people who are interested in doing that too, was very appealing,” Passmore says.

“And now here we are a year later where our children have their best friends living across the street and on the weekends there’s a flurry of children running in and out of our house.

“They swim at the dam together, they’ve been building nesting boxes for possums and birds together, and climbing the neighbouring trees. We feel pretty lucky to have landed in this growing community of people, all really seeking similar things.”

### Community connections

Karen and David Millar are both semi-retired, Karen working with the management team at the Witchcliffe Ecovillage and David as a GP specialising in men’s health in Margaret River.

The couple, originally from Fremantle, moved to the ecovillage late in 2022,

after renting in Margaret River while they built. But Karen says even before the house was complete, they were regulars there, working on the veggie patch attached to their property and getting to know the community.

“We wanted to feel connected and start meeting the people that were around and get the soil ready for planting, so we started at least 18 months before moving and we’re reaping the benefits of that now,” she says.

The community aspect has been greater than she expected, with neighbours happy to help the couple move in, offering ready-cooked meals and dropping off veggies.

“Here people that we’ve met have become friends pretty quickly. I think both the place and the people around us are just delightful.” ■



Images courtesy of Witchcliffe Ecovillage