

Inland Waterways News

Ecotopia

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Ecotopia is a yearly two-week gathering of environmental and social activists organised by European Youth For Action (EYFA). It is held in a different European country each year, and this year it was held in Bealkelly Woods, on the banks of Lough Derg near Scarriff.

The site looked beautiful on the sunny August day when I visited. However the ground was pretty muddy from the week before, and I imagine it wouldn't have been so nice on a rainy day. Participants stayed in a campsite in the woods (separate from the main site) in assorted tents. The tents ranged from conventional camping tents to teepees, yurts and something called the Geodome. A Moroccan wedding tent was being used as a library in the main site.



Teepee

At 10:00am I attended Morning Circle, where announcements are made, volunteers for tasks are found and items are discussed. All issues are decided by consensus, and no-one represents anyone else. After Morning Circle, the first set of workshops started. I went to the Welcome Workshop, run for anyone who has just arrived. After that I wandered around the site, and various friendly people explained how things worked. After lunch (I'm not sure what it was, but it tasted good) I went to a workshop about using the **Freedom of Information Act**, and another about winning support for campaigns. I was impressed by the friendliness of everyone I met, and I would have loved to stay longer.

Ecotopia is a very participative event. Workshops are hosted by anyone who feels like hosting a workshop, so there can be up to 30 workshops a day, run in three sessions. The theme this year was Conflict Resolution, so there were some workshops on this theme, but workshops could be about anything at all. On the day I was there, topics included world food security, labour and the environment, genetic engineering, bioenergetics, singing and songwriting, Brazilian stick dancing and three-sided football. The previous week, Paddy Mackey had given a talk on Save Our Lough Derg. An ongoing project was the building of a straw bale outhouse for the owner of the land. People not participating in workshops helped out in the kitchen, moving wood, cleaning toilets, washing up and so on.

Ecotopia is run as a sustainable community. This means having the smallest possible impact on the local environment. There was no mains electricity on the site, but several bicycles were rigged up to a generator. If you wanted to listen to music or use a laptop, you had to charge up a battery first by doing some cycling. At one point, there was a section of pathway that needed lighting at night. There was a string handrail; pulling the string turned the pedals on a bicycle suspended in a tree; that rotated the back wheel, which ran a dynamo, which powered a light, which illuminated the path.

Water was taken from a clean and safe nearby spring. Cold showers were available, though the guidebook recommends leaving water in a black plastic bag in the sunshine for an hour to heat it up before showering.

Very little waste was generated. Food and drink cans, cardboard, paper, glass, plastic containers and cartons are all recycled; the rest was put in a barrel, which wasn't even nearly full after a week and a half — and much of that had been picked out of the lake. Waste water was poured into a big pit about 75 metres from the lake: it will be filtered by the earth on the way to the lake. The scum on top of this water stayed in the pit, and was buried when Ecotopia ended. There was a huge compost heap which seemed to be used most of all.

One of the most intriguing parts of the site was the compost toilets. Aiming not to pollute Lough Derg, the organisers decided not to set up conventional drainage systems, which tend to end up in waterways. Instead, they rigged up compost toilets. Large pits were dug, and curtained structures were erected around them. These toilets were for solids only; anything else had to be done in the woods somewhere. The idea is that you do what you have to do, then pour fermenting sawdust on top. As sawdust rots, organisms grow in it. These absorb the nitrogen in the toilets. Nitrogen is the main pollutant in human waste, and it's what makes waste smell. Once the nitrogen is removed, the waste is much less harmful to the environment and doesn't smell (I didn't believe it until I visited the toilets). When Ecotopia left the site, the pits were filled in and trees were planted on top, providing an environmentally friendly alternative to dumping waste into lakes and rivers. Perhaps compost toilets should be fitted on boats instead of holding tanks.



Ecotopian loo (Top)
Generating electricity (Bottom)

Anyone concerned by the amount of oil and scum that gathers in harbours could do worse than talk to some environmentalists. I certainly learnt a lot there, and realised that being eco-friendly doesn't necessarily mean being uncomfortable.

There are accounts of Ecotopia on the web: search for "ecotopia clare 2002" or visit the indymedia.ie website at <http://www.indymedia.ie/cgi-bin/newswire.cgi?id=11454>