



Ecoversities Gathering 2017

**Earth University, Limon, Costa Rica
18th February 2017**

“The Ecoversities gathering in Costa Rica was a space like no other. I have been dedicating my time to the transformation of higher education for the past 13 years and I can't think of a richer place to be for someone like me. I was inspired by the depth and the diversity of experience of the people present, combined with their willingness to listen deeply to each other and create together. I think that the world needs this unique community and the depth of the conversation it is generating around re-imagining higher education. This Ecoversities unconference deepened the relationships and created a strong core that can keep alive a critical worldwide conversation and collaboration. It was a precious gift.”

- Traian Bruma, The Alternative University, Romania

Kate Morales (Mycellium, USA) shares a beautiful poem to welcome everyone into the gathering.



“I am so honored to welcome you all here

Take a moment right now to allow yourself to fully arrive. Allow the dust to settle in your mind. Bring your attention to your body, your breath, this present moment. You have arrived! Welcome.

We welcome your excitement and your trepidation. Your clear inquiries and your big question mark faces. We welcome your wide eyes and open hearts right alongside your side eyes and cynicism/ skepticism. You are welcome here.

Your culture is welcome. Your ethnic origin is welcome. Your race, your skin hue, accent, food preferences, and all of the complexities that make up your cultural identity are welcome here. The histories, herstories, and experiences of your ancestors are honored and welcomed. We welcome you with all of the connections you bring in with you to the children in your lives, your partners, siblings, parents, the animals in your lives, and other loved ones in your communities. You are welcome here.

We welcome your spiritual practice, your religious affiliation, your spiritual walk. However you hold that aspect of your life is welcomed. Your love is welcome here. How you love, who you love, and your understanding of what love is are all welcome. We welcome you in all of the ways your sexuality has and is unfolding. We welcome you in all of the ways your gender has and is unfolding.

We welcome you in your ignorance. We welcome you in your privilege. We welcome you in your grief. We welcome you in your guilt and shame. You are welcome here.

Your quirks and ambiguities are welcome. We welcome your humor and we welcome your silent contemplation. We welcome the parts of yourself that you're still figuring out. We welcome you in your roles as entrepreneurs, activists, healers, feelers, intuitives, parents, caretakers, students, artists, witches, change agents, magicians, educators, and warriors. We welcome you at whatever level of mental and physical wellness you are currently functioning. We welcome your introversion and your extroversion. We welcome all of the experiences that led you to this moment. Thank you for surviving! We welcome your wounds and scars. Your emotions, ALL of them, are welcome as well. You are welcome here.

Thank you for bringing your ancestors with you; we welcome them also. We welcome your sacred connections to the lands on which you were conceived, the lands that hosted your births, and the lands of your ancestors. We welcome you to this land here, where we have prepped the soil for you to sow the seeds of your dreams. Let your roots sink into this nutrient dense soil, intertwining with the roots of everyone else here, and connecting to the root systems of all of the other living things around here through the underground mycellial network.

Settle in. Welcome.”

Elena Prado (Ceprosi/PRATEC Peru) offers a powerful indigenous ritual to welcome everyone to the land and invite in the guardian spirits.



The group was taken for a little field trip to the Earth University organic farm where the students are involved in practical on-farm learning every week.



Johannes Pfister (Think Camp, Germany), Marcus Ford (Flagstaff College, USA), Dennis Littky (College Unbound, USA) and Deepak Menaria (Lemon School of Entrepreneurship, India) flash some smiles during the visit to the campus' organic farm.



Famous Costa Rican cacao beans being dried at the Earth University organic farm.



“There are two strong takeaways for me from the 2nd Ecovercities Gathering. First, the need to strengthen processes of South/South and West/East dialogue and intercultural translation became very apparent. For example, context, meta-language, and concepts within certain conversations can be easily universalized by preoccupations and ideologies stemming from the geographical North. Other forms of relating need to be acknowledged, especially those based on the everyday experiencing of the community as a way of life and political project. Second, as a result of the gathering, the seed was planted for co-creating a regional emerging network of Mesoamerican Ecovercities – including projects of (un)learning from Mexico and Central America -- focusing on the recognition of our localized, em-placed, collective voices with an objective, among others, of strengthening our platform so that we may effectively increase our participation in the next gathering.”

- Gerardo Lopez-Amaro, Raices Colectivas, Mexico

Traian Bruma (The Alternative University, Romania) and Manish Jain (Swaraj University, India) try their hands at cutting up sugar cane with some African students of Earth University during the visit to organic farm.



“Spending 6 days in Earth University for the Ecoversties gathering was a wonderful experience and I am sure it will impact my work in times to come. There was a rich exposure to cultural diversity, to global themes for change and to the wonderful work of so many changemakers across the world. I leave with a stronger belief in alternative/parallel education models. The format of the ‘Un’ Conference approach provided opportunities for equal participation and a democratic way of focused discussions, breakouts and leadership. I hope to use it more in our programs. The best takeaway for me was the possibilities for partnerships and synergies with many organizations for amplifying the impact of the work. I look forward to working with multiple partners in Ecoversties to design models for student exchange, cross-pollination and mutual benefit. The meet provided a global big picture for issues concerning higher education, sustainability and convergence of efforts for a positive change.”

- Deepak Menaria, Lemon School of Entrepreneurship, India

Victoria Haro (Universidad del Medio Ambiente, Mexico),
Nick Joyce (NuMundo, USA) and Khadra Ali (Digital
Hargeisa, Somalia) on a group tour of the campus.



Karim-Yassin Goessinger (Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Egypt) shares some morning Chi Gong practice at the men's house to start off each day with good energy.



“My deeper lessons came from the smaller group sessions such as cooking with someone and finding out more their work and why they do the work that they do? What inspires them? What drives them? And what sustains them? Sometimes when you are doing your work in your part of the world, it can feel isolating and you can feel like giving up (or at least this has been my experience). However my fire from within has been reignited by the stories I heard and the people I met. I am seeing the opportunities of connecting the work that I am doing with Black Daddies Club and Verandah University here in Toronto, with other projects globally, finding an opportunity of supporting the education for racialized and marginalized young people here in Canada and connecting with opportunities to learn in places such as Swaraj University in India or in Peru. In regards to lessons that I am taking away, it is what Ronaldo said about one plus one equals three – the idea of the connection between us is its own entity and we must honor it. Also, the connection between human beings and nature was also something that came through for me even stronger and how much more I need to incorporate learning from nature into the work that I am doing.”

- Brandon Hay, Verandah University, Canada

Cooking together was a beautiful part of the gathering. Here Marina Leitner (Enlivened Learning, Argentina) shares some of her amazing empanadas.



Ashley Cooper (Mycellium, USA) listens to Nalei Kahakalau (EA Ecovercity, Hawaii) share about indigenous rites of passage.



Nick Joyce (USA) and Cynthia Tina (USA) shared their vision of NuMundo as “an AirBNB for transformative learning experiences” which stimulated lots of animated discussions.



“Two weeks ago I attended a gathering at EARTH University where 40-some strangers evolved into friends, mentors, unfacilitators of emergence, dance partners, swimming companions, eyes into the invisible, dream readers, reflectors of my soul, and energy exchangers. We all came with different stories, selves, sense of identities, cultures, customs, projects, prides, tribes, presents, and priorities. We came without explicit expectations but carrying the baggage of the social norms that have infiltrated our schools, societies, and senses since the beginning. And yet, we were a community. This was clear from the first round of hugs and deepened with every dance step. It strengthened in each moment of silent recognition that spread across the circle, and was what allowed the tension to hang so tangibly from south to north, west to east...”

- Eileen Walz, Kalu Yala, Panama

There was an amazing cultural night where different Ecoversities members and some Earth University students came together to share their diverse talents – music, clowning, dances, poetry.



“Over the course of our gathering we breathed together; exhaling some of the fumes to make room for the fires in each of us. Some of the questions that I carry with me:

- What is at the core of education? What does authentic learning look like?
- How can we re-value education and do away with degrees?
- Who is [the group currently called] Ecoversities and what can we offer the world? What can we do now?
- Do we know how to listen? Are we really listening to each other?
- What social tensions did we fail to recognize? What cultural ignorance did we continue to embody?
- Is Earth University, with its impressive statistics of cultural, racial, and economic diversity part of the solution - or part of the problem?
- Is our group part of the solution or part of the problem? Do we know yet? Will we ever?
- What can we learn from our dancing, music, emerging, ceremonies, laughter, and our care for one another?
- How can we hold on to and nurture the wisdom of our elders?
- Are we moving too fast or too slow? Are we moving in the right direction?
- What truths are we not ready, willing, or able to speak?
- Are we asking the right questions?”

- Eileen Walz, Kalu Yala, Panama

We had lots of Costa Rican rice and beans in all kinds of combinations.



Ku Kahakalau (EA Ecovercity, Hawaii) shares how to weave an indigenous Hawaiian garland *lei*.



“The talking piece that became more prominent, without being transparently agreed upon by the whole group, was the topic of decolonization. Because it reflected so clearly the striking difference in the way of being together, of our capacities of listening, of our capacities of deciding and collaborating. In a way, it wasn’t given space openly in the whole group, but it kept of painting a hue over most interactions together, sometimes engaging in interesting side dialogues and strengthening visions, sometimes disrupting the flow of agreement and in my opinion impeding simple processes, affecting the effectiveness of the whole group and raising pressure on the limited time we had together. The methods that I found most ergonomic for the group were the sacred ritual spaces, where there was a deep respect and engagement. They didn’t feel overworked, forced, but very invited and encouraged by everyone. Another one was the use of outings, which connected the group to a sense of being invited to meet a landscape and brought some grounding to some abstract dialogues in the group. Overall, I found the gathering to be inspirational, bringing me to a bigger trust in the hearts and minds engaged in doing incredible work: healing the social fabric of communities and creating more diverse educational spaces that are earth-centered and rooted in honest inquiry and responsibility.”

-Vera Franco, Findhorn Foundation College, Scotland

The river was a popular destination for hosting discussions as several Ecovercities members took some time each day to cool off in the Costa Rican heat.



“The teaching and practice around ‘cargos’ was deeply influential to me -- highlighting that there are things we are called to do, responsibilities we are called to hold that we might not actually want to, but it is our cargo to do so. We can be directly asked by another person or we can feel a calling from a higher source. To carry through with our cargo requires time, commitment, trust, and respect. This has been a tremendously helpful learning for me.”

- Ashley Cooper, Mycellium, North Carolina, USA

Brandon Hay (Verandah University, Canada) taking in some moments of quiet group meditation.



A small working group discusses future online exchange and partnership opportunities.



“The gathering this year provided me with a greater understanding and perspective about self-directed learning and opened up my mind around what this can actually look like. I came to this gathering to reflect on my work in Somaliland and to seek an alternative solution to how we work, educate, and live in this world without falling into the ‘trap’ of capitalism, colonialisms, etc. There were no lectures or set agenda to do this but the informal conversations and the community setting allowed me to find what I was seeking. I particularly enjoyed interacting with the African students studying at Earth University. I was able to leave Costa Rica knowing that others are also seeking diverse solutions and, with this community, I was where I was supposed to be.”

-Khadra Ali, Digital Hargeisa, Somalia

Francisco Grau (Schumacher College, UK) was our local representative from Costa Rica and gave us many insights into the local philosophy of *Pura Vida*, the pure life.



This little Costa Rican iguana was even fascinated by our group and our conversations.



“Attending these Ecovercities gatherings has been both enlightening, in terms of learning about new models of education, as well as practical, in terms of creating new professional partnerships. Specifically, the first gathering spurred the creation of EA Academy, as the foundation for a Hawaiian system of higher learning. While the recent second gathering in Costa Rica resulted in a partnership with a group in India to create Hawaiian language and culture apps. I really loved the unstructured unconference format, which allowed us to really get to know participants on a personal level and form solid relations. This has already led to exciting collaborations, like the publication of Edushifts, an exciting book sharing the ideas of 16 courageous education thought leaders to see the world with new eyes and lead the way toward a better future.”

- Ku Kahakalau , EA Ecovercity, Hawaii

Genaro Vasquez (Instituto Superior Intercultural Ayuuk, Mexico), Giovanni Ciarlo (Gaia Education, Scotland) and Deepak Menaria (Lemon, India) continue their discussions on the beautiful beaches of Costa Rica.



Udi Mandel (Earth University, Costa Rica) hosts a discussion on solidarity and how to strengthen the Ecovercities Alliance.



"The gathering allowed me to broaden, deepen and amplify my imaginings of higher education. It reassured me that I wasn't alone in grounding bold theoretical insight, serving socio-ecological justice and building a community of practice in circumstances that aren't necessarily favourable. The gathering constituted for me a time and place of humility, self-care and great generosity. It generated friction and warmth. It constituted a shared effort to collaborate across differences and to formulate a common vision. From it I returned to Egypt lit, refreshed and eager to carry on."

- Karim-Yassin Goessinger, Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Egypt

Gerardo Lopez-Amaro (Raices Colectivas, Mexico) and Alessandra Pomarico (Free Home University, Italy) share a sketch proposal for a possible collective project bid under the Yidan Prize.



This past week was purely magical to me. To see and to be seen. To love and be loved. To share a vision of a world that is more whole, more just, more sustainable... I returned home with a full heart and dreams to realize. I gave notice today that I'm going to go down in work hours next spring and we have sketched a plan for Flagstaff College that includes our first offering- a week long journey around the sacred San Francisco Peaks. For six days, we will travel with a group of students and learn together about the local ecology, culture, and conservation issues affecting the area. Thank you all for being a part of helping to light these dreams. Thank you for helping to push me to fight harder for justice and helping me to see that one plus one is not just two.

- Rosemary Logan, Flagstaff College, Arizona, USA

Sarah Amsler (University of Lincoln, UK) and Sergio Romero (Unitierra, Mexico) enjoy the farewell party dinner featuring an amazing international feast, cooked by all the participants.



Special thanks to Kelly Teamey, Yari and Udi Mandel (and Earth University, Costa Rica) for their affectionate hosting of this year's gathering.

