

# Recycle Like It's 1999!

By Seth Baum



IMAGINE: It's 1999. (Okay, this part isn't too hard to imagine, but maybe it would have been back in 1975 when the book was written). Hell-bent on consumer-driven capitalism, the United States runs itself into the ground: its economy collapses due to fossil fuel and other resource shortages and to excessive military activity, its people are overworked, stressed-out, poorly nourished, lacking exercise, and otherwise miserable, and it finds itself increasingly isolated from a world committed to a more ecological and emotionally sane existence. (Maybe that part is, for better or worse, not too hard to imagine either, thanks to author Ernest Callenbach's

prophetic imagination). Determined to chart a more positive course, the people of Northern California, Oregon, and Washington secede and form "Ecotopia," adopting lifestyles and technology friendly to both the

environment and the beings living within it.

Ecotopia tells the story of William Weston, the first person from the remaining United States to visit Ecotopia, 20 years after its secession. The book's value is in the social and technological details of Ecotopia woven into an engaging narrative.

The social aspects of Ecotopia are rather farfetched, as the proposed would require a substantial and simultaneous personality change of a large population, although it does play off of cultural differences that exist between the East and West coasts. "It's as if they have lost their sense of anonymity which enables us to live together in large numbers," Weston writes in his personal journal. "You can't, therefore, approach an Ecotopian functionary as we do. The Ecotopian at the train ticket window simply wouldn't tolerate being spoken to in my usual way—he asked me what I thought he was, a ticket-dispensing machine?"

Technological Ecotopia is no less bizarre, but much of it is at least plausible. In fact, many Ecotopian inventions leave me wondering why we don't have anything like that. For example, Ecotopia has do-it-yourself housing. As Weston writes in an article for publication back in America: "We extrude plastic sausage casings, wire, garden hose, aluminum shapes, and many other items, but the Ecotopians extrude whole rooms... The resulting houses take many shapes—in fact I've never seen two that were alike—but you can get the general impression by imagining that jet airplane cabins could be bought by the yard and glued together into whatever shapes you had in mind."

While the Ecotopia would never actually exist as described in the book (for example, it had no internet), it's remarkably insightful and stimulating. Indeed, much of my own progressivism was inspired by the book, given to me in high school by a friend who regularly skipped school to shoplift advanced sustainable design books from Barnes & Noble. (My friend is now gainfully employed doing "green" architecture in Toronto.) Regardless of your age, environmental knowledge, or altruistically delinquent tendencies, I recommend reading "Ecotopia." **WU**

Seth Baum was here.

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