



Linnæus University

Sweden

Master Thesis

Exploring the Role of Eco-Communities in Fostering Environmental Stewardship: A Study of Volunteer Tourism at Cloughjordan Eco- Village



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University: Linnaeus University

Term: Spring 2023

Subject: Master-Thesis

Level: Master



Abstract

In recent years, there has been a shift in interest in travel, toward an increasing interest in sustainable travel and alternative forms of travel. As a result, there is also an interest in research studying these alternative travel concepts. Therefore, this qualitative study looks at experiences in ecovillages, focusing on volunteer workers. It examines the effects of the ecovillages that influence these volunteers to become environmental stewards. For this purpose, the concept of place attachment, as the connection to the place and the people within the ecovillage, is used. As well as the concept of transformative learning, i.e., the change of views and orientations of the participants of the learning program.

To get a better overview of the context of the case study, the literature on voluntourism and voluntourism in the global north (due to the location of the case study), as well as on communities and eco-communities will be examined.

The case study is an ecovillage in Ireland, located in Cloughjordan, the middle of Ireland. There, 11 in-depth interviews and observations were conducted, and the volunteers were interviewed about their experiences and their time in the ecovillage.

The results of this study suggest three ways in which volunteers are influenced by their ecovillage experiences to become environmental stewards. On the one hand, this is the case due to the recognition of the importance of the developed soft skills. As this is learning for oneself and improving communication with other people. Furthermore, by learning with and from each other, the volunteers are led to take stewardship actions. Finally, it is also the community itself that manages to implement stewardship among the volunteers through the way of life and togetherness and the high value of environmental actions through place attachment.

Keywords

Place attachment, transformative learning, environmental stewardship, voluntourism, eco-communities, ecovillages, Cloughjordan ecovillage, community attachment



Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the people who have supported me in whatever way during the writing process.

First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Solène Prince without whom my work would certainly not look the way it does right now. Thank you for your always very detailed and thoughtful feedback - I am very grateful for your support.

I would also like to thank Dr. Stephan Reinhold, the course coordinator for the thesis course. Thank you also for your feedback and thoughts. It has given me new perspectives and through it, I have also been able to specify my research question.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Ruairí Moore for conducting the pre-test for my interviews, without which my interview questions would not have been as good.

Then I would like to thank you for your cooperation with Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland. I am very happy about the week I spent in Cloughjordan. It gave me new energy to complete my master's thesis. I would especially like to thank Peadar Kirby, the research coordinator of the ecovillage for organizing the interview partners and giving me a lot of information about the ecovillage itself. Another big thank you goes to my hosts at the ecovillage, Bríd Ní Chumhaill and Martin Maguire. Special thanks also go to the interview partners for the time they gave me to participate in an interview. I was also able to meet some of them personally, which I am very grateful about.

Thanks also to my fellow students for their feedback during the seminars and for their support during the process, especially when things did not go well in the writing. I would especially like to thank Sarah Nieutin, Sandrina Thurow, Zaïre Laly, Diana Alexe, Szabolcs Harhai, and Constantin Luft for the incredible support I received during the master thesis in the form of countless Zoom sessions, motivational speeches, great conversations, and dance sessions.

A very big thank you also goes to my family and friends, whether in Sweden or Germany. Without the emotional support, I would not have been able to finish this thesis.



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1 Introduction

In recent years, the interests of travelers have moved to a more sustainable and alternative way of traveling. The focus on alternative travel options in general has been growing (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Typically, the term alternative tourism refers to travel that is small-scale, locally owned, and managed, and that offers experiences like educational tours, volunteering travel, farm stays, and ecotourism (Oriade & Evens, 2011; Prince & Ioannides, 2017; Weaver, 2006). Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased people's interest in those alternative experiences linked to principles of sustainable travel and slow travel (Paul et al., 2022). As sustainable travel like nature-based tourism and non-conventional travel is becoming more and more popular, it makes communities that live closely knit and follow environmental values interesting places for travelers. Ecovillages are such places, where the community members, meaning the people inside ecovillages, are living closely together with a focus on environmental sustainability (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Authentic tourism encompasses a form of travel that embodies sincerity, spontaneity, and faithfulness to a destination's cultural, historical, and natural legacy. It entails respectfully and sustainably engaging with local communities, traditions, and lifestyles. Genuine tourism experiences are immersive in nature, providing visitors with a chance to discover and understand the local culture and way of life (Yeoman et al., 2007). Ecovillages are intentional communities formed by members who share a common vision and seek the fulfillment of lifestyle goals often oriented toward principles of sustainability (Farkas, 2017). People, who join eco-communities often want to live according to principles of what they perceive as an authentic or unconventional way of living.

Ecovillages, that are one type of eco-communities, combine aspects of authentic living and a strong connection to nature through the co-existence with the natural environment in the ecovillage exists (Feng et al., 2017). This combination can be achieved, for instance by designing their sustainable community through the building of eco-houses, the usage of solar power, the development of organic food, and sharing things like kitchen gadgets or clothes (Espinosa & Walker, 2013). Ecovillages are interesting to study in tourism research because they try to maintain the traditional methods of agriculture while continuing to optimize them. Moreover, according to



research, ecovillages are the optimal use of land. Furthermore, one of the aims of ecovillages is to protect rural ecosystems (Gorji Mahlabani et al., 2016).

The benefits that volunteers receive in the ecovillage environment and within the learning program can be, for example, nature-centered education. Ecovillages often invite volunteers to participate in their daily operations whilst also offering learning opportunities to their visitors (Prince, 2017, 2019; Prince & Ioannides, 2017). Through various volunteering opportunities, internships, and education programs, volunteers at eco-villages usually benefit from education in the field of environmental sustainability and alternative ways of living (Feng et al., 2017; Lennon & Berg, 2022). But also, aspects like e.g., the development of social relations with other volunteers and community members, learning about organic vegetable production, or improved language skills play a role in the learning program for the volunteers (Deville et al., 2016b; Miller & Mair, 2015). These aspects result in benefits such as better knowledge of environmental protection and the development of pro-environmental behavior (Deville et al., 2016b). Moreover, as the residents of ecovillages try to live as self-sufficiently as they can, they sometimes also become part of the learning experience of visitors by teaching them new skills during daily activities (Feng et al., 2017; Pickerill, 2021).

There are arguments, for example, from Moscardo et al. (2013) that the environmental education inside the ecovillage has positive effects on the environmental behavior of the people taking part in learning programs of ecovillages (Moscardo et al., 2013). These learning programs offered in the ecovillages have different focuses. For example, programs are offered in the areas of community resilience, renewable energy production, biodiversity, climate change, local food systems, green buildings, or permaculture design, to name just a few possible course topics (Cloughjordan Eco-Village, 2023a; Collins & Kearins, 2010). Likewise, visitors are sometimes allowed into communities or eco-communities that provide information and knowledge transfer for outside people, like university groups in the form of guided tours, for a day, or even weekend programs with the previously mentioned subjects. The programs have a dual objective: firstly, to facilitate knowledge sharing and economic support within the communities, and secondly, to provide participants with the knowledge and expose them to a novel way of living. (Prince, 2017, 2019; Prince & Ioannides, 2017). The focus of learning programs inside eco-communities is to



introduce these people to ways of living that have a positive impact on the environment (Moscardo et al., 2013; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2022). In these learning programs, visitors or volunteer workers often come into close contact with community residents. According to research on tourism, residents' perceptions are very important for community resilience. Therefore, there must be a meeting and exchange between visitors and residents in eco-communities. Community members can share their knowledge with visitors or volunteers and thus spread resilience (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Lee, 2013; Yang et al., 2021).

1.1 Research gap

In eco-communities such as ecovillages, the education provided by community members often catalyzes transforming students into environmental stewards (Walter, 2016). Environmental stewardship can be described as the way of living better, than people without stewardship actions, together with the environment as individuals and acting toward having the best impact on the environment possible (Kapeller et al., 2022). During the time that the volunteers live in these eco-communities, tourism research has shown that a connection is formed with the residents who live permanently in these same eco-communities (Lee, 2013). The connection can lead to eco-communities' visitors adapting to the residents' behavior. By adapting behavior and learning environmentally friendly actions such as food preservation, recycling, energy conservation, and resource handling, visitors can become environmental stewards accordingly (Bennett et al., 2018; Peachey, 2008).

Arguably, volunteers at eco-villages can become better environmental stewards through their formation of a place attachment towards the community. Place attachment describes the relationship or bond with a place and its people that people form over time (Dredge, 2010; Guo et al., 2018). When it comes to volunteering, previous research recognizes that the connection with the community, as well as the connection between the volunteers themselves, if there are several at the same time, is important for the transformative learning process that the volunteers go through. However, this transformation is not necessarily recognized as better environmental stewardship (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011).



Volunteering in general is very commonly studied in tourism research (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Daldeniz et al., 2010; McGehee, 2014; Mustonen, 2007; Pompurová et al., 2018; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). However, there is little research on volunteering in ecovillages in specific. For example, a search using the keyword "volunteer tourism eco-village" yields only three hits in the Web of Science database. All three articles are by the same author and are all about the same eco-village in Iceland (Prince, 2017, 2019; Prince & Ioannides, 2017). It is perhaps because there are so few studies on volunteers at eco-villages (i.e., the places where people meet and learn about alternative ways of living or encountering stewardship) that the relationship between the formation of place attachment and the transformation towards environmental stewardship during volunteer tourism experiences is not fully understood in tourism research.

The connection between the transformative learning experience and the feelings of attachment to the ecovillage developed during the volunteer experience is currently unclear in the existing literature. There is no research establishing a connection between the formation of place attachment and the successful transformative learning experience that changes a volunteer into an environmental steward. Researchers have established that there is a positively influencing link between place attachment and environmental stewardship (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020), as well as between transformative learning and environmental stewardship (Raftopoulos, 2020). But there is currently no link between the three concepts when it comes to volunteers at ecovillages. Knowing how the concepts of place attachment and transformative learning can work together to transform people into environmental stewards is important to creating better learning programs. If the learning programs become better and enable more eco-communities to offer such learning programs for volunteers, more people can be influenced to become environmental stewards.

This thesis project explores the links between these concepts and examines what constitutes drivers of environmental stewardship. There are correspondingly different perspectives on ecovillages from the viewpoint of tourism research: Ecotourism, alternative tourism, community-based tourism, as well as sustainable tourism (Brightsmith et al., 2008; Giampiccoli et al., 2020; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Prince, 2019).



Ecovillages can be thought of as locations for ecotourism, which entails ethical travel to unspoiled areas that preserve the environment and supports the welfare of the local populace. Tourists can learn about ecological and social principles and experience sustainable living in ecovillages (Brightsmith et al., 2008).

Moreover, ecovillages are an illustration of alternative tourism, which entails non-mass tourism that supports genuine cultural encounters and local development. Visitors get the opportunity to interact with locals, participate in eco-building projects, and learn about organic farming and renewable energy generation in ecovillages (Prince, 2017, 2019; Prince & Ioannides, 2017).

Ecovillages can serve as examples of community-based tourism, which include travel-related projects that are owned and run by local communities and enhance both the local economy and the environment. Residents of ecovillages frequently own and run them so they can profit from tourism-related activities while still having control over how they live (Giampiccoli et al., 2020; Jung, 2018).

Furthermore, ecovillages serve as examples of sustainable tourism, which is defined as tourism that satisfies the requirements of current visitors and the host area while preserving and expanding chances for the future. Ecovillages encourage environmentally friendly behaviors including recycling, water conservation, and the use of renewable energy sources (Lee, 2013; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007).

1.2 Aim and objectives

The efforts made by ecovillages offering educational programs to volunteers can lead to the transformation of its participants into environmental stewards. Efforts that are to be taken by the ecovillages are for example, that they must be officially listed by a learning program, such as the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) program, Erasmus+, or similar programs. To achieve this, an infrastructure must be created within the ecovillages for administration but also teaching and learning (European Commission, 2023; European Youth Portal, 2023). Consequently, the following research question aims to establish how the concepts of place attachment, transformative learning, and environmental stewardship relate to each other, which will be addressed through



interviews and on-site experiences at an ecovillage. One advantage of conducting qualitative research in this context is that it allows me, as a researcher, to form my impression of the ecovillage. Additionally, informal conversations provide a contextual backdrop for the interviews, aiding in addressing the research question at hand.

How do experiences in eco-communities influence environmental stewardship?

Therefore, this thesis aims to find out how ecovillages influence their volunteers to become better environmental stewards during their stay with them. It explores the role that the affective connection, meaning the attachment to the place of the ecovillage itself plays in the transformation of the volunteers toward better environmental stewardship.

The results of this thesis will support ecovillages in their management, and interactions with tourists as well as provide guidelines for designing effective volunteer education programs. The improvements that the volunteers made for themselves can influence their life from the point of entering the ecovillage. However, the improvements also include environmental stewardship actions that the volunteers adapt from the ecovillage. Therefore, the more people involved, the greater the impact of the improvements on society and planet Earth. The knowledge that volunteers gain in environmental stewardship during their stay in an ecovillage can also be passed on to friends, family, and other people they meet throughout their lives. In this way, stewardship actions toward the environment become more widespread and can have a greater impact on society (Nichols & Ralston, 2012, Wearing & Neil, 2000). This research project moreover also seeks to find out how to improve the management of such learning programs and the interaction of community members and teaching methods.

I chose the ecovillage Cloughjordan, where I collected the data because it offers a learning program for volunteers. There I conducted the interviews with the very volunteers who attend or have attended this learning program. It is a medium-sized ecovillage, which was the first in Ireland and thus has a certain pioneering role in the country. In addition, the ecovillage is more mainstream, which means that there are no extreme actions for environmental protection, but rather the concept that everyone implements what they can do to protect the environment. Furthermore, the ecovillage



has a reference to research directly on the website and publishes research projects they have done in cooperation on an overview page about research at the ecovillage. This made it clear to me right from the start that they are also open to researchers in their ecovillage and could be interested in cooperating also for this thesis project.

1.3 Disposition

This thesis is divided into seven chapters to help the reader to understand and answer the research questions and its concepts. Chapter 2 describes the theoretical framework. Therefore, in this chapter, three different theories are presented to provide a theoretical framework that describes the connection to the place of the case study, how learning can change people, and how this together might change people's environmental behavior. Chapter 3 provides an overview of all the major contributions on this topic that have been made in the literature of tourism research so far to show how different perspectives on this topic have been explored. Chapters 2 and 3 differ from the usual at Linnaeus University. Usually, the literature review comes first, followed by the conceptual framework. This decision is justified by the fact that the frameworks used in this thesis also appear in the description of the existing literature. This means that they must be explained beforehand to enable the reader to follow the guideline of this work better. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the methodology, describes how data collection and analysis are performed, and describes the research environment, including specific information on the case study, philosophical perspectives, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter 5 presents the results of data collection and shows how transformations in the behavior of people through living and learning inside the ecovillage are happening. Chapter 6 builds the discussion of the results and presents the findings in context with literature, and finally concludes the research in Chapter 7.



2 Conceptual Framework

This thesis explores how volunteers can be influenced to become better environmental stewards through their experience of eco-communities. It is fundamental to establish the background of this research project and discuss how the theories, place attachment, transformative learning, and environmental stewardship used in this research align and connect.

Place attachment is used in this context because it is a specific location in the study with Cloughjordan eco-village. It is important in this context to assess how strongly the volunteers feel connected to the community and whether they have formed a bond with the people and the place (Dredge, 2010; Guo et al., 2018; Lee, 2013). Transformative learning is important to study because the eco-village itself is a learning program that the volunteers go through. The learning experience can be seen as a way of motivating volunteers to rethink their current behavior in different directions and to reflect on them (Walter, 2019, 2016). Those two concepts are related to the third concept, environmental stewardship, which will therefore also be established in this chapter. How environmental stewardship is provoked in volunteers is what this research project seeks to find out.

2.1 Place Attachment

There are lots of different ways of structuring and defining the concept of place attachment. One possible way to define place attachment is as people's positive emotional attachment to a place, which is an important concept in human geography and environmental psychology (Guo et al., 2018). Most researchers assume that the location bond has two different dimensions - socially and physically. The social aspect of attachment refers to people with close ties to other community members, strong religious ties, or generational roots. The physical aspect of connection refers to people feeling connected to the natural aspects of a place (Guo et al., 2018).



As a short definition, the following one can be used:

“Place attachment, as a positive and emotional bond to the physical and social elements of a place (Altman & Setha, 1992)”, “refers to an individual’s strong desire to protect valuable and meaningful places (Dredge, 2010)”.

2.1.1 Place

When looking more closely at place attachment, it is also important to recognize what a place is in general. A collection of spaces that have been transformed into a significant location by local experiences and ideas is what Leonard (2014) refers to as "place", which is a combination of social and cultural interactions. It is also a more narrowly defined geographic region than "space," where meaning is frequently developed through individual use and interaction (Kaján, 2014; Leonard, 2014). Since the concept of "place" is meaning-based, different experiences and interactions with the actual landscape can produce different meanings (Kaján, 2014).

According to Seamon (2021), attachment levels cannot be determined based on age, social status, physical characteristics, or the physical characteristics of a place. Rather, connections relate to relative roots to the place, geographic and cultural nature, quality of life, level of personal and social engagement, individual and group identity to the place, etc. Contributing to the lived experience of place and connection are the body's routines across time and space. Habitual bodily routines are maintained by environmental attachments, whereas bodily routines interact with and give meaning to a particular environment which maintains long-term identification with a place (Seamon, 2021).

2.1.2 Dimensions of Place Attachment

After the explanation of the concept of “place”, this paper takes a closer look at place attachment. The relationship between the place and the tourists who stay there is of great importance in the process of place attachment (Shen et al., 2019). The tourist builds such a strong connection with a place and/or the people who are there only



when certain conditions are met. These are often physical from the outset, i.e., the conditions on the ground at the destination. Whereby the travelers usually inform themselves about this before their stay (Shen et al., 2019; Tsai, 2012). Nevertheless, tourism and place attachment researchers rather see the invisible and non-tangible factors as the basis for place attachment. Examples of this can be stimulation, interaction with residents, excitement, experience, satisfaction, and involvement. All those factors can then lead to a bonding connection with the place itself (Gross & Brown, 2006; Shen et al., 2019; Tsai, 2012). Tsai (2012) also lists the following drivers of experience toward place attachment: security, trust, attractiveness, cheerfulness, confidence, and identification. Not all these drivers toward place attachment need to be met for strong bonding with the place and locals or other travelers to occur, but the more that are met, the more likely an attachment to a place will emerge and the stronger it can become (Gross & Brown, 2006; Shen et al., 2019; Tsai, 2012).

In the existing research, there are different approaches to place attachment. Tsai (2012), for example, lists different ways of categorizing place attachments. Researchers have suggested that the factors of attraction, self-expression, and centrality to lifestyle can be used to predict place attachment (Tsai, 2012).

According to other researchers, the physical environment, the quality of the interactions, and the outcome (Alexandris et al., 2006), or the physical setting can influence people toward place attachment. But not only those factors but also outdoor recreation, emotional connections, social ties, special moments, solitude, and destination tradition can create a feeling of attachment to a place and the people being there with them (Smaldone et al., 2008).

Apart from a few exceptions, the consensus in research is to divide place attachment into two dimensions – place identity and place dependence (Boley et al., 2021; Dwyer et al., 2019; Gross & Brown, 2008; Guo et al., 2018; Kaján, 2014; Shen et al., 2019; Tsai, 2012). The terms "place attachment," "place dependence," "place identity," and "sense of place" are frequently ambiguous and overlap. Although there are many definitions of place attachment, one way to comprehend the idea is to examine it through the two sub-concepts of place dependence and place identity (Kaján, 2014; Styliadis, 2018a).



Place dependence is the term used to describe a functional relationship between people and place (Guo et al., 2018; Wynveen et al., 2014). The idea that a specific location can best assist people in achieving their goals and meeting their needs gives rise to this function-driven relationship with the place (Guo et al., 2018). Place identity is a cognitive process through which people experience a sense of belonging to for themselves a significant place. It describes an individual's identity, beliefs, thoughts, or cognitions about a particular place (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). But place identity is also a common classification in the study of place attachment because it separates instrumental and affective bonds with a place. Affective bonds denote the emotional ties or attachments that individuals develop towards a specific location. These bonds typically arise from personal encounters, cherished memories, and a deep sense of belonging. Within the realm of place attachment, affective bonds stand in contrast to "instrumental bonds," which are more utilitarian or pragmatic associations with a place, such as the economic or social advantages gained from residing or working there. (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001).

Numerous studies have evaluated the effect of place attachment on societal resilience, but their results are conflicting. Residents of a community with strong place attachment are more resilient toward the community and the nature the residents are surrounded by. People will work to preserve a place if it holds special meanings and connections for them. Individual efforts to safeguard, preserve, or better a community will be more effective when people are emotionally connected to the area (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Place identity appears to have a particularly strong connection to community members' capacity for planning, learning, and organizing as well as their comfort with risk and change (Gross & Brown, 2006; Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). A strong sense of emotional attachment and psychological identification with the community can motivate residents to learn about it and support adaptive learning to keep it thriving. Place identity also fosters the social capital of the neighborhood, encourages group action, and improves the community's ability to respond to natural disasters (Gross & Brown, 2006; Guo et al., 2018).

As the previous discussion suggests, place attachment is embedded in the lore of an area. For some members of the community, knowledge helps them to understand the



place and what happened in that place over time. This perception of time, space, and place is central to justifying one's position and belonging to one's group (Lemelin et al., 2015; Stylidis, 2018a). However, the values associated with the protection and conservation of localities take many forms. Through their knowledge, historical understanding, and sense of place, long-time residents believe they are stewards of the area and need special recognition to continue to protect its natural features (Lemelin et al., 2015). Place attachment is the result of people's cumulative experiences of both physical and social aspects of their environment, leading to an emotional attachment to that place. Connectivity between communities and places has been studied in several fields including tourism (sociology, psychology, marketing, etc.) (Lemelin et al., 2015).

Researchers like Devine-Wright & Howes (2010) and Hopkins & Dixon (2006) for example agree that residents who feel emotionally connected to their communities approach tourism impacts differently than less connected residents, but the nature of this relationship (positive/negative) is not clear. Despite strong evidence supporting the link between place attachment and impact perceptions, empirical research examining the relationship between place perceptions and impact perceptions is limited (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Gallarza et al., 2002; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006; Stylidis, 2018a, 2018b).

2.2 Transformative learning

Transformative learning can be defined as learning whereby people inside a learning process can overcome

“limited, distorted, and arbitrarily selective modes of perception and cognition through reflection on assumptions that formerly have been accepted uncritically (Mezirow, 1991: 2)”.

A fundamental shift in viewpoint must take place during a learning experience for it to be transformative and lead to transformative action. The emancipatory process of becoming critically conscious of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain how we see ourselves and our relationships is what



leads to perspective transformation. To understand transformative learning in the context of communities, it is also necessary to investigate the realm of adult learning. Because the people who learn something here are adults who have finished school and subsequently should aim to learn something for their further life or about themselves (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010; Clancy & Holford, 2018).

To alter behavior, people's values must undergo radical transformations (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010). Learning is a lifelong process and there has been sporadic interest in the subject of older people in adult learning. Researchers have emphasized programs for older adults, program requirements for older adults, individual learning reflections, classroom teaching strategies, individual learning reflections, and other studies (Baumgartner et al., 2022). At its best, adult education promotes not only increased professional competencies and training for employability, but also intellectual development, transformation, and change (Clancy & Holford, 2018).

2.2.1 Learning

The importance of critical thinking, debate, and challenge is frequently mentioned by students as the distinctive certification of their learning experience; many said that the change in the perceptions, convictions, and behavior had a dramatic emancipatory effect on the understanding of political, economic, and social structures, as well as their internalized views on identity and capacity for self-reflection of the people taking part in a learning experience (Clancy & Holford, 2018).

According to the literature, adult transformations are essential for maintaining the natural environment and achieving worldwide environmental change (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010; Clancy & Holford, 2018). Given the difficulties associated with transformation, both formal and informal environmental educators working to change attitudes and behaviors face difficulties in first doing so and connecting the global to the local (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010). There is a lengthy history of educational practice involving outdoor education in the wilderness. These outdoor learning experiences are designed to help students gain leadership, interpersonal, and self-reliance skills as well as environmental consciousness, environmental awareness, and wilderness survival skills. Numerous elements that encourage personal development



and program change are identified in the literature on outdoor education and adventure learning (Walter, 2013).

Learning in and about nature is a creative, holistic process involving the intellect, body, heart, soul, and the five senses, according to cultural, spiritual, and transformative learning in the outdoors (Walter, 2013). Art, poetry, music, dance, meditation, and singing are all possible inclusions. The use of technology in outdoor learning that involves touch, taste, scent, sound, and sight may be inventive. Adult learners can create artistic nature photographs or films, write, and share art, music, and photographs in reflective digital diaries and blogs, or use software to create digital eco-art. As an example, they can listen to, dance to, and sing along to digital music outside. In this way, learning in the natural and digital worlds may grow in harmony, in a creative relationship, and synergy (Walter, 2013).

Transformation through learning is also taking place in tourism. Thus, there are many learning programs with a tourism background offered in different types of trips. In most cases, events occur or certain conditions for these catalysts take place. For example, Kirilliva et al. (2017) list self-development, spontaneity, unity with nature and others as well as heightened awareness as possible triggers. It is common for such triggering events while traveling to be coincidental in character. It was not expected or planned, but all the participants can recall it in detail. Instead, the literature implies that the triggering events typically take place after a journey, come as a surprise, elicit strong, frequently "bittersweet," emotions, a keen awareness of the fleeting nature of the moment, and a sense of connection to something significant (Kirillova et al., 2017).

These events, which can trigger transformative learning in tourism, can in turn be linked back to place attachment. Kirillova et al. (2017) mention the same triggers with unity with nature and people around the tourist, which can also trigger an attachment to a place. Thus, both place attachment and transformative learning can be evoked by the same events or characteristics of a place and or people in these situations.



2.2.2 Mezirow's Transformative Learning Model

When talking about transformative tourism, almost all research is based on Mezirow's model (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Fleming, n.d.; Illeris, 2014). This model will therefore also be the basic construct in this paper, focusing on the field of outdoor learning. The American sociologist Jack Mezirow initially proposed the transformative learning theory, which is frequently applied in studies on adult education. Mezirow sought to "identify factors that typically impede or facilitate the progress (Baumgartner, 2012)" of re-entry programs in his study. A 10-phase process was created using the data that was gathered, and according to Mezirow, it changed people's "meaning views (Baumgartner, 2012)". The model will be directly connected to tourism as well while describing it to draw a stronger relationship between the model and this project.

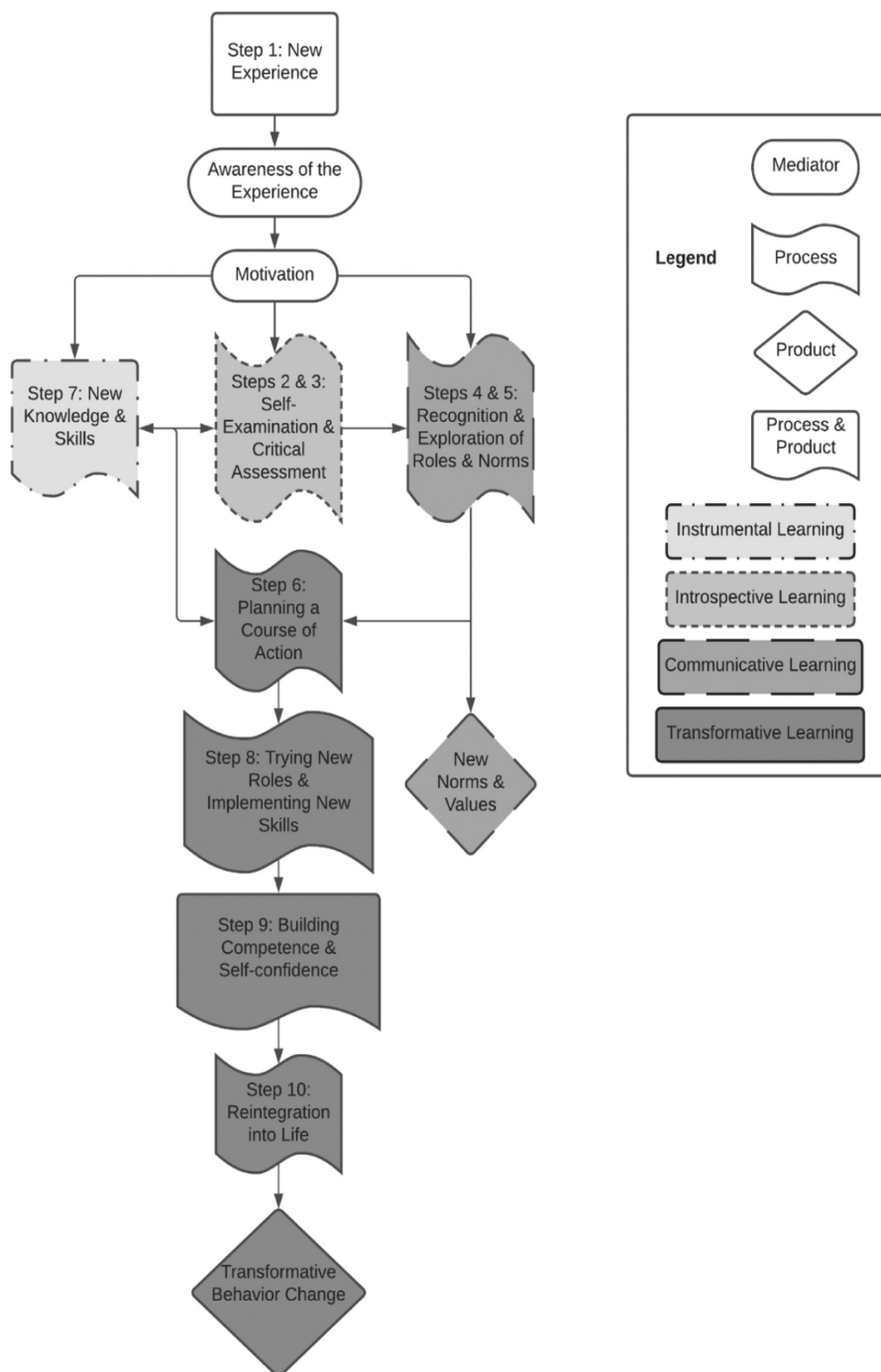


Figure 1 The Transformative Learning Model (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022)



Step 1: New Experience

This step acknowledges the mediating effects of consciousness and motivation on the processes and outcomes of the tourism experience. When people become conscious of and pay attention to a specific experience process, experiences are born (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Even though some aspects of a macro-experience, such as a weeklong vacation, may require less attention than others, such as lounging on the beach versus hearing a talk from a wildlife expert, experiences are co-creative activities that demand participants' attention. The model also implies that people's reasons for participating in an experience will affect how they participate in it and the results that come from it (Brown, 2005; Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Tomazos & Butler, 2010).

Steps 2 & 3: Self Examination & Critical Assessment

Research shows that even the most memorable tourist experiences do not always lead to or include self-examination and critical assessment of prior ways of thinking or being, even though assumptions evaluation is crucial for transformative learning. Because of this, reflective learning is positioned between instrumental and communicative learning in the Transformative Tourism Learning Model (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Raymond & Hall, 2008). In a tourism context, travelers can discover alternative sustainable lifestyles, such as cultivating their food and engaging in composting, while enjoying their vacation in the Arctic. Through self-reflection and critical evaluation, they may come to realize that these practices are not challenging and question why they haven't implemented composting or food cultivation in their own homes. However, without undergoing this process of introspection and assessment of their own lives, visitors may lack the motivation to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge (Step 7) to actively apply the insights they have gained during their travels (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022).

Steps 4 & 5: Recognition and Exploration of Roles & Norms

Mezirow's method has steps 4 and 5, which deal with understanding social norms and experimenting with new roles. These actions are communicative in character because they involve learning through social contexts where a person involved in the learning



program can see how others live and then investigate different ways of being and acting in their own lives (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007).

For instance, visitors to a remote polar bear research station saw how the practices of the staff and researchers there resulted in a minimal ecological footprint, where composting toilets were the standard and showers had two-minute timers to conserve water (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Raymond & Hall, 2008).

Step 7: New Knowledge & Skills

The extent to which actions that the person involved in the learning process are transformative, however, is still unknown (Moyer et al., 2016). Even though studies show that people can learn new knowledge and skills that might inspire them to take new actions (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). For instance, (Quinn & Sinclair, 2016) research found that individuals can use instrumental learning to spot issues and answers, as well as build and implement action plans when it examined learning outcomes concerning sustainable tourism. Transformative behavior changes in this case and the learning is more about the community and how to spot potential substitutes. Those rather extreme experiences can then be mentioned as possible ways of transforming tourists (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016; Quinn & Sinclair, 2016).

Steps 6, 8, 9 & 10: Transformative Learning

Step 6 of the transformative tourism learning model is conceptualized as the central hub where visual learning transitions into behavior transformation. This is a logical step after evaluating norms and investigating new roles or methods of acting and being (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022).

Mezirow identified step 8 and applying new knowledge and skills in a personally tailored manner as a crucial component of transformative learning; however, it is undoubtedly the most difficult step (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). It is challenging to change behavior and the highly contextual learning that occurs during tourist experiences means that applying what is learned to daily life may not be apparent right away or may present numerous obstacles (Bueddefeld &



Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Having more social and community support during this period increases a person's ability to navigate obstacles and get past them while also exploring potential new norms and values (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016).

Maintaining behavior changes in a manner that is truly and permanently transformative requires developing competence and boosting self-confidence (Step 9). One must choose to continue taking the necessary steps after remembering to do so. The integration of actions into transformative behavior changes will probably be aided by society and family support (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016).

The final step is for a person to fully integrate their new behaviors into their context of daily living (Step 10). Transformative behavior change is likely to stay difficult to measure and accomplish because the permanent integration of transformation is highly contextual (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022).

2.3 Environmental Stewardship

Although the meaning of environmental stewardship is not consistently stated in the literature, some essential elements are clear from the literature (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2021). Worrell & Appleby (2000) define stewardship as

“the responsible use (including conservation) of natural resources in a way that takes full and balanced account of the interests of the society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs, and accepts significant answerability to society” (Worrell & Appleby, 2000: 263).

Nonetheless, any action that safeguards the environment, has a beneficial effect on it or uses it sustainably is considered stewardship (Bennett et al., 2018). Stewardship entails the responsible use, management, and protection of the environment while taking into consideration both the present and future requirements of society (Baird et al., 2021; Kapeller et al., 2022). According to Lehen et al. (2022), active



stewardship includes not only behavior but also a positive attitude toward the environment and a desire to preserve it.

According to Kapeller et al. (2022), the concept of environmental stewardship has endured and developed in connection to the human-environment relationship. By combining definitions of stewardship, we can see that it involves integrating social and ecological systems and directing future trajectories in ways that are good for both people and the environment. It also involves using the ecological system responsibly with a focus on human well-being. Stewardship is necessary to respond to today's environmental issues. Furthermore, stewardship stresses the interconnectedness of humans and nature and aims to increase system resilience (Kapeller et al., 2022).

Environmental stewardship is a framework that is often also used in tourism research. One can see environmental stewardship in the strong bond between destination communities and the natural environment (Raftopoulos, 2020). No assessment of any human environmental impact will likely be completely accurate because it is simply unrealistic for us to be all-knowing. Furthermore, as the knowledge advances and the impacts evolve, the appropriate responses will also change. The most effective approach is to develop robust solutions that achieve the following goals: decrease energy waste and reduce the use of fossil fuels, resulting in lower water and non-water emissions. But also important is achieving goals like minimizing negative effects on water in terms of both quantity and quality; generating prosperity by improving the living standards of current and future generations through a focus on fulfilling essential needs rather than unnecessary desires; and preserving natural ecosystems in their original state (Peachey, 2008).

Finding the best overall options to reduce human impacts should be part of environmental stewardship, not just a few actions that concentrate on one form of impact at the expense of all others. Decisions about local, regional, and global stewardship should be able to meet human demands with the least possible disruption to fundamental requirements for the economy, the environment, and societal security. If humanity is sincere about protecting the environment for the advantage of future generations, people should be willing to sacrifice some societal "wants" for this (Peachey, 2008). This is determined by providing for their basic needs as opposed to indulgent desires and finally maintaining habitats in their pristine condition (Peachey, 2008). People who are environmental stewards thus have a very strong understanding



of nature and a strong connection to nature. They try to minimize their impact on nature as much as possible. In addition, they often try to educate other people about the opportunities they must reduce their impact on nature. They live as resiliently as possible and pay attention to aspects such as sustainable transportation, recycling, reuse of things, local food, and much more (Leslie et al., 2021; Peachey, 2008).

The three Rs of environmental care are reduced, reuse, and recycle (Leslie et al., 2021). All three of them can be seen as actions of people that are stewards toward the environment. Firstly, reduce the number of resources that are wasted on pointless desires so that they are still available for use by future generations. Secondly, reduce the high energy costs and environmental harm associated with the creation of raw materials by reusing resources more than once. When the first two are not an option and research reveals recycling to be the best option, thirdly, recycle. It is best to avoid switching from one type of consumption to another because, in many instances, it may only be a "feel good" placebo (Leslie et al., 2021). Furthermore, wasting renewable resources is still a waste and requires just as careful management as using non-renewable resources, if not more so (Peachey, 2008). Around the globe, numerous people, local communities, environmental organizations, and governments are taking and encouraging actions to steward the environment (Bennett et al., 2018).

The expression "environmental stewardship" has been used in research to describe a variety of activities, including setting aside protected areas, planting new trees, restricting harvests, lowering harmful activity levels, reducing pollution, establishing community gardens, rehabilitating degraded areas, and buying more environmentally friendly goods. It may be used to refer to stringent environmental preservation measures, active rehabilitation efforts, or the sustainable use and management of resources. Stewardship activities can be carried out in both rural and metropolitan settings, at various scales ranging from local to global (Bennett et al., 2018).

2.3.1 Areas of Environmental Stewardship

According to Bennett et al. (2018), environmental stewardship can be divided into eight areas of action toward living in a more environmentally friendly way and becoming a better steward of the environment.



These are firstly stewardship actions - the methods, actions, conduct, and technologies used to preserve, repair, or utilize the ecosystem sustainably. Stewardship actions can be carried out at various scales, can address complicated issues, and can be carried out by various actors or groups depending on their traits, objectives, and capabilities (Bennett et al., 2018; Moskell & Allred, 2013).

Secondly, there are actors or also the various stewards across organizational scales or their configurations who are leading stewardship efforts. Actual and desired rights, roles, and obligations for actors vary. The skill, motivation, and willingness to engage in stewardship may be influenced by people around the environmental steward (Bennett et al., 2018; Moskell & Allred, 2013).

Thirdly, there are the structures of internal or extrinsic incentives or the causes behind people's environmental activism. The level of stewardship behavior that people have can be changed through these intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations are linked to behaviors that are anticipated to result in personal fulfillment or pleasure, either through adherence to ethics, morals, values, and beliefs or through satisfying psychological requirements for self-actualization and self-determination. Extrinsic motivations, such as the perceived direct costs and benefits of resource management and externally provided rewards or sanctions, are linked to the anticipated achievement of their goals. The motivations of an individual or a group outline the justification for actions, make obligations clear, and give them the willpower to act (Bennett et al., 2018; Bramston et al., 2011; Ding & Schuett, 2020; Kreutzwiser et al., 2011; Moskell & Allred, 2013).

Forth, Bennett et al. (2018) state that there is the capacity for stewardship, i.e., the capacity to protect the environment through activity. Local assets and more general governance factors either allow or restrict an actor's ability to take stewardship actions. Social, financial, physical, cultural, political, human, and institutional capital can all support local stewardship capability. The agency, options, and capacity of stewards may be empowered or constrained by broader governance, which includes institutions (i.e., laws and policies, organizations and networks, and decision-making processes), as well as structural processes related to power and politics (i.e., economic inequality, discrimination, and exclusion from decision-making) (Bennett et al., 2018; Plummer et al., 2008).



Fifth, the context of stewardship determines which stewardship practices will be socially, politically, economically, culturally, and ecologically successful. This set of social, cultural, political, economic, and biophysical variables. The complexity, size, speed, type, and severity of the change that is happening can make it difficult for governments to exercise good stewardship (Bennett et al., 2018).

Sixthly, there are the outcomes of stewardship, meaning the effects of care practices on the environment and society. The results of stewardship may be desired or undesirable, create synergies or trade-offs, and have different costs and benefits for various groups (Bennett et al., 2018), subsequently, the stewardship interventions. Various organizations and actors, such as governments, NGOs, interest groups, and local communities, promote and execute policies, programs, or market mechanisms with the goal of fostering or advancing environmental stewardship (Bennett et al., 2018).

Lastly, Bennet et al. (2018) mention the leverage points for stewardship, the precise levers, or points at which various local or outside groups and actors may intervene to bring about change in the management of a system to enable desired ecological and social outcomes. Increasing capacity or governance, introducing new actors, offering incentives, encouraging specific behaviors, or watching results are examples of leverage points (Bennett et al., 2018).

Now that it is understood what environmental stewardship means, it is important to explain why it is important to pursue and disseminate. Turnball et al. (2021) emphasize how reliant on nature people are. The concept of sustainability, which is defined as the long-term integrity of the biosphere and human well-being, embodies the fundamental importance and reciprocity of human-environment relationships. Environmental health is dependent on human behavior. Human responsibility as stewards of the environment is essential to attaining a sustainable future. It encourages people to get back in touch with the environment and helps social-ecological systems become more resilient (Turnbull et al., 2021).

Volunteering can be seen as one of the activities where stewardship actions can happen. Volunteering is a relevant place, where the existing motivations and values of the volunteers and the hosting communities engage in environmental stewardship. All ages of volunteers work on projects that either directly or indirectly handle



environmental problems, such as riparian restoration, fundraising, political activism, resource monitoring, community outreach, and education. However, because the result of their labors is frequently so evident and includes learning, it is thought that environmental project volunteers' motivations vary slightly from those of general volunteers. The importance of restoring ecosystems has frequently been emphasized, and volunteers are drawn to such projects because they can see a clear reward for their efforts and learn new ecological information (Bramston et al., 2011).

2.3.2 Motivation for Environmental Stewardship Actions

Bramston et al. (2011) characterize what motivates volunteers to stay involved for a long time and measuring the motivations that drive environmental action, however, is undoubtedly more conceptually challenging. The motivations can be divided into different categories: first, improving the environment - tangible changes that occur as a direct result of voluntary work in the community. Second, becoming more aware of their immediate surroundings - what the volunteers discover about the natural world because of their activities. Third, social connection - includes the wide range of interpersonal advantages of meeting and engaging with like-minded individuals. Forth, experiencing chances for personal reflection. The tranquil meditative feelings that participants connected with natural settings. Lastly, being a member of a project team and organization with excellent organization. The allure and fulfillment of participating in a well-run program. Ecological initiatives continue to safeguard and restore delicate ecosystems thanks to the dedication and labor of volunteers (Bramston et al., 2011).

The current phase, which is a reality check in that we do not want to destroy the environment, was brought about by the understanding of that. As a result, we must limit or reduce our impacts, which emphasizes environmental stewardship. Currently, humanity faces the challenge of reconciling development and growth with environmental needs, while also questioning the extent of our knowledge regarding the consequences of our actions. Furthermore, we must make decisions regarding acceptable levels of impact, choose appropriate baselines and benchmarks, and devise metrics to effectively measure stewardship efforts. (Turnbull et al., 2021).



2.3.3 Dimensions of Environmental Stewardship

According to Gottwald & Stedman (2020), there are three different dimensions within environmental stewardship to describe this framework in even more detail. Place traits, personal characteristics, and location relations make up the three dimensions.

One might contend that a place's or a landscape's physical surroundings determine the possibilities and constraints for the meanings that can be ascribed to them, as well as the social constructions and institutional administration that follow. Landscapes are impacted by individual choices as well as new social organizations. Protected areas and other institutionalized management areas are the results of the societal construction of landscapes and their meanings. A strong connection with the nature around a person, such as the landscape around the person, is more likely to lead the person to behave toward environmental stewardship. (Bennett et al., 2018; Gottwald & Stedman, 2020).

Second, knowing the occurrence of environmental stewardship requires an understanding of personal traits. These can be further broken down into sociodemographic traits and psychological qualities. Numerous studies demonstrate that pro-environmental behavior, such as the willingness to take action to mitigate climate change, is more prevalent among younger people, women, and individuals with higher incomes and educational levels (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020).

Third, the meanings and values that people attach to a location and their attachment to that place are understood as people-place relations. It has been established that the theory of sense of place, which includes the ideas of evaluative place attachment and descriptive place meanings, has a connection to environmental care (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020; Stedman, 2002).

Since studies have shown a positive correlation between place attachment and environmental stewardship, important places should be those where residents act responsibly as environmental stewards. However, contested meanings among residents (Chapin & Knapp, 2015; Gottwald & Stedman, 2020), high place satisfaction (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020; Stedman, 2002), external factors like being geographically remote from that place (Brehm et al., 2013; Gottwald & Stedman, 2020), or individual capacities and motivations may prevent environmental stewardship (Bennett et al., 2018; Gottwald & Stedman, 2020).



According to Gottwald and Stedman's study from 2020, there are different factors for the motivation of a person to create environmental stewardship. These are a person's capacity to act, place relationships and values (such as the degree of attachment and the number of values they perceive), and desire to protect a special place can all be understood as functions of these factors (as defined by proxy of previous engagement experiences). The descriptive statistics demonstrate that important locations with willing environmental stewards are more frequently found in areas with agriculture, settlement, rivers, and lakes than in areas without such willingness, despite the insignificant relationships. The latter, however, exhibit greater frequencies in protected areas. This implies that since there are already protection measures in place, people may not sense the need to serve as stewards in protected areas (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020).

Conforming with tourism research, place relationships, and place ideals are the best indicators of environmental stewardship at significant locations. Respondents who take care of all their meaningful locations differ from those who are more selective and take care of only some of their meaningful places in terms of their stewardship behavior (Gottwald & Stedman, 2020).

3 Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature in the field of tourism research to understand what volunteer tourism is, how it differs in distinctive areas of the world, and what different focus volunteers and hosting communities can have. As such, the first part deals with voluntourism in general, the setting of it, and the motivation on both sides – volunteers and hosts. The second part presents the view on voluntourism in the global north. Hereby, the differences between voluntourism in general and in wealthier countries in the setting of the practices as well as different motives for hosting communities and volunteers will be explained. As the next step, communities and eco-communities are defined and their different values and motivations as well as the ones of their community members and volunteers are shown.



3.1 Voluntourism

Voluntourism or also described as volunteer tourism has had explosive growth over the last decades and can therefore be considered one of the fastest growing forms of alternative tourism. Alternative tourism links different types of traveling that are not connected to mainstream traveling (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Voluntourism is often defined as follows in research:

“Those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment (Wearing, 2001).”

Here it is clear that the people who pursue this form of travel combine two aspects, as the name suggests - travel and volunteering.

In recent years it became important to note that social media also has a potential impact on voluntourism. Therefore, examining the interface between technology and volunteering is of increasing importance in research. The connection between technology and voluntourism, the need for a systematic investigation of useful certification options in keeping track of quality volunteer tourism experiences for everybody involved, and the role of spirituality and faith in volunteer tourism are three vital topics that researchers are just beginning to scratch the surface of. There is a pressing need to investigate how social media is affecting volunteer travel in the first technological area (McGehee, 2014).

The volunteers who pursue this form of travel can be very diverse people and any person can potentially become a volunteer tourist. However, there is often a relatively clear picture of who is a volunteer tourist. For example, they are often people who do a gap year after school. Here, the experience gained during the volunteering period should give more insight into what the person would like to study afterward or what seems important to them in life (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Foller-Carroll & Charlebois, 2016). In addition, it is often a career break, which can happen at any stage of life (Butcher & Smith, 2010). However, even here the research clearly shows that it is



more likely to be young adults (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Foller-Carroll & Charlebois, 2016).

Another way to look at voluntourism is as a notion of life politics. It is defined as the human endeavor to fill the gap year by individual change, according to Butcher & Smith (2010). Politics in daily life is concerned with how people relate to one another and how their actions can ultimately lead to political change. The desire to engage in volunteer travel is promoted by society on various levels, with institutions offering credit for gap-year volunteer travel. It is a socially acceptable pastime that prompted the growth of volunteer tourism (Butcher & Smith, 2010).

Volunteers are motivated to do volunteer work for very different reasons. Thus, Wearing & McGehee (2013) distinguish volunteers into different groups. They determine between motivations that are based on self-interest and altruism, but also between personal and interpersonal interests. However, no matter what motivates the volunteers before starting the volunteering, they perceive their experience as independent and unique compared to mainstream mass tourism (Daldeniz et al., 2010; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Furthermore, the motivations can be divided into three basic areas: shallow, intermediate, and very strong. In the case of shallow volunteers, personal interests usually outweigh the motivation for actual volunteer work. Volunteer motivation increases from the shallow motivation level to the intermediate and is highest around very strong motivation (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Wearing & McGehee (2013) distinguish four different types of motives. They name cultural immersion, seeking togetherness, making a difference, and family bonding. They also discuss main intrinsic motives. Here, they highlight experiencing something different and new, as well as meeting locals, and living in another country. Furthermore, Wearing & McGehee (2013) list learning about another country and culture as well as broadening one's mind (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Weaver (2015) names the same motives but also discusses other motives and motivational approaches. The author also mentions contributing to the host community, as well as helping the environment and a desire for learning (Weaver, 2015). But what should also not be forgotten is that the volunteers desire an authentic experience and, for some, seek to experience living in the "Third World" to get a once-in-a-lifetime experience during the volunteer work they are fulfilling (Braverman et al., 2023).



For some volunteers, experiencing international travel and extended stays are a top priority. Others want to do something useful, get away from their previous life, or do not know what else to do instead (Daldeniz et al., 2010). While there are motivations related to altruism and interaction with other cultures, there are also motivations related to future opportunities, which are seen as good to have in one's CV (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Daldeniz et al., 2010). Caruana et al. (2020) emphasize that only people in certain social positions can choose the "right" way to travel. Merged, these individualistic motives lead to the major problem that long-term economic and social problems in developing countries may not be solved by the goodwill and ambition of some individuals (Butcher & Smith, 2010).

There is a lot of research on the motives of volunteer tourists. However, there is rather less research on the motivation of hosts to get involved in volunteer tourism, as Wearing & McGehee (2013) point out. There are studies in tourism research about the host. Whether the hosts are a person or a community, they receive less attention in the volunteer tourism literature. The difficulty in identifying and including the entire spectrum of stakeholders who may come under the terms hosts and community may be a contributing factor to this deficiency of host-centered attention. Power and socioeconomic status issues frequently prevent marginalized groups from fully participating in and being accepted as members of society (McGehee & Andereck, 2008; Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Since voluntourism is growing quickly, it is important to also examine the positive and negative effects of this form of travel. The positive aspects of volunteer tourism can be seen as the improvement of life and the quality of life on site, especially in developing countries. In addition, voluntourism also can have positive effects on nature and local communities in general (McGehee, 2014). Through the increased income that volunteers bring with them, they create long-term income stability (Brightsmith et al., 2008; Daldeniz et al., 2010) and improve health and well-being. In addition, volunteer workers also develop themselves (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Daldeniz et al., 2010; McGehee, 2014) and gain a better cultural understanding (Butcher & Smith, 2010; McGehee, 2014), and learn to live together with foreign cultures (Brightsmith et al., 2008).

But voluntourism has not only positive aspects and effects on the local community in which it takes place. There have been several negative effects brought on by the



expansion, including instances of exploitation of volunteers, host communities, and the environment; dependency and continued neo-colonialism of at-risk populations; improper handling of human, physical, social, and financial resources; poor project work carried out by volunteers; a decrease in employment for locals; and a lack of communication among the various stakeholders (Brightsmith et al., 2008; McGehee, 2014). The risk of harm to host populations can be substantial. The increased focus on volunteer tourism has, however, also drawn attention to the many instances of excellent experiences that enhance host community populations' lives and environments, enlighten, and alter volunteers' perspectives, and contribute to greater social change (Caruana et al., 2020; McGehee, 2014). The importance of religion and spirituality in voluntourism, the third emerging issue that must be addressed, has gotten less notice than the first two emerging issues, but it is just as significant. Additionally, it might be much more unpredictable. Regarding religion, there are complicated dynamics between the volunteer tourists and the host society (McGehee, 2014).

3.2 Voluntourism in the global north

Voluntourism is about volunteers giving something back to the community while having a positive experience during the travel. This is also the case when volunteers travel within the "global north" – countries of Western society (Nordbø et al., 2020). However, these volunteers have a different focus than the volunteers traveling to the "global south" for doing development work. The stays in fully developed countries are less about development aid, the focus is more on sustainable travel, farm stays, and educational tours. As it is a type of voluntourism it can also be called alternative tourism, which is mostly offered by small communities that often run local businesses and projects (Prince & Ioannides, 2017). Those small communities and companies are often related to agriculture and farming. This form of volunteer tourism, just like other forms of tourism like package tours, tries to serve the needs of its guests. In the case of voluntourism in the global north, volunteering takes part in traditional hospitality in remote areas, with a lot of nature and the possibility to experience cultural practices (Choo & Jamal, 2009).



A popular form of voluntourism in the global north is through the global program "World Wide Opportunity on Organic Farms" or WWOOF for short. This abbreviation describes a global exchange market for movements in voluntourism. WWOOFing can also be seen as a cultural initiative, mostly feasible on organic farms. It is both a sustainable and cultural experience (Deville et al., 2016a). On-site, volunteers are usually provided with accommodation and three meals a day, and in return help on the farm wherever they are needed (Nordbø et al., 2020). In recent decades, the number of WWOOFers has increased tremendously, which arguably means that more people want to make a difference in the world during their travel experiences (Nordbø et al., 2020). Volunteers want to be able to develop themselves personally but also to contribute to the world. With WWOOFing, the focus of travel is to learn something and to experience and implement an ethical change. Therefore, it can also be considered a special form of volunteer tourism (Nordbø et al., 2020).

However, several researchers see increasing commodification as a problem with this form of volunteer experience. Deville, Wearing & McDonald (2015) see the market as already commodified. According to WWOOFing, there may be a market for non-commodified experiences as a unique means of escaping from traditional institutionalized tourist flows. However, due to the packages that the volunteers can order, the hosts are becoming an ever-increasing component of the tourism business. However, they continue to emphasize continuance because the volunteers contribute a substantial amount of both physical and emotional energy into working inside the community and helping to develop these communities (Deville et al., 2016b). The problem is the WWOOF movement and the changes it has already brought about in the tourism industry. It gradually shifts toward the traits of mass tourism, which only upholds capitalistic principles. This happens due to more and more people doing voluntourism programs and the hosts changing from meeting the basic needs of their volunteers toward a more mainstream interaction (Deville et al., 2016a).

The volunteers who travel on these farms can be roughly divided into two groups. One is the traditional long-term backpackers who come to the destination to live with the locals and have an authentic experience. The other group is the mainstream backpackers who travel from one tourist attraction to the next. The focus of volunteer tourism is on the traditional backpackers, as they represent the focus groups of this work. These volunteers try to travel off the beaten tourist track. They want as much freedom and spontaneity as possible while traveling (Deville et al., 2016b).



Demographically, WWOOFers can be described as majority female (about 60%). The clear majority are persons between 20 and 29 years and most are singles. Often, the persons do not come from the country in which they pursue voluntary activity. Many stated in a survey that they already paid attention to sustainability before their stay on the farm and mostly bought organic items, which can be linked back to the concept of environmental stewardship. This is the case because the consumption of organic foods is better for the environment than non-organic items (Köse, 2020). However, only under ten percent said that they always consume organic items. In general, it can be stated that these are mostly people with a high level of education, and many were either studying before or will be doing so after their stay (Nordbø et al., 2020). The majority also want to travel alone and gain experience without friends or family. In addition, often the majority are from Europe and have no previous WWOOFing experience. Those volunteers want to learn about organic farming and experience an alternative travel lifestyle (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006).

The motives of volunteer workers are different within the group of volunteers themselves. Some are focused on improving their English skills during their stay (Deville et al., 2016b; Schedel, 2022). Mostly this is done in countries where English is the official language. For example, there are many language schools in Malta. To finance or extend their stay there, the language students pursue other activities. These are often voluntarily or very poorly paid. The volunteers often must do cleaning jobs or housekeeping to live cheaper inside the accommodation to finance their stay (Schedel, 2022). But the motives of the volunteers are also about gaining life experience away from home, and about gaining experience for life, that is, unique experiences that you remember (Deville et al., 2016b). In addition, some volunteers state in surveys that they also want to learn about organic farming (Deville et al., 2016b). However, it should also be noted that often the primary intention is not an interest in sustainability-related issues. For some, this may be the case, but for many also there are other motives like cheap traveling and seeing other countries while volunteering (Deville et al., 2016b, 2016a). Therefore, it can be stated that the focus of volunteering is at the beginning often not about learning in general and certainly not about becoming better environmental stewards. The more traditional volunteering as well as WWOOFing is more about meeting new people and living with the local population. Those volunteers also often aspire to experience nature and want to strengthen their connection with nature as well as to experience wildlife. In addition,



money also plays an important role, because it is cheaper to travel in this way than through more mainstream forms of traveling (Deville et al., 2016b; Schedel, 2022).

Volunteer travel is not only important for the volunteers themselves. Also, it is important for the hosts on the farms since the volunteers must come to them and do work on-site. Thus, volunteer farm tourism has become an important factor in recent years in the Western countries that offer this form of experience. It is about the exchange of education on the one hand but also of friendships on the other hand (McIntosh & Campbell, 2001). The hosts often live in rural areas and are demographically mostly in their 50s (Deville et al., 2016a). The slight majority about 55% of the hosts are female and women tend to have a higher level of education. The farms are mostly small-scale ventures and often cultivate herbs, fruits, vegetables, trees, etc. In some cases, however, nuts and cereals are also grown, and livestock is raised. Almost half of the respondents of McIntosh & Campbell's study also mentioned having another secondary activity outside the farm (McIntosh & Campbell, 2001).

During the peak season, hosts are motivated to accommodate volunteers to receive additional assistance. But also, other aspects like social reasons, i.e., getting to know people from other parts of the world and the cultural exchange with these people. They also like to share their knowledge about organic farming (Deville et al., 2016b, 2016a; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). Environmental education must go beyond the information-based model of environmental action to include practice-based motivation at the individual level to be successful in changing behavioral patterns. This shift necessitates two things: (1) an understanding of how people become inspired to engage in environmental activities; and (2) a strategy for utilizing this knowledge to create interventions that inspire people to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors (Dutta & Chandrasekharan, 2018).

In summary, it can be stated that many motives and motivations are the same on both sides, i.e., volunteers and hosts. Therefore, many positive effects can result from the process of volunteering, which is certainly also the reason for the strong growth of the WWOOF movement. However, some aspects can be criticized, and some aspects can turn out to be negative in the long run. There are often conflicting interests between the volunteers and the hosts. This can be for example miscommunication between management and volunteers, or unclear tasks for the volunteers (Prince & Ioannides, 2017). In addition, there is often some inequality between hosts and



volunteers when it comes to power relations. Volunteers are often seen as privileged and socially powerful, while hosts are seen as less powerful. The decision to stay or move on is up to the volunteers, and the hosts, in turn, are somewhat dependent on the volunteers to come because of the space that has been created for the volunteers and the workload that was planned to be done by the volunteers. Otherwise, they will have problems doing all the work that needs to be done themselves (Miller & Mair, 2015).

The volunteers' desire to remain in their current organization, company, or community can be traced back to the concept of place attachment. Thus, if a volunteer cultivates the desire to stay longer, there must have been place attachment or transformation. However, something improved the consciousness of the volunteer, otherwise, the volunteer would simply move on to get to know new places, people, and ways of working.

3.3 Communities and eco-communities

This chapter explains what communities are and how they have evolved over the last few years. It also takes a closer look at the characteristics of the special form of eco-communities as a sub-category of communities. This is important to understand how an eco-village operates and what its characteristics are, as the case presented later includes such a form of community. The idea of place attachment is strongly tied to community involvement since it results from both the commitment and participation of community members in development activities. Place attachment has the power to influence future behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions in favor of development. As a result, it may be related to community involvement due to its impact on residents' capacities and willingness to get involved in local concerns.



3.3.1 Communities

A community is formed of

“a place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which members of a local population express a shared sense of identity while engaging in the common concerns of life (Wilkinson, 1991)”.

Accordingly, communities can be seen as a mostly local association of people. The residents or members of the community often share common values and pursue similar goals, which they are more likely to achieve together than as individuals. Social interaction is therefore found in an area that is shared (Wilkinson, 1991). The community field focuses on the way that local behaviors and identities change (Wilkinson, 1970). Community development often represents the possibility of improvements. It creates for example the opportunity of creating a system to solve their problems independently, without outside interference. In most cases, it also creates the possibility of education, information programs, and training in general in the form of the implementation of community projects (Quimbo et al., 2018).

Communities are groupings of individuals who have similar features, interests, or aspirations and who are linked by social relationships, interactions, and experiences that are shared. Geographic communities, cultural communities, professional communities, and virtual communities are all examples of communities (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2022).

Geographic communities are groupings of individuals who share a geographical location, such as a neighborhood, town, or city. They share a physical context and may share cultural, traditional, and historical experiences (Jung, 2018).

Cultural communities are communities of individuals who share a culture, ethnicity, language, or religion. They may share ideals, beliefs, and traditions that link them together while also distinguishing them from other groups (Moric et al., 2021).

Professional communities are groupings of people who work in the same field, profession, or industry. They may share work-related knowledge, skills, and expertise, and they may participate in professional groups and collaborations (Rolandson & Ross-Hekkel, 2022).



People that connect through websites, social media, or other forms of technology form virtual communities. They may share common interests, passions, or beliefs, and they may communicate via online forums, message boards, or social networking groups (Rolandson & Ross-Hekkel, 2022).

Communities have a significant impact on the identities, habits, and well-being of individuals. They offer social support, a sense of being part of something, and possibilities for collective action and civic participation. They also help to build social capital, which is the network of interactions and assets that people may use to fulfill their objectives and aspirations (Zahra & McGehee, 2013).

3.3.2 Eco-communities

As stated in the previous chapter, communities are a social group of inhabitants in a specific region (Feng et al., 2017). An eco-community also follows this concept. Here as well, a common goal is pursued within the community and there are strong bonds within the community (Feng et al., 2017; Flora, 2016). However, the objectives within eco-communities are usually more concrete and not as diverse as in communities in general. Thus, the objective here is usually clearly set in a pro-environmental direction (Feng et al., 2017). Traditional communities are defined as rural areas that integrate sustainability principles and a village's existing vision. The shift to an ecovillage and more sustainable lives is praised for its creative idea. In comparison to communities, eco-communities came together intentionally (Lennon & Berg, 2022). An eco-community itself can be defined as follows:

An eco-community is a settlement created intentionally by a group of people to fulfill collective environmentally conscious goals, such as voluntary simplistic living, reducing the carbon footprint, providing food, or being energy sufficient. They may consist of a few cooperating families or members of a single-unit community settlement, or several hundreds of members in larger ecovillages and cohousing, which are the two most-cited types of communities (Blažek, 2016).

It is debatable whether eco-communities should be considered utopian societies (Blažek, 2016). Additionally, it demonstrates how ecovillages and eco-communities



work hard to distance themselves from pejorative clichés like the "hippie" label and forge a more conventional identity. A lifestyle is a way of life based on certain attitudes, values, or beliefs. They are frequently described by consumption habits that support the expression of identity through a range of options. Sustainable lifestyles link the notion of lifestyle to sustainability principles. The four pillars of sustainability - social, cultural, ecological, and economic - are what eco-communities strive to achieve, however, they frequently place a stronger emphasis on the environmental and social facets (Lennon & Berg, 2022).

Eco-communities focus on minimizing the negative effects on the environment, maximizing the use of renewable resources, and ensuring self-sufficiency. A new social structure, resource sharing, and collective ethics are also crucial to describe eco-communities (Pickerill, 2021). Communities that share the vision of living together in harmony with the environment often come together in ecovillages. An ecovillage can be seen as a human settlement with a contemporary and sustainable environment, where ecological functions are emphasized and building and management are integrated with an extensive understanding of the environment. There is the incorporation of ecological factors into community planning and development to create a dense and sustainable living environment. Sociality, location, and symbiosis are characteristics of eco-communities. The main difference between an eco-community and a traditional community is symbiosis, within the eco-community but also with the environment around them (Feng et al., 2017). Eco-communities can be seen as significant socio-technical niches and local hubs for the social economy (Blažek, 2016).

According to the ecovillage principles, individuals and their communities must grow healthily. Humans and nature must live in harmony. In addition to harmony, both interior and outdoor comfort aspects are intended. Indoor comfort is achieved by changing the temperature and humidity, and outdoor comfort is achieved by designing the space with ventilated corridors and greenery. This is followed by conservation, which implies the implementation of water- and energy-saving measures, for example. The use of technology and intelligence to track the condition of environmental components in a community in real time is another aspect. These individual aspects are fulfilled in different ways, and in most cases, different approaches are combined to achieve the most positive environmental balance possible (Feng et al., 2017).



People across the world are creating and constructing their communities in response to global issues that threaten local sustainability. They are establishing organic food production, constructing eco-houses, and utilizing solar energy (Espinosa & Walker, 2013). Additionally, tools can make it simpler for laypeople to learn more about design choices. Absolute resilience is impossible to obtain because humanity does not know how vulnerable it is. However, this does not imply that issues should be simply disregarded. Resilient solutions must be considered because of this. Communities assess the value of each design individually and recognize any potential risks to it (Hopfe & McLeod, 2021; Surjan & Shaw, 2008). It is crucial to create long-lasting changes in the urban's material, political, and economic structures. The shift towards permanence exposes various contradictions, such as challenges in managing finances and capital, property ownership, navigating regional government and planning processes, complying with building regulations, and concerns about thefts, personal security, and safety. These factors can inadvertently restrict access to certain areas, deviating from the initial intention of greater accessibility. (Pickerill, 2021).

While it is evident that reducing consumption is crucial for sustainability, sustainable lifestyles are not primarily defined by consumer habits. The media portrayal of eco-communities and ecovillages often perpetuates some of the original associations with countercultural or "hippie" movements. These depictions intersect with a broader political discourse that emphasizes stronger sustainability principles in everyday life and lifestyle choices (Lennon & Berg, 2022).

Idealism is frequently characterized as having slightly negative overtones because it is linked to wishful thinking about an idealized Utopia: the sun is shining, nature and the children are prospering, people are happy, and the vegetables are organic and healthy. Images show people in the ecovillage sharing meals, skills, the land, and even parenting one other's children. With a new model, it has attained the average living level. From being quirky and alternative with more sustainable practices, there is a shift to being commercially successful with less sustainable practices and a more capitalistic orientation. Maintaining a mainstream identity while promoting an alternative or distinct way of life is difficult. Nowadays, eco-communities frequently portray a surprisingly typical setting as the antithesis of a modern rural idyll. It may lead to perceptions of eco-communities as "greenwashing" for housing development because it is about creating a narrative of change in which community members are



regarded as assisting a societal transition to a sustainable future (Espinosa & Walker, 2013; Lennon & Berg, 2022; Pickerill, 2021).

There are differing views on the implementation capability of the alternative lifestyles and technologies created within eco-communities. The improvements made e.g., in the technical area or living improvements can also be used and implemented outside these eco-communities that developed them. Some may even be used in substantial urban development projects (Pickerill, 2021). Whereas there is also another viewpoint that eco-communities might create space for experimentation with alternative systems of production and consumption although it is unlikely to happen on a global scale (Boyer, 2015). Phenomena like climate change, economic instability, energy supply, security, and global pandemics may alter how people regard eco-communities. In the future, there will also be hazards that we are currently unaware of. Threats of this nature always loom when systems fail. Then, looking at what eco-communities are already doing might be helpful to continue living in the way that the current lifestyle is without making too many adjustments outside these communities (Hopfe & McLeod, 2021).

To sum up, the positive outcomes of the eco-communities can be linked back in two ways to environmental stewardship. On the one hand, the improvements made inside eco-communities can be implemented outside the eco-communities in the everyday life of people living in rural areas and cities. Those improvements can be technical improvements, agricultural improvements, or related to different ways of living (Feng et al., 2017). On the other hand, people who are active in eco-communities gain the knowledge and connections they need to take better care of the environment. As Hopfe & McLeod (2021) stated in the paragraph above, visitors should continue living in the way they lived inside these communities.



4 Methodology

This study investigates how an ecovillage community influences volunteers to become environmental stewards. More specifically, how volunteers develop an emotional bond with the ecovillage during their stay turns them into better environmental stewards. It will be explored how the learning experience at the ecovillage can lead to a transformation for the volunteers. By following the social constructivist philosophy, I examine how the volunteers describe their experiences themselves, how they construct their reality and what they described with the residents, the ecovillage, and the learning process they went through.

Subsequently, this chapter presents the methodological positioning of this dissertation study, including research philosophy, data collection, and sample selection. This chapter then provides the rationale for the research environment and case selection of Cloughjordan ecovillage in Ireland. Additionally, analytical strategies, ethical considerations, and limitations are presented.

4.1 Reflection on the Role of the Researcher

A personality statement describes the epistemological position of the researcher. Furthermore, in this chapter, I describe possible influences on the research project through my personal beliefs, theoretical influence, and perspectives that guide the research.

My first experience with a community goes back to my childhood. I was part of a spiritual community through my mother but without a focus on environmental stewardship. This experience shaped me in that I was very critical of communities before I did this project and was at Cloughjordan ecovillage for the first time. However, I believe this is more beneficial as a critical researcher than if I had only been positive about community life. That voluntourism is an interesting research topic became clear to me during my studies when we critically assessed this form of tourism and I also carried out a project on this topic.



During my stay in the Cloughjordan ecovillage, I lived with a family in the household. On the one hand, this gave me a very good overview of life in the ecovillage, but on the other hand, it also gave me a very strong connection to the ecovillage myself, and possible influences on my research may have occurred as a result. In addition, my background can be named as the motivational approach to this research project, but also as a source of influence. I come from a middle-class family and my life so far has been very education focused. I believe that we humans need to live more in harmony with the earth and the environment around us. We need to try to live in a more environmentally friendly way and I also follow the approach of living locally, seasonally, and vegan. However, I am aware that I can only do this because of my middle-class background and that it is not possible for everyone to live this way. These attitudes and my background can also influence my attitude toward the interviewees. For example, before I came to ecovillage Cloughjordan, I did not think about how people eat. However, when I found out that less than half of the community members are vegetarian or vegan, I was surprised. This is one example that I became aware of, but there may be other such aspects of bias due to my experiences and lifestyle.

4.2 Social Constructivism

Philosophical ideas underlie all research but are not always explicit (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A philosophical position refers to a particular worldview that relates to research approaches, designs, and methods of research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Three key factors characterize worldviews and shape research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These components are ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Social constructionists assume that people seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, meanings directed at objects and things. These meanings are multiple and varied, prompting researchers to look for complex perspectives rather than narrowing meaning down to a few categories or ideas. The purpose of the research is to rely as much as possible on the views of the participants regarding the situation under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).



Subjective meanings are often socially and historically negotiated. They are not simply imprinted on the individual but are shaped through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through the historical and cultural norms that operate in an individual's life (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Thus, constructivist researchers often deal with interaction processes between individuals. It also focuses on the specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural environment of the participants. Because researchers are aware that their background influences their interpretations, and how their interpretations flow from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences, and position themselves in research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4.3 Research Design

This study uses the case study approach to answer the research question presented at the beginning. In this chapter, I will describe what exactly a case study is and what advantages this approach has in connection with the research. It also describes the way that I am dealing with data through the narrative approach.

4.3.1 Narrative Approach

In qualitative research, the narrative method is frequently applied within a social constructivist framework. It is founded on various approaches that seek to comprehend the variety and complexity within the various realities that people experience, as well as how these are presented (Flick, 2009; Mura & Sharif, 2017). The objective of a narrative method is to illustrate these social realities. This is possible through narration because people create their realities through their stories. This means that each unique tale serves as a representation of the various meanings associated with experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2009; Mura & Sharif, 2017). The respondents are free to express their subjective focus and convey their unique meaning toward an event when using a narrative method. The key is to comprehend how each person is creating their narrative. By comprehending how this is done, it is possible to interpret someone's sociocultural surroundings in the same



way that constructed worlds are presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mura & Sharif, 2017). Thus, using a narrative method enables one to go beyond simple text mining and instead value the story. The actual subjective reality can be found by analyzing the text and considering the background, the context, the audience, and the transitional moments, such as silent moments (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Mura & Sharif, 2017).

The narrative method requires a proactive role from the researcher, in keeping with the social constructivist framework. As the stories are understood and interpreted by the researcher's knowledge and background, the interviewer participates in the creation of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, since the narrative analysis is predicated on the idea that audiences and stories are frequently interdependent, the narrative itself may alter depending on the setting. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the narrative approach's dual interpretation: first, interviewees interpret their lives through the stories they tell, and second, the researcher interprets how the respondents' stories were constructed (Flick, 2009; Mura & Sharif, 2017).

4.3.2 Qualitative Case Study

To respond to the stated research topic, this study used a case study methodology. Gerring (2007) defines a case study as follows:

A case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population) (Gerring, 2007: 20).

Case studies give an in-depth analysis of a particular situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study research design is concurrently adaptable and can incorporate various kinds of research techniques and data (Denscombe, 2010). This design has benefits like holistic insights, adaptable approaches, and suitability for small-scale study. It follows the selected qualitative research methodology as a result. The volunteers of the eco-village Cloughjordan reflections on the learning process and time spend in the eco-village serve as the study's case.



4.4 Research setting: Cloughjordan Eco-Village, Ireland

Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd presented the public with their vision for Ireland's first ecovillage in 1999. The idea was to bring together a group of committed environmentalists and purchase a piece of land where they could all settle down and start new lives. After considering several locations, the ecovillage settled on the 67-acre property near Cloughjordan, a town in county Tipperary (Cloughjordan Eco-Village, 2023b; Espinosa & Walker, 2013).

The village started to grow quickly, and by 2012, it had 50 houses constructed or under construction, 500m² of solar panels, an eco-enterprise center, an eco-hostel, and fiber optic broadband cables installed. The concept of an eco-village was finally taking shape with all these fresh projects, and the neighborhood has been cooperating, thriving, and expanding ever since (Cloughjordan Eco-Village, 2023b; Espinosa & Walker, 2013). In addition, the ecovillage has a system to heat the water inside the ecovillage.

Members of the Cloughjordan ecovillage embraced the concept of delegating duties and working toward common goals and values. Cloughjordan Ecovillage symbolizes a shift towards the new era of self-organizing systems theory by establishing a process of mutual agreement. The creation of Cloughjordan ecovillage has involved input from every member of Sustainable Projects Limited. From deciding on the site of Cloughjordan to adopt the Ecological Charter for sustainable housing development, every step of the project was decided upon by the community. This indicates that the ecovillage's homes and infrastructure were not only constructed to be environmentally sustainable, but also in a collaborative and co-creative way that included the ideas and views of all ecovillage residents (Cloughjordan Eco-Village, 2023b; Espinosa & Walker, 2013).

The ecovillage has its farm where the volunteers who were interviewed also work. This farm produces vegetables, which are brought to a pick-up station twice a week. To get an impression of this farm, here is a picture of the community farm, more precisely of a polytunnel. For a subscription of 16 euros per person per week, the members of the farm can get as many vegetables as they need from this station.



A case that serves as an example of a consistent, cross-case relationship is the center of the typical case study. According to the terms of whichever cross-case model is used, the typical case could also be regarded as a representative example. The latter phrase is frequently used in writings on psychology (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Cloughjordan Eco-Village is a good example of a medium-sized Eco-Village. It is not too radical or extreme in its environmental efforts or external relations. That's why this ecovillage can be seen as the from Seawright & Gerring (2008) mentioned typical case. Therefore, Cloughjordan is well suited as a case study to conclude other Eco-Villages. Comparable results of this study can also be expected after data collection in other eco-communities.

4.5 Data Collection

Two forms of qualitative data were collected in this work. Observations were conducted throughout the stay at ecovillage Cloughjordan. In addition, interviews were conducted inside the ecovillage, beginning on the third day of the one-week stay at Cloughjordan. This stay inside the ecovillage was to ensure that I can first familiarize myself with the ecovillage, the environment, and the people so that I can better respond to the answers of the interviewees in the interview.

4.5.1 Observations

Observations are an important way of collecting data in qualitative research. Here, the place itself, and the interactions of the participants, in this case, the interactions of the residents and volunteers, are observed. In this way, an impression of the field setting can be gained with all five senses. I recorded these impressions and documented them by taking notes for subsequent scientific evaluation or as a basis for further research or data collection. The observation usually starts relatively broadly, and everything is observed first, giving me a first impression of the ecovillage and how it operates (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Afterward, the observations became more focused on the research object. There are different possibilities of observation.



At the beginning of my stay in the ecovillage, I was given a guided tour of the entire ecovillage site by the research supervisor I had in Cloughjordan since the beginning of my master thesis and the cooperation. He told me a lot about the ecovillage, its origin, and its development. He also talked about the future and told me a lot about the different houses.

The next day, a group of students from a nearby university in Ireland came to visit. I accompanied this group during the day and thus also received a guided tour from another ecovillage resident, which gave me more insight. The group also received three presentations on climate change and policy in this area. I took notes during the tour and wrote them out after the tour and before the presentation. During the presentation, I also took notes to capture more information about the ecovillage and its operations. I considered this important for the interviews that followed. With the observations in mind, I was able to understand of places and people the interviewees were talking about. Also, one morning, so as not to disturb anyone, I walked through the entire ecovillage grounds once to take pictures of the individual project sites.

Once a week there is also a soup lunch, where the volunteers cook soup. This is a meeting where a lot of residents come together and so I could also have some conversations there with other community members and with the volunteers. Those conversations were necessary to fix appointments for the interviews with the volunteers. I was also able to talk to several community members as well as with the only farmer that is full-time employed by the community and who teaches many of the volunteers the skills of planting, caring for, and harvesting vegetables. I decided not to record the conversation, but to take notes. This I did out of a feeling as I had the impression that I would not get very detailed answers from a formal interview. As he described to me, he is more of a person who will talk to someone spontaneously than make appointments for interviews. The participants questioned the necessity for a formal setting to discuss common topics with a person they considered a volunteer and preferred to chat on the spot, so I had hoped to interview them more officially. The researcher's sensitivity to the research participants frequently informs methodological decisions (Caton, 2014; Prince, 2017). I did, however, always let them know throughout conversations that I was a researcher.



4.5.2 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are sometimes conducted in research with a very small number of interviewees. Chong (1993) describes the advantages of this type of data collection as follows:

“One of the advantages of the in-depth interview over the mass survey is that it records more fully how subjects arrive at their opinions. While we cannot observe the underlying mental process that gives rise to their responses, we can witness many of its outward manifestations. The way subjects ramble, hesitate, stumble, and meander, as they formulate their answers, tips us off to how they are thinking and reasoning through political issues (Chong, 1993:868).”

Similarly, investigating a single case might allow you to examine the causal effects of a theory, providing supporting proof for a causal claim (Gerring, 2007).

Depending on the degree of flexibility desired in the discussion, interviews can be either structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Semi-structured interviews were used in the research, which allowed for the development of follow-up questions as the interviews went on. The most important questions were covered, but semi-structured interviews also allowed for flexibility to suit the conversation and allowed for unplanned follow-up questions to get more depth into the participants' answers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The interviews were conducted in two different ways. Eight interviews were conducted in person at ecovillage and three additional interviews were conducted via Zoom.

These interviews were conducted with three different groups of volunteers. One group is volunteers who have just finished their volunteer program. Five interviews were conducted with this group. In addition, I interviewed four volunteers who stayed at the ecovillage after they finished their volunteering. As a third group, I conducted interviews with two previous volunteers who left the ecovillage after finishing their program. Unreliable internet connections and interviewees who may be less concentrated than during in-person interviews are potential drawbacks of conducting interviews online. For instance, one interview that was conducted via Zoom also cut



off in the middle and had to be paused and started again a few minutes later. That happened due to the internet connection issues of the interviewee. However, the researcher had the chance to investigate and consider the respondents' emotions and facial expressions thanks to the use of video calls (James & Busher, 2006).

Before the first interviews took place, a pre-test was conducted. This was to check whether the interview questions were understandable and whether relevant answers could be obtained. In addition, it was checked whether the time frame envisaged could be achieved and the possibilities of follow-up questions and the development of better interview management skills towards the goal of the research of this thesis were developed and rehearsed. The pre-test itself lasted 54 minutes and was thus very well within the upper range of what was aimed to reach with the range of 30 to 60 minutes. The interviewee did a one-year volunteer program in Kinsale, Ireland. This is not an ecovillage, but very much a type of eco-community and a learning program with shared leisure activities. Due to the pre-test, one question was removed from the interview guide and one question was rephrased to achieve better results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Respondents were prompted to share their experiences through questions designed to encourage them to talk freely (Carolyn Boyce, 2006; Riessman, 2008). In advance of the interviews, I prepared several open-ended questions related to the background and theoretical underpinnings of the research. These were summarized in an interview guide that included a total of 18 questions. The aim was not to ask all these questions, but to have all questions answered by the end of the interview. The first two questions were designed to get the interviewees talking and sharing their experiences, of living inside the ecovillage and the interaction with the people and the place, very openly and without specific direction. This often meant that questions planned for later in the interview had already been answered and these were rephrased and put into context, following the semi-structured interviews approach, to avoid repetition. This ensured that the interviewees felt understood and got the feeling that I, as the interviewer, was present and interested in their stories.

A total of ten interviews were conducted. The shortest interview lasted 41 minutes and the longest 74 minutes. The average interview duration was 55 minutes. This puts the duration of the interviews at the upper end of the target of 30 to 60 minutes. The



interviews were taken within two weeks from the middle of the stay in Cloughjordan and until one week after coming back from Ireland.

However, to build their understanding of the ecovillage and their experience living in it and learning new approaches, extra questions or follow-up questions were asked based on the interview's flow and the participant's stories. In addition, the order of the questions varied based on the flow and subject of the conversation in each interview. Through the open-ended questions, the participants were allowed to freely express their thoughts and emotions without being constrained by a predetermined framework. I was able to attend intently and concentrate on the conversation because the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. The recording was then used to assist with the transcription, which was always done within 48 hours after the interview. Additionally, while conducting the interviews, notes were taken to note significant remarks or pivotal incidents that called for extra consideration during the reflection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.5.3 Interviewee selection

Most of the interviewees are graduates of the one-year volunteer program offered by Eco-Village Cloughjordan. But some interviewees volunteered without a program and decided to stay in the ecovillage afterward. There could have also been interviews with other former volunteers without a program that left the ecovillage after their time of volunteering, but they cannot be reached due to the data security standards of the ecovillage. The interviewees are selected from among the volunteers of the last five years. For volunteers who have completed their volunteer program before, memories will not be strong enough to conduct in-depth interviews. The interviewees were invited by an email that briefly described what the interview would be about and how long the interviews would last. This email was created together with the contact person for research within Cloughjordan. The email was then sent to 26 potential interviewees through the program coordinator using a database of former volunteers. I or the contact person never received this list, as this is not possible for ecovillage due to the data protection regulations. The names of the interviewees mentioned in the table underneath are pseudonyms. They are not the actual names of the volunteers



I interviewed but to make the process of analysis better flowing I changed the names into names that are common to have in their country of origin. The following table presents an overview of the interviews conducted. The pseudonyms are the names I use in the further course of this thesis to quote them and to present the experience of these volunteers. In addition, the table shows how long the interviews lasted, whether they took place in person or via Zoom, and the role of the interviewees. By role, it meant whether they are volunteers who have just finished their volunteer program or have completed it several years ago. Here, a distinction is made whether they stayed in ecovillage after finishing the program or left it again.

Interview	Pseudonym	County of origin	Duration	In person /Zoom	Role
1	Chloé	France	41 min.	In person	Current volunteer
2	Samir	Turkey	49 min.	In person	Volunteer that stayed
3	Valentina	Spain	54 min.	In person	Current volunteer
4	Karl	Denmark	57 min.	In person	Current volunteer
5	Ríán	Ireland	62 min.	In person	Current volunteer
6	Emilia	Germany	74 min.	Zoom	Former volunteer
7	Hanna	Hungary	44 min.	In person	Current volunteer
8	Connor	Ireland	48 min.	In person	Volunteer that stayed



9	Maria	Greece	57 min.	Zoom	Former volunteer
10	Katharina	Austria	66 min.	In person	Volunteer that stayed
11	Aisha	India	50 min.	Zoom	Volunteer that stayed

Table 1 Interviewee overview

4.6 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the data is segmented, broken down, and then put back together to make sense of the information that has been collected, which is typically in numerous forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The processes of gathering data, analyzing that data, and composing and structuring the report are all interconnected and frequently take place at the same time. As a result, each researcher must develop an approach that advances the study's overall objective because the research procedures are individually constructed and modified throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The observations were evaluated as I compiled the notes. Afterward, I summarized them and highlighted the most important information. In the end, a document was created that summarizes which places in the ecovillage I visited with whom and what information I received. Furthermore, this document contains the most important information from the conversations I had with people from the ecovillage that were not interviewed. These were the more informal conversations, but they took place about my research. Private conversations that I had were not included because they were not relevant to the research, and I do not consider it ethical to use this information from private conversations without the consent of the other person.

Since all data must be anonymized due to the requirements of the ecovillage, I have therefore pseudonymized the names of the interviewees as already presented in the previous chapter. However, this data with the real names and contact information is not passed on to other persons and is kept secret. In addition, names of people who live in the ecovillage or are mentioned by interviewees for other reasons are



paraphrased with the characteristic that this person shows. For example, I wrote "[name of farmer]" in brackets instead of leaving the actual name in the transcript. This ensured that the interviewees could speak as freely as possible without thinking about whether they were revealing sensitive data.

As already explained, the interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees using the app *myrecorder*. They were then saved to a hard drive and deleted from the cell phone. Subsequently, the audio files were uploaded to the program *f4*. This program automatically transcribes the audio file with the help of software. However, since the program also makes mistakes, and I wanted to smooth out some of the text, I went through all the transcription texts again myself and made these improvements.

After the interviews were all transcribed, I first read through them between three and four times to get deeper into the text and to get a feel for what content occurred in which interview. In this way, I wanted to ensure that my evaluation of the interviews was as precise as possible.

Finding patterns and themes to depict and explain in a final report is part of the process of analyzing qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To create a framework that helps me organize or categorize thematic ideas from the data, coding is the process of methodically categorizing data, in this case, the transcribed interviews and notes from observations (Saldaña, 2013).

First Cycle Coding and Second Cycle Coding are the two rounds I used to classify the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). For this purpose, I used the MAXQDA program. In vivo, coding is a system or version of coding I used in the first cycle. Here, the language, viewpoint, and views of the respondents are examined through the transcripts before being interpreted. The understanding of the issue and the codes designed specifically for it using the in vivo codes will be at the heart of my investigation (Saldaña, 2013). Following the first cycle of coding, the second cycle created coding groups using centered coding. This phase will assist in identifying and narrowing the most crucial codes (Saldaña, 2013). The developed codes from the second cycle were used to progress recognition of the designs and themes that occurred inside the information after the coding process was completed. The most crucial comparisons and contrasts within the subject's understanding were used to the



degree that is typically intended by the inquiry address to narrow the information down (Saldaña, 2013).

Additionally, I used the procedural, relational, and contextual elements of the three identity categories as initial codes. All elements that involved a comparison between the then and now or the now and then were classified under procedural. Contextual codes were applied to stories about farm life and/or personal life. Relational aspects were those in which the volunteers discussed individuals (hosts or other volunteers), relationships, or bonding.

All the elements connected to the participants' remarks on meaning and transformation are included in the themes that emerged from this study. The coding and analysis of the interviews are done using both a traditional thematic coding method and a more comprehensive coding, as was already stated. The holistic approach also considers how things are said in addition to the overall situation, while thematic coding concentrates on what is said.

4.7 Limitations

The interviews were all conducted in English. The problem here is that for most of the interviewees, English is not their native language. Of the ten interviews, two were conducted with native speakers of English. However, this problem does not only exist with the interviewees, English is also not my native language. This can sometimes lead to problems, which influence the possibilities of expression during the interviews. The two interviews with German interviewees were also conducted in English so that they do not have to be translated separately.

Some of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. This is better for understanding the facial expressions and gestures of the interviewees, but distractions can still easily occur. The interviewees are usually less focused and although the body language can be partially recognized, it is still more difficult to interpret. For example, before the interview started, there was a short interruption because the interviewee received a phone call. In some cases, interviewees about Zoom are also less willing to share



personal experiences readily. They have never met me in person, so they don't know how much they can trust me.

It should also be noted that I am partially biased concerning my research and the interview questions. Complete neutrality is not present here, since I was on-site in the ecovillage and met with some interview partners privately or spent time with them at events that took place during my stay in Cloughjordan. Although I made every effort to balance the circumstances with interviews and conversations with community members, it's also possible that my feelings for the volunteers skewed my results in favor of their perspectives.

In addition, it should be noted that not all memories are fully available for interview partners whose experiences in the ecovillage date back several years. In some cases, they had to think longer, and some aspects have slipped their minds over time.

4.8 Ethical considerations

For this research, several ethical issues must be considered. To that end, I have adhered to the advice provided by Creswell & Creswell (2018). The participants were first told of the research goals at the start of each interview, and their part in the study was made abundantly clear to them. Second, participants' previous consent was only obtained for recording interviews. Thirdly, the subjects' anonymity was protected, and they were made aware that they could leave the study at any time while it was still being conducted. Finally, the information gathered has only been applied to this research.

Additionally, I have followed Cloughjordan Ecovillage's published ethical research standards, which are available online (Cloughjordan Eco-Village, 2023c). Most of the suggestions were duplicative of those made by Creswell & Creswell (2018). There were, however, some extra ethical guidelines to adhere to. To receive ethical approval for the study, I first had to submit the research proposal to the eco village's research coordinator, who evaluated it. Secondly, I filled out and signed a research inquiry form that asked for details like my name, address, and academic affiliation as well as the topic and intended results of my research.



I have taken special care throughout the thesis to ensure that the residents' anonymity is respected because Cloughjordan Eco-Village is a comparatively small village, and the residents know one another very well. This was accomplished by omitting gendered pronouns, the respondents' official roles, and the use of quotes that made their roles clear.

5 Results

The results from the interviews are presented in this chapter. These themes are the most important aspects of data analysis to answer the research question of this thesis: “How do experiences in eco-communities influence environmental stewardship?”

Three themes emerged from the narrative analysis of the experiences of the eleven volunteers interviewed: 1) learning to value soft skills over hard skills, 2) learning from each other to become better stewards and 3) building a community of stewardship through attachment.

Overall, the results show that eco-communities influence visitors who come to the community from outside through various aspects towards becoming environmental stewards. This happens on the one hand through the appreciation of the soft skills they have learned during their stay in the ecovillage. The interviewees state that the soft skills are more important to them than the hard skills they learned, even though they came to the ecovillage for the hard skills, such as growing vegetables. It is these soft skills that have had a lasting impact on the volunteers' lives.

In addition, the eco-community, through providing a setting for people to learn from each other, enables the volunteers to become better stewards of the environment. This happens because of the strong connections people form with each other and the lasting memories of the moments of accomplishing something together, especially when it seemed impossible initially. These are moments of shared success that the interviewees said they will never forget. These experiences are what they value most and what they find that had the strongest impact on their learning experience. According to volunteers' testimony, it is these experiences that have made them more in touch with the nature around them and become better environmental stewards.



Lastly, it can be said that the volunteers at the ecovillage build a community of stewardship which leads them to become better caring persons for the environment. This happens through the level of attachment to the people of the community in which they lived their eco-village experience. The community, the sense of community, and the sense of simply wanting to grow as a person in that environment and wanting to become better for the sake of others is very special for the volunteers. Through their experience of community living, they become better in the sense of developing a stronger connection to nature and the desire to live more sustainably.

In the following, these three themes are described in more detail, and supported by quotes from the interview.

5.1 Learning to value soft skills over hard skills

During their stay at the ecovillage, the volunteers learn various skills. These skills can be divided into hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills relate to learning about the biological and physical processes at the ecovillage, such as learning how to grow vegetables and, herbs and fruit trees. But also, other skills like building things or improving their English s fall under the hard skills that the volunteers want to learn. The soft skills the volunteers develop during their stay relate to fostering interpersonal relationships, functioning in close contact with other people in the ecovillage, and especially with other volunteers. As an example of the soft skills they learned, there was a workshop about "non-violent communication" organized at the eco-village during the time of interviews. Just to be learning about communication whilst in the community had great importance for them.

During their stay, most volunteers realized that these soft skills were more important to them than the hard skills they had come to acquire. For some volunteers, the main reason for participating in the ecovillage volunteer program was to learn how to grow vegetables. However, this focus changed during their stay. Now, when they look back, they realize that what sticks out for them as the most important aspect of their learning experience at the eco-village are the soft skills that they acquired, like communicating with other people of other cultures and social backgrounds.



The skills mentioned most frequently during interviews as important to the eco-village experience are briefly summarized in Table 2. A distinction is made here between hard skills and soft skills that the volunteers learned.

Hard skills	Soft skills
Organic vegetable growing	Setting boundaries
Learned how to make own compost	Listen to myself
Learned / improved English	Take quiet time and learn about myself
Building things (e.g., compost toilet, camp area, community garden)	Learned about new cultures and cultural differences
	Communicating with people in an honest way
	Slowing down and listen to people
	Stronger connection with nature

Table 2 List of developed hard and soft skills

In the following, I will take a closer look at these skills, which are shown in the table, and what meaning they have for the volunteers' transformative experience at the eco-village. Only the skills that are most relevant to the transformative learning process and specified as most important for the future by the volunteers will be discussed.

Firstly, there are hard skills. They are the reason why most of the volunteers come to the ecovillage. The reason for most of them to join the eco-community was to learn how to grow vegetables. They wanted to experience a stronger connection with the earth from which vegetables are grown and to gain the skills and knowledge to grow their vegetables in the future. Accordingly, as other studies on volunteering have demonstrated, their motivation is related to wanting to learn something practical for their future life (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010).



The volunteers often mentioned this aspect of their motivation to come to the ecovillage. Looking back, the volunteers also noted that growing vegetables and working on the community farm was fulfilled during their experience. As Emilia states here reflecting on her experience: *“I have a sense of how to grow, and I didn't have that before. So, I understand the full cycle of things (Hanna, 2023).”* However, as can be seen, it is not only growing vegetables that mattered to her in the learning program but also experiencing the whole process of what it means to be growing vegetables. It is not only that vegetables are grown and harvested, but as Emilia addresses that a “cycle of things” can be experienced. Throughout the year, there is always something to do for the sake of the garden, for instance, seedlings must be secured from the vegetables once they are harvested. The volunteers learn that there is an entire process behind gardening that they might have overlooked initially, one with preparation and follow-up of the cultivation of vegetables.

Growing vegetables is also something that Katharina addressed in her interview. She mentions crop rotation as an important thing that she learned while at the eco-village. She is happy that she is now able to understand the process of cultivating vegetables: *“What I learned is all about vegetables, about crop rotations (Katharina, 2023).”* Thereupon, she continues saying: *“I learned as well to appreciate that knowledge (Katharina, 2023).”* She emphasized that she values the knowledge that she has gained while at the eco-village. She values the work very much. Her experience reflects the first step of Mezirow's transformative learning model, which proposes that transformative experiences are co-creative activities that necessitate the attention of the participants to emerge. Since Katharina makes clear with her statements that she values the learning process of growing vegetables, it is recognizable that she gives her full attention to the experience of learning, not just to learning the skill. This connection between the two ways of learning, the skill itself and the experience of the learning is important to create possible transformations among the volunteers as many studies have already shown (Brown, 2005; Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Tomazos & Butler, 2010).

Many skills related to organic vegetable growing or farm work were mentioned in the interviews. In these conversations, the possibility to feel a connection with the soil was often mentioned as a skill to learn. Katharina said: *“The connection to the ground, to the soil, is just so immensely big, which makes you realize that you never*



stop learning about it (Katharina, 2023).” The possibility to connect with the soil is important to develop a stronger connection with nature and the earth. Walter (2013) describes that outdoor learning includes touch, taste, scent, sound, and sight. Outdoor learning experiences in turn help develop skills such as leadership, interpersonal relations, environmental consciousness, and environmental awareness (Walter, 2013). Thus, it can be argued that when volunteers at the eco-village start working closely with the soil, they are embarking on a transformative journey. This also according to Mezirow, who said that when people become aware and pay attention to a certain process, new experiences emerge (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). The connection to the soil strongly influences the volunteer, as it is a tangible experience that will be strongly remembered. Environmental consciousness and environmental awareness and an accompanying positive attitude towards the environment and nature and the desire to protect nature are crucial to environmental stewardship. The willingness to protect nature can be seen as the remaining step toward stewards of the environment (Lehnen et al., 2022).

Another aspect of the volunteer program is learning to build things from scratch. For example, the volunteers learned how to handle wood and use it to build benches for a fireplace or a composting toilet on the community farm. They also learn to do smaller things, like renewing handles on the greenhouses, and for many volunteers, like Emilia for example, this was their first experience with building from scratch. In the beginning, when they were asked to build from scratch, they were briefly instructed on how a drill or saw works, but then the approach would usually be to let them try it themselves and call in if they needed help. Thus, Emilia reflects on her first time building from scratch:

“It has taught me that there are things like building all the things I had before coming here, I had no scale for building because I had no patience. And now maybe I'm able to build something from scratch by myself (Emilia, 2023).”

She said that before she came to ecovillage, she was not patient enough for building things and had no knowledge of building things at all. Clancy & Holtdorf (2018) describe that adult education is best when it includes the aspects of improved professional competence and intellectual development, transformation, and change. This is recognizable in the case of Emilia. On the one hand, she learned the skill of



building, which improves her professional competence. On the other hand, as Emilia explains, she has changed during her stay. She finds that she is now more patient to do things like building something from the beginning, for which she had no patience before her stay at the ecovillage.

All volunteers indicated that they would like to continue using the skills they developed during their time in Cloughjordan in their future lives. For example, nearly all volunteers indicated that they would like to continue growing vegetables for themselves. This makes it clear that the learning process has meant a lot to them and that learning this skill has impacted them greatly. This fact of influence includes several steps of Mezirow's transformative learning model. Firstly, step 7, is new knowledge, and skills, because the skill of growing vegetables has inspired the volunteers so much that they want to take new actions with it (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). This is shown by the following quote from Karl, who extended his stay at the ecovillage for half a year:

“We can start with growing like the physical skills of growing that will be of use. I think that is the thing that I want to do for the rest of my life. So, I think that's something I'm just going to be using regularly as I'm staying longer here for half a year, but also even if it's not going to be in a working environment like in a private. I want to be able to grow my food and be able to produce something for myself in my garden. That's for sure. So that's a skill I'm going to be using every day (Karl, 2023).”

He describes that he wants to continue to use the skill of growing vegetables in his future life. It is not yet clear to him in what context, but it is of great importance for him and his future to be able to grow his food. First, he will continue to use this skill in the ecovillage, but also after that, he would like to use it professionally or just privately. This fact includes steps 8 to 10 of Mezirow's transformative learning model, which states that applying new knowledge and abilities in a personalized manner is essential as a component of transformative learning (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Moyer et al., 2016). Karl continues to use the learned skill of vegetable gardening even after completing the learning program. However, research suggests that the actual final transformation is difficult to measure, and thus future permanent use cannot be predicted at the time of this thesis. It is merely the



interviewee's current attitude toward his or her transformation (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022).

However, one participant stated that from the week after the interview, he will move back to Dublin and work on a farm there. Rían has previously completed a bachelor's degree in physics. However, his learning experience at the ecovillage has influenced him to the point that he does not want to work in the field of physics, at least for the time being, but instead in agriculture. He describes his near plans as follows:

“My next step is next week. I'm moving back to Dublin, and I have a job lined up at an organic vegetable farm on the edge of Dublin. So, I guess for the next few months, maybe a year. Anyway, I'll be directly using the skill set learned here and in a sort of almost full-time job of growing vegetables (Rían, 2023).”

Rían, therefore, seeks to work in a similar environment as he is now working on the community farm. His future work is not a community but an organic farm where he can directly use his skills in growing vegetables. In this context, we can speak of step 9 of Mezirow's transformative learning model (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022), which is about the further use of skills and experiences. The use of skills in the future is a big step towards permanent change and implementation of the learned and behavioral changes in the future life (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016).

A skill not directly related to the community farm that was mentioned during interviewing was learning or improving one's English. For example, Samir from Turkey knew almost no English before he came to Ireland.

“I didn't know English, people tried to help me to learn English. I got lessons from the beginning from so many friends here, and not only on the paper, like writing, but actual rules of the land and language (Samir, 2023).”

Consequently, the residents of the ecovillage took a lot of time to teach him English. He only knew a few words of English and now after a few years at the ecovillage (he stayed there after his one year at the farm), he is fluent enough in English to conduct this interview.



Other volunteers who could speak English before also said they had significantly improved their English skills during their time at the eco-village. Emilia, who comes from Germany, significantly improved her English. According to her statement, she could speak English well before she came to the ecovillage. Nevertheless, she felt that she gained confidence in English by integrating into the community, as she describes here:

“I would say that at least my understanding of the Irish accent has been improved because I remember the first weeks, I was really having a hard time understanding those people who spoke with a strong Irish accent, and it got better over time, and I gained confidence in speaking English. So that was nice (Emilia, 2023).”

In the beginning, as she describes, she had significant comprehension problems, especially with the Irish accent. However, just by working with the other volunteers and living with other people and the other community members, her English has improved over time, and she thus gained more confidence to speak it.

Learning hard skills was the reason for most of the volunteers to come to Cloughjordan. However, the volunteers also learned other unexpected skills during their stay. As already briefly explained, they also learned soft skills, which are also very important and, as will be described later, have become even more important for them, according to their statements.

The volunteers, as they stated in their interviews, also developed a lot of what they considered to be soft skills. These skills are learned by living life in the community. The volunteers appreciate what they learn from living in close quarters with other people and the close contact and communication they have with the other community members. Rían describes this aspect very well:

“I have learned a bit about kind of the value of community and having related to a range of people around you. Like, even if you're not great friends with everyone, just sort of knowing everyone in your immediate area and how much richer your life can be as a result and how handy it is when everyone whom you hang out with lives close to you likes you more so than you know in a city (Rían, 2023).”



This form of learning from inside the community and the community members can be seen as self-development, as described by Kirillova et al. (2017). This form of learning for oneself without guidance creates heightened awareness and is seen in research as a strong trigger for change (Kirillova et al., 2017). However, the volunteers have learned that it is also important to spend time alone and to find a stronger connection to themselves. Here, it is very often mentioned that they have learned to take a step back, which can again be linked to self-development, meaning a possible factor of personal change during a self-oriented learning process (Kirillova et al., 2017). Chloé states this way of connection to herself as follows:

“I just to listen to myself more and sometimes I realize, I need quiet time and not to see anyone and not to speak to anyone. So, I'm not going to go there or I'm going to say no to that or it's okay to change my mind and say that I don't feel like it or so, that would be my biggest learning here (Chloé, 2023).”

Chloé describes this lesson as the most important she learned during her time at the ecovillage. The process of slowing down makes the volunteers feel grounded and they also feel a stronger connection to the nature around them. They need to set the boundaries of social structures for themselves. In principle, at ecovillages, individuals, and their communities are meant to grow healthily. Slowing down and the feeling of being more grounded is an important step in finding a good balance between the individual and the community (Feng et al., 2017). The feeling of being better grounded can be attributed to a higher awareness of one's own needs, which can be understood as part of self-learning and self-development (Kirillova et al., 2017).

Conner also addressed the aspect of slowing down which is important to him. As time passed since his stay at the ecovillage, he no longer does everything as quickly as possible. He now considers it valuable to take the time to talk to the people he encounters. Connor enjoys slowing down and stopping when he meets other community members while walking around in the ecovillage to talk and connect with them.

“But I think learning the value of maybe slowing down a bit and being more patient and just, the joy of stopping to talk to people and listening



to people and because, I wouldn't have done that before (Connor, 2023)."

Slowing down is also very important for Katharina. For her, it works through finding a connection with the ground, which she learned to do at the ecovillage. For example, she states that before coming to Cloughjordan she was often all over the place and didn't know what was important to her and what intentions she should follow. She was always trying to do a lot of things at the same time. Since arriving at the ecovillage, she became more focused on fewer aspects. She has a much-changed vision for her life that she wants to continue to follow. Therefore, Katharina formulates the following statement about feeling more grounded and connected to herself and about having a vision for her future.

"It is the connection to the ground. Having the time to just connect instead of running like a headless chicken around all the time. I do it anyway but different, and I have it much more together. I have a very strong vision. I learned to listen to that and to follow it as good as I can but be okay as well with it to fall back a little (Katharina, 2023)."

It becomes clear that she sees many things more calmly than before, as she describes that it is also okay when something doesn't work, and you feel like you fall back a bit because of it. She simply accepts that by now. Bush-Gibson & Rinfret (2010) argue that transformative learning can also be seen as a fundamental shift in the viewpoint of a person. In addition, they point out that transformative learning is also about learning something about yourself that you want to use in your future life (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010). In Step 8 of Mezirow's learning model, it is also described that having a social community around you that supports and navigates you makes it easier to go through these changes in personality (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016). This is what we see at Cloughjordan.

The learning process that the volunteers have gone through, such as finding more time for themselves, finding out what they want, and following their feeling more strongly, also leads to the development of more soft skills. One of these soft skills is interpersonal communication. On this matter, the interviewees almost all mentioned during their interviews a workshop that was conducted as part of the learning program. This was a workshop on "non-violent communication". In this workshop,



they learned how to resolve conflicts verbally without much confrontation. Many volunteers admitted to usually dealing with problems by remaining silent so as not to offend anyone. However, with the help of this workshop, they learned that conflict communication can be helpful and can also facilitate negotiation with the other person. This workshop on "non-violent communication" can be seen as an aspect of Steps 4 and 5 from Mezirow's transformative learning model, meaning that this workshop is about actions that are communicative in nature because they involve learning through a social and interpersonal character. In this context, the learner sees what other people value and what kind of communication is most purposeful for them (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007). So, Karl talks directly about this workshop. In the process, volunteers learned how to better connect empathically with others. In addition, they have learned to express themselves properly in a friendly manner when they want to tell another person that they disagree with something or need to give preference to themselves.

“And also, because we've had courses in non-violent communication and exercises with so really, we've been taught how to connect through empathy with other people, like the entire gist of non-violent communication, which I think for me gave me a better vocabulary about my own needs and boundaries (Karl, 2023).”

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Maria also talks about communication as part of her learning experience during her stay at the ecovillage. For her, however, another aspect played an important role here. For her, it is dealing with the language, the other country, and the culture of people that makes a difference in communication. Maria describes how she has learned more about other cultures and noticed cultural differences. Thus, she has learned intercultural competencies as a soft skill in the ecovillage, as she describes here:

“I think that when people leave their country and go and to work in another country, they need to face altering things like they need to find



ways to communicate because it's not only the language but also the culture and the communication they have between each other. I think that this experience made me much more relaxed to work with other countries (Maria, 2023)."

None of the interviewees indicated that they saw cultural exchange as a reason to come to Cloughjordan but learning about new cultures became part of their learning experience, nonetheless. For example, there are differences in lifestyles, or even work culture between their countries of origin and Ireland. Samir, who comes from Turkey, even speaks of a culture shock at the beginning:

"That's a transition, culturally, the climate of the place, the landscape, and everything compared to where I was coming from, it's a little bit different. And I learned a new language, all those transitions have happened in this (Samir, 2023)."

Maria, who is from Greece, spoke about the differences in ways of working. Where she comes from, you usually must prove that you can do everything on your own and don't ask for help. In Ireland, however, she has learned that it is the supervisor's job to teach employees new knowledge and ways of working. So, Maria believes that she experienced a shift in consciousness in terms of how she understands effective work behavior. The transformative learning process proposed in Mezirow's model is apparent here. She still works in an international context and thus step 9 about maintaining the behavior changes seems to be at work (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016). The ecovillage and the supervisors of the learning program seem to have left a lasting impression on her as well. Samir, in turn, speaks to the new culture he has learned through the people at ecovillage, as the majority are from Ireland apart from the volunteers. The social fabric of group performance as an experience can make learning much more memorable and long-lasting. Accordingly, this type of learning has great potential to influence the personality of the individual (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Kirillova et al., 2017).

Ultimately, the skills that the interviewees learned coincide with the tenants of Mezirow's transformative learning model. According to Mezirow, learning skills can be conducive to lasting change in behavior, which is especially the case when volunteers are heavily involved practically in the community. Since the volunteers in



Cloughjordan are very much integrated into the daily activities of the community, having practically become a part of the community over time, this step of giving the first-hand experience of real-life situations is fulfilled. These rather extreme experiences, such as working on the farm in all kinds of weather or the constant contact with new people within the community, transform the volunteers more effectively than would processes based on cognitive approaches, like what would take place at a university (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Moyer et al., 2016; Quinn & Sinclair, 2016).

The learning experience that the volunteers have gone through is generally very important to them. Emilia explains that the stay at the ecovillage has had a strong impact on her and has thus made her change her plans. Currently, she travels from eco-community to eco-community to learn even more and thus continue to broaden her horizons, as she describes:

“I would say that shaped my future because. This is how I’m living now. Like making money and then traveling and visiting ecovillages (Emilia, 2023).”

Karl conveys the importance of the connection he made with other volunteers and community members that matter more to him than the learning of skills like vegetable growing:

“I came for the vegetables, but I appreciate the people that I’ve gotten to spend time with and gotten to know (Karl, 2023).”

This sentence not only clarifies that for him the relationship and connection with the people in the community is more important than the learning of growing vegetables. However, this initial main reason has changed a lot for him within a short period at the eco-village, meaning at the time of the interview after one year of staying at the ecovillage. For him, the time he spent with the local people and the interpersonal relationships he felt are more important than the hard skills he learned like growing vegetables. Here, a shift in consciousness can be seen as he critically reflects on himself and his actions. He reflects on his behavior and his values. This is central to transformative learning and the shift in consciousness it requires: self-reflection on



assumptions rather than simple acceptance (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). According to Karl, he is very strongly influenced by the communication skills he learned, which he sees as very important to him for the future.

“I’ve gained so many more skills and I’ve grown as a human-like I think I have when I look at myself. And where I was just a year ago, it’s a big change. It’s something that’s going to stick with me, for the rest of my life, just like the communication skills that you got in here are something I going to be using and make them. This place has given me so much and I’ve changed (Karl, 2023).”

Karl accordingly believes that he has developed as a person and links this very strongly to the soft skills he has learned, such as communication or living with people.

For Hanna, in turn, it is also important to mention that living together with other people has changed her. However, she goes even further and formulates her learning experience as realizing that she wants to live in a community. The community had a strong influence on her. She has found more to herself and working together with the other volunteers and the farmers has made her believe in herself. Therefore, she describes this attainment and awakening as follows:

“Yes, I suppose I would probably mainly because of what I was saying earlier about community and awakening me to how much I value that and how important it is to me, which is something I didn’t even realize before. That would be the main reason (Hanna, 2023).”

She now sees that she is worth something and that the work she does is important and has meaning for other people. Thus, she has developed autonomy and self-development during her learning experience at the eco-village. This is what Kirillova et al. (2017) refer to as transformative learning: such triggering events usually take place at the end of a learning process, as an alert awareness of the transience of the moment (Kirillova et al., 2017).



5.2 Learning from each other to become better stewards

Volunteers do not only learn from organizers, farmers, or other supervisors during their time working at the ecovillage. During the interviews, the volunteers stated that they learned a lot from each other inside the group of volunteers but also from community members. Here, it is important to clarify that when volunteers speak of organizers, they mean ecovillage leadership and workshop providers. They refer to the employees of the learning program of the ecovillage, who are responsible for the bureaucratic process and the funds, and the overall organization's process of the learning program. While the lessons they learn from these individuals are important to the volunteers, they also state that the individuals in charge of the organization of the program were not the most important for their learning. For example, Ríán states that the organizers were there and that you could approach them if you need something. But for him, what was the most important was the knowledge he gained from workshops. Those workshops were about non-violent communication, as well as permaculture practices, or natural dying options. The workshops were offered by the organizers of the program but also by community members. Otherwise, the organizers represent more for him the framework of the volunteer program than they are knowledge mediators.

„And from our coordinators, I mean, they've just sort of facilitated us being here and learning in a way, and it's necessary. And you've learned some sort of non-violent communication out a few workshops at the start of the program with them (Ríán, 2023).”.

This shows that Ríán, as do several volunteers, considers learning outside the organizers' workshops, which was the workshop about non-violent communication, to be more important.

Hanna took the time to explain how they learned from each other as a group of volunteers during her interview. For instance, the volunteers often cooked together in the evenings, and since they are all familiar with different countries' ways of cooking, they have had a cultural exchange at dinners here. She describes experiencing these food events and learning about other dishes from other countries as special memories.



“Just experiencing it, experiencing the food and the whole group, everyone's been a great chef. So, there were many things I thought I didn't like previously. And then here it's just changed because, just seeing different uses for things (Hanna, 2023).”

As the volunteers learned how to cook from people from other countries, they went through a learning experience in the evening that went beyond the volunteer program. Here, they learned new skills in a group, which as Bueddefeld & Duerden (2022) describe can be important as a basis for a transformation. The volunteers cooked almost exclusively with the farm's vegetables and sustainable produce from the market that takes place every two weeks. During the social exchange of skills and knowledge within the group of volunteers and the group of community members in general, a kind of connection with the farm of the ecovillage and with each other between the volunteers took place. This can be seen as a bonding process bringing the volunteers closer to each other, the community, and the natural environment around the community, which is the first principle of environmental stewardship (Raftopoulos, 2020).

Rían explains that there was also an exchange of other skills, such as preserving food and making pickles or apple sauce among the volunteers during their stay at the eco-village. He states that he learned a lot from other volunteers, for example, how to preserve food, as he describes here. The learning within the group of volunteers has accordingly influenced him and given him more knowledge and helped him develop new skills.

“I learned a lot from people. But when the volunteer who was here before she's made as well and I've learned a lot about, you know I guess some sort of old fashioned do it yourself skills as well. Like preserving food, like making pickles, apple sauces, and stuff like that. And which is an important part that if you're going to want to eat seasonally and grow food, then you need to also learn about preserving and stuff like that and how to use what you have. I learned a lot of traditional skills from her as well (Rían, 2023).”



For him, this knowledge of preserving food, especially if you want to live according to the seasons like the volunteers at the ecovillage do, is very important to live sustainably. This knowledge Rían gained relates to principles of environmental stewardship, meaning displaying a positive attitude towards learning to preserve the environment (Lehnen et al., 2022). The knowledge that relates to principles of environmental stewardship also displays the extrinsic motivation of sustainable resource management (Bennett et al., 2018; Bramston et al., 2011).

Another aspect of the learning experience at the ecovillage relates to reflecting and learning from mistakes made. Aisha describes learning from making her own mistakes as the process of reflecting on what went wrong after realizing her mistakes, which is much facilitated by having other volunteers and community members around her to speak with. The other people involved in the community, such as other volunteers for example, are willing to help people who do mistakes like Aisha and try to show them respectfully how to improve for the future. Aisha mentions that a lot of people in the community have lived already for a longer time at the ecovillage and therefore gained already a lot of knowledge when it comes to e.g., growing vegetables, which they can pass on to people who are just starting to learn. She admitted during her interview that she made some mistakes at the beginning when she moved to the ecovillage with her husband. They started as volunteers but were always farming a piece of land in the ecovillage themselves. There, she made some mistakes when trying to cultivate vegetables. Because she had difficulties, she received support from other residents of the ecovillage to improve her skills in cultivating vegetables.

“I think it was first-hand experience making the mistake, and then spending time on reflection and contemplation. Yeah, so it was learning some from experience, a good bit from experience. I think there was some learning from other people's experiences when they shared with us how they navigated these situations because they've lived here longer than us. Many people here have lived longer than us. So those are the two ways that we learned (Aisha, 2023).”

By receiving support from others to succeed in life, one learns about their selves and the possibility for transformation, as Clancy & Holtferd (2018) assert. Volunteers



support each other to become better individuals. Accordingly, adult education is at its best when both skills are improved and there is intellectual progress because then there can be a change in the perceptions, connections, and behavior of the people. Here a transformation and change of personality are best possible (Clancy & Holford, 2018). So, there needs to be mutual support and help for the transformative learning process of the newcomers to be effective, especially for those who do not have so much experience with agriculture. For Aisha herself, the support from other community members for improving her skills in growing vegetables, for example, was one of her main and most important learning experiences, she mentions during the interview. The willingness to help each other and teach each other skills of different kinds is something that is thus very important for a successful ecovillage experience of learning from other community members. She would not have expected this kind of learning, because, of course, she did not expect to make a mistake and then learn from it. Accordingly, it is an unconscious and unplanned learning process that Aisha goes through here.

The experience of living at the eco-village in general seemed to influence the volunteers to be better caring people for the environment, or to put it more precisely, to become environmental stewards. Since the influence of learning among each other was rated by the interviewees as very important for themselves to develop as people, and transformative, it can be interpreted that learning among each other leads to changes in behavior towards a more caring for the environment. According to Bramston et al. (2011), environmental stewardship motivates volunteers in different ways. One dimension of motivation is to learn about oneself and the environment in, for example, the context of a community. Volunteers seek to learn something related to the environment through their activities and will thus change their attitude toward nature once they know how to appreciate it better (Bramston et al., 2011).

For Emilia, this learning experience of learning from each other within the group of volunteers at ecovillage Cloughjordan as a volunteer has had a lasting impact on her. During this one year, she believes that she has completely changed her way of life and the core of her activity. Emilia wants to learn even more about sustainability. Therefore, since she left the ecovillage Cloughjordan in 2021, she is constantly traveling from eco-community to eco-community to develop even more environmental awareness and learn even more in the field of sustainability at different



eco-community locations. Emilia describes that since she left the ecovillage in Cloughjordan she has only been traveling between other eco-communities. She wants to continue to get knowledge and skills in these groups of people among themselves.

“I can say that I felt absolutely encouraged to keep traveling, to keep visiting communities, to keep learning about not only sustainability but hopefully regenerative practices when it comes to landscaping (Emilia, 2023).”

It can be constructed that Emilia has a positive attitude towards nature. According to her statement, she already had this before she came to Cloughjordan, but it has been strengthened by her experiences in the ecovillage. She states that her stay at the ecovillage has inspired her to gather more knowledge in the field of sustainability and to preserve nature as much as possible (Lehnen et al., 2022).

Volunteers gave many examples in their interviews of how they learned and adapted environmental stewardship actions while at the ecovillage.

Chloé also articulates a change she has observed in herself, that she is more conscious in an environmental way than she was before coming to the ecovillage. She expresses furthermore, that she feels that she grew mentally during her time in Cloughjordan.

“I learned a lot. I think I grew here mentally. And because you're always learning new things. So, it makes me makes it made me aware of more things. So, I'm more conscious in an environmental way (Chloé, 2023).”

She sees a shift in herself toward a more environmentally conscious way of living. For her, learning from her experiences at the ecovillage through the interactions with the people living there and the values of community members has played an important role in this process. This can be seen as a way of learning from other community members through interaction with each other and knowledge transfer (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Walter, 2013). Chloé thinks that she has grown mentally through the learning process she has gone through. In theory, this can be seen as a volunteering stewardship action, which creates an engagement in the motivations and values of volunteers together. The experience of living with other environmentally conscious people in the community has led her to learn and mature as a person. She has learned,



as she states, which is to be understood by the other community members, as she describes that she has learned through the process of living within the community. (Bennett et al., 2018; Ding & Schuett, 2020).

5.3 Building a community of stewardship through attachment

The community of stewards is closely related to the term eco-community. A community itself is a place-oriented gathering of people who pursue common actions and objectives (Wilkinson, 1991). An eco-community also follows this concept but with a clear focus on environmental sustainability. Here, the social interpersonal aspects are also important for the community in the way they establish their goals and set the way of living inside the community, but the common focus is on the pursuit of environmental goals. These actions can be for example reducing carbon footprints, living energy sufficiently, or producing and supplying organic food (Blažek, 2016), which are all done at Cloughjordan.

The formation of an attachment to the community during their stay influences the volunteers to act and change their behavior to be more sustainable. In their free time, the volunteers as some of them stated, also spent time by themselves in the nature around the ecovillage, but also within the group of volunteers with a trip to a lake in summer. The attachment to the place happens through connection to the nature around the ecovillage and the feeling of the volunteers to build a stronger connection to nature through the time spent in the forest or next to the lake. Attachment to the place also happens through the hospitality of the community members and the many social events that take place at the eco-village. Furthermore, the feeling within the community, as the volunteers describe it in the interviews, does that they simply want to do more for the environment and start even more environmentally friendly actions (Guo et al., 2018).

According to Guo et al. (2018) and Wynveen et al. (2014), place dependence is the term used to characterize a functional relationship between people and place. This function-driven relationship with the place is based on the notion that a particular



location may best help people meet their requirements and achieve their goals (Guo et al., 2018).

Nature and being outside are also very important for Aisha. However, she relates this connection more to the ecovillage itself. She says that working on the farm and growing vegetables gives her a connection to the ecovillage itself and the facilities available inside.

“We never had enough opportunities to grow our vegetables right from start to finish. And I think we started growing and experimenting with Indian vegetables in the greenhouse and grow some vegetables that could be grown outside. That was a very good memory for me, and I’ll always look back and say, yeah, I had access to nature. I was able to make my hands dirty with, with nature (Aisha, 2023).”

The volunteers formed a strong connection with both the physical space of the ecovillage as well as the social space of the eco-village, shaped by experiences of working inside the community.

Aisha also speaks of a connection she has found with the ecovillage, people, and nature. But she also described the place dependence that she felt towards the ecovillage. She describes that she feels a very strong attachment to the place of the ecovillage itself. Aisha, as she states, has a lot of memories that she associates with the place. She started talking about placing dependence on her own, I did not say this expression to her.

“So, in that way, we have some level of I’m trying to find another word for dependency, but let’s call it that. Otherwise, there is interdependency here. And maybe the other attachment would be just in the form of being able to contribute to everything that we have received here from this place. And maybe another one would be just all the memories that we have here. So those would be some ways in which we find ourselves attached (Aisha, 2023).”



Aisha describes that she got back from the community and the people at ecovillage. She has memories that she will not forget. The memories are the reason why she has built a relationship with the people. This is what is seen in theory as place attachment and more specifically place dependence. A strong connection between the place and the people who live in the ecovillage, which is seen to be a functional relationship between place and people (Guo et al., 2018; Wynveen et al., 2014).

Karl mentions that he did not feel any kind of attachment to the community or community life in general before coming to Cloughjordan. It was not even clear to Karl before he came to Cloughjordan that he would be living in a community. He signed up for the volunteer program without having much information about it and was then surprised to find that there is also an ecovillage attached to the farm. However, living in the community surprised him positively, and explained that it turned out to be the perfect way to live for him. Both in terms of working and the proximity of the farm, as well as experiencing the social fabric of the ecovillage he feels attached to the community:

“I didn't know that I was going to be living in an ecovillage or a community. So that was a big surprise when I arrived to see what it was. I didn't expect the community and the people to be so nice. I think this is the perfect place to live also after this program is over (Karl, 2023).”

According to Shen et al. (2019), important for emotional attachment to a place are the non-tangible bases of place attachment such as stimulation, interaction with people, excitement, experience, and involvement. All these lead to a bond with the place and its people. Since Karl's attitude towards the community went from practically no knowledge or interest in community living to the attitude that this way of living together with other people is perfect for him, one could argue that he has gone through a cognitive process of forming a place identity by forming bonds with people.

The social gatherings of the community members, such as music sessions, which take place regularly are important for the volunteers. Chloé said that at the beginning of her stay in the ecovillage she lived with a family. This family gave her the feeling of always having a home at Cloughjordan. She identifies herself accordingly with this



family and feels at home with them. That connection and the social aspect of the community is also what she expresses in her following quote:

“Important are the gatherings or the part where you share moments with people. Which can be a music session every first Friday of the month. A small social gathering is what I say it is. Some people, as I said, like the family I first lived in will always be kind of like home (Chloé, 2023).”

Subsequently, this connection with the family is a strong connection that she has developed by living together with these people, which explains the formation of place attachment (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001).

Similarly, Samir feels like he became a part of the ecovillage and its community. For him, it was the hospitality and helpfulness of the people at the ecovillage that brought him to this realization. For Samir, it felt special how much he was helped in the beginning. He was practically offered private English lessons, as mentioned earlier. He also felt integrated into the community and how fast this process of integration is happening is special, where, for example, he mentions how he enjoyed community meals (dinners that usually take place outdoors where (almost) all community members come together and eat together).

“I’m part of this village and of course, this came to me through the connection that I was having with people here. So that helped me a lot. And the way because I didn’t know English and didn’t know that people were trying to help me. I was given an advantage too, so we were having, and we still have community meals, and sharing things. That conversation with other people also helped me to realize, that that’s a good place (Samir, 2023).”

We can arguably see the formation of a place identity for Samir. He feels a strong connection with the community and community members. For him, it is the shared events, the welcoming culture, and the willingness to help that make ecovillage a special place. Place identity describes in theory a cognitive process in which people feel a sense of belonging to a place to the point where they identify with it. Moreover, place identity represents the beliefs, identity, or thoughts a person has about a place and the people in that place (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). For



Samir, the value of the place, as he describes, is the way the community meets and bonds with each other and the helpfulness he has experienced from the other community members. Samir considers many aspects of his life and behavior to have changed since living at ecovillage because of the bonds he formed with the place. He describes that the language he speaks, the culture he lives in, and what he needs have all changed significantly to adapt to integrating into the new place. Which can be seen as a transformative power in place attachment as he states:

“The needs that I was having was like my language, my culture, my ethnicity, and when I came here, my needs changed. I mean, if I wasn't having problems like this back home or in the country that they came from, I would be the same (Samir, 2023).”

For Aisha, too, the special form of the hospitality of the residents of the ecovillage has made the place special. For some volunteers, the welcoming culture of the people at the eco-village was very surprising. Aisha and her husband were invited frequently by other community members for dinner evenings in the beginning when they moved to ecovillage. She describes the people from the ecovillage in her memories as kind and generous and she was surprised by all the dinner invitations she and her husband received at the beginning of their stay. The community members wanted to get to know her and invited her to dinner. Aisha describes how generous and kind the people inside the ecovillage are and that she and her husband got to know a lot of new people from the community within the first months of their stay already. Those connections are not just superficial but there are also strong connections formed, as she states in the following quote:

“A lot of memories with people being very kind and generous. You know, a lot of examples of that. Like we were only here for a month or so, and not, not many people knew us, and there was this one family who invited us over to the home for a meal to get to know us (Aisha, 2023).”

Hanna described feeling a connection with the other volunteers as something special that she had never felt before in her life. According to her, she is a rather shy person who needs a long time to open up to people. And yet, here in the community with the other volunteers, she has managed to form special interpersonal relationships. She



became very emotional during the interview, as she describes how she interacted with the group of volunteers during her stay in the ecovillage, from a perspective of looking back to the time spent together, as Hanna will be leaving a few days after the interview.

“I’m emotional right now because I’m leaving in a few days. I like all the other volunteers that I didn’t expect to grow up to. I don’t know what to expect with the group. We were still quite strong up until the end. So, it was a quite special connection to a special thing to share this experience together (Hanna, 2023).”

Aisha describes having a similar experience as Chloé and Hanna. For Aisha, too, it's the connections with the other people at the ecovillage that make the place special. She formed very close relationships with people in the last few months, which she appreciates very much. She feels that through this close interaction with other people, such as her neighbors, she is attached to the ecovillage. She has arguably developed a place identity, through these close connections with other community members, which reflects a capacity for learning and comfort. According to the literature, Hanna and Aisha's place identity is the cognitive process by which people experience a sense of belonging to a significant place for them. Place identity expresses an individual's identity, beliefs, thoughts, or cognitions about a specific location. (Gross & Brown, 2006; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Aisha describes how she feels that over the last few months, the connection with neighbors but also with community members, in general, has become much stronger. She even talks about close relationships that she values, which makes her feel place attachment.

“But in last six months, just from my side, we have enriched and deepened our relationship, let's say, with our neighbors who are our friends now, where we can count them on, where they can help us out if we need them. And, that has created an attachment, it feels like you can look back, and you have some familiar faces, but not only familiar faces but more close relationships (Aisha, 2023).”

Samir goes beyond the stage of friendship when talking about people he met at the eco-village. He speaks of the new family and caregivers he found at the ecovillage.



Samir describes that since he has been living in the ecovillage for a long time, he has built up a particularly strong connection to the people who live there. He feels that he has found many close friends who always help him when he needs it. He even feels some people like a second mother or father. In this quote, he speaks of having found a second family to which he feels very attached.

“It has been long time and I have family, but the circumstances that I am in, to have a nice group of people around me. And that group is not only helping each other, it's just, being a real friend, because I'm away from my friends being a family member or a brother, a father, a mother. So, I got attached. It's new home. It's second family, second home, I would say. New friends, new family members, new neighbors' new co-workers. So of course, it will be like attached and whatever (Samir, 2023).”

Accordingly, one can see that the volunteers have developed a place identity through their strong connection with the community members and their interest in learning from them, and the attitude to change their lives, for instance by wanting to work longer on the farm.

The high level of environmental consciousness that exists in the ecovillage among the residents also matters to the formation of place attachment of the volunteers. The volunteers have changed to some extent in this respect by living together with other community members as well as other volunteers who are similarly environmentally minded. Valentina describes her actions as better than before. She feels that she was also conscious of the environment before she came to ecovillage. But living in the ecovillage together with other people who are also trying to be stewards of the environment has brought her further to improve her actions and to be a better steward of the environment.

“Maybe my actions have been better. Like more connected to taking care of the environment. But consciously the concerns I had them before is how it was. It's one of the things that pushed me to come here because of the values of this place. So, I think that this year I've been doing things more connected to my values, but I had these values already (Valentina, 2023).”



She now sees her actions as very much in line with her values. Her connection with the place and her more environmentally friendly actions are due to intrinsic motives tied to her values and beliefs. She tries to adapt her actions to her changing values to feel personal fulfillment (Guo et al., 2018; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001).

Connor also sees changes in himself after his eco-village experience. He describes the community and its people as the cause that he also is now more environmentally engaged. Consequently, it is easier to live environmentally conscious when the volunteers are surrounded by people who are also trying to have as little negative impact as possible on the environment through their actions. One can argue that people influence each other positively and that positive effects result from the influence the people inside the community get from each other. There are elements in every setting that can affect how stewardship is carried out (Moskell & Allred, 2013). In this case, it is the neighborhood or community environment, that influences people like Connor toward volunteering stewardship actions (Bennett et al., 2018; Bramston et al., 2011). For him, it is this feeling of being surrounded by environmentally active people that positively influences him to himself be more environmentally active. The influence on the volunteers happens through the intrinsic motivation to feel fulfillment and to follow his changing values or ethics and thus to bring stewardship actions towards the environment, which he states with the following quote:

“Yes. I think I was already very environmentally conscious before we came here, which is part of the reason that we were attracted to being here. But, when you're surrounded by a community of people who are very environmentally active, then it can only make you kind of more environmentally engaged and aware and so I suppose since coming here, I've gone from being someone who kind of was somewhat environmentally active in my personal life more as part of a community, which is nice (Connor, 2023).”

Connor also describes feeling a transformation. For him and his wife, it was clear from the beginning that they would only stay for a certain time and then move on. However, according to him, the decision to stay longer inside the ecovillage has changed very quickly. In the beginning, the couple only wanted to spend a limited time at ecovillage and then move on. However, they both felt so strongly connected



to the community which made it difficult for them to leave. They would like to stay in the ecovillage. This is due to the attachment they feel towards it, in this case, a particularly strong connection to the community and its members. They would like to continue growing their vegetables and it is hard for them to leave the people in Cloughjordan, as he describes here:

“Yes, absolutely. Yeah, 100%. Because, when I moved here, I was fully ready to just be here for six months and then to leave. And then I thought, oh, it would just be a short, interesting time in my life when I lived in an ecovillage. But now, that we’re here, we’re finding it hard to leave. And I think I would find it hard to leave. So, I’m attached to the community (Connor, 2023).”

They have stayed longer and now would very much like to buy a house in the ecovillage and fully settle down there. His sense of attachment to the community was very evident.

Katharina describes her feeling of being attached to the community similarly. She speaks of a strong connection to the community and even to the people in Ireland in general. She is very strongly motivated to continue volunteering at ecovillage. In her opinion, you don't volunteer for something you don't feel passionate about. She feels a great deal of meaning in the volunteering she does at Cloughjordan. She asks herself how she can make a change, and she sees this change and passion in volunteering at ecovillage, as she describes here:

“And now it's still the community and still the people of Ireland, but it's mainly the land. And to growing that this place allowed me to both, my personal life and my business are very important about what I'm doing and well, I think as well. You don't volunteer for something that you don't have passion for. And passion is something very personal, you know? So how can I really make care? How can I make a difference? And I think this place here did allow me to understand that (Katharina, 2023).”

We see that she has a strong passion for the ecovillage and for her, it was acquired within a short time, which she would not have expected. She speaks of a connection she has never felt before in her life. Her vision and further life plans have changed



completely within a short period. She no longer wants to work as a teacher, which she studied to become before, but rather to stay in Cloughjordan and live in the community and continue to be involved there with her volunteer work. Katharina describes that it was the community, not individuals, that influenced her to go through the powerful transformation she describes in this quote:

“And that was my plan when I came here. But that changed within two months. I knew that it was a bit of a weird one because I realized as well that maybe it changed within half a year. By being here and finding a connection that I've never found before to the land and as well to certain people. But it was the land here that the community wasn't just one person. That made me have a completely different vision of my life (Katharina, 2023).”

This connection with the community, as well as the changed vision for her future as a result, is a powerful statement from Katharina describing how strongly she feels connected to the place. In theory, this is seen as a non-tangible basis for place attachment. It is the attachment through stimulation, and interaction with people and the community but also excitement through the experiences she has had within the community and with the community members (Shen et al., 2019).



6 Discussion

This thesis aimed to investigate the impact of ecovillages on the environmental stewardship of their volunteers. To achieve this objective, the study examined the significance of place attachment in influencing environmental stewardship and explored how volunteers undergo personal transformations during the learning process in ecovillages. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the improvements in volunteers' personal development and how these improvements contribute to their role as environmental stewards. In summary, the research question of this study is focused on the influence of transformative learning and place attachment on environmental stewardship in eco-communities, and the data collected and analyzed will be used to answer this question: *How do experiences in eco-communities influence environmental stewardship?*

The experiences of volunteers in eco-communities contribute to the development of their environmental stewardship, as evidenced by this study. The learning experience that takes place among the volunteer workers in the ecovillage plays a significant role in this regard, as they learn from and with each other. This learning experience also results in a transformation in consciousness, which fosters a stronger connection to nature and a desire to become stewards of the environment. Additionally, the connections established with other individuals, the ecovillage, and the community at large promote a sense of place attachment that further motivates the volunteers to become environmental stewards.

First, the volunteers in the ecovillage experienced a shift in their perception of valuable skills, as demonstrated in this study. Although they initially sought to acquire hard skills, the learning process they underwent in the ecovillage led to a significant change in their consciousness regarding skills important for their future lives (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010). Notably, this shift also included a recognition of the importance of personal and interpersonal development among the volunteers themselves (Kirillova et al., 2017). As a result, the volunteers further developed their personalities through the learning experience in the ecovillage, leading them to highly value the soft skills they had acquired.



Second, in addition to the learning experiences they had with the farm work and organizers, the volunteers also had a transformative learning experience within their group, as revealed in this study. Collaborative efforts, such as building a compost toilet and designing activities to promote environmental consciousness among participants, contributed to this learning experience (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). Overall, this study highlights how eco-communities foster environmental stewardship by providing volunteers with a range of learning experiences, particularly those that occur within volunteer groups or through interactions with community members. This is the unplanned, unconscious learning process that volunteers go through outside of the eco-village learning program.

Third, this study reveals that eco-communities promote environmental stewardship through the community's collective actions and behaviors, as well as the creation of a sense of place attachment, or more specifically, community attachment (Guo et al., 2018). Community gatherings, hospitality, and helpfulness of community members contribute to this sense of attachment, along with the feeling of having found a new family and close confidants within the community. Different types of place attachment, such as attachment to the place, attachment to the people, and attachment to the community itself, facilitate this connection, empowering individuals to achieve their environmental goals and set higher ones. Through their experiences in the eco-community, volunteers are influenced to become environmental stewards not only through the community's actions and behaviors but also through their connection to the community and the feeling of belonging.

In Cloughjordan ecovillage, various aspects and experiences contribute to the development of environmental stewardship among visitors, particularly volunteer workers. This process involves three themes: 1) the recognition of the value of soft skills over hard skills, 2) learning from each other to become better stewards, and 3) building a community of stewardship through attachment. These themes are interconnected and overlap with theoretical concepts of place attachment and transformative learning. The volunteers undergo an intensive learning process through various forms of learning, such as learning in groups, learning in an outdoor environment, and learning from one another in the ecovillage. These factors create a memorable learning experience that leads to transformations in perceptions and behaviors, as observed in existing research in the field of transformative learning.



Transformations are crucial in promoting environmental change and preserving the natural environment (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010; Clancy & Holford, 2018; Kirillova et al., 2017).

The learning process that volunteers undergo in eco-communities can lead to changes in their personalities, values, and actions. This aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning model, which suggests that transformative learning experiences can result in the recognition and implementation of new roles and norms. These experiences are also memorable and encourage self-development and critical thinking. The learning program in eco-communities involves a brief introduction to the task, after which volunteers take personal responsibility and initiative. This allows them to learn from their mistakes, which is more effective than learning theoretically. Through hands-on learning and knowledge sharing, volunteers build bonds with each other and with residents of the eco-community. This process can also serve as a building block for a strong connection between volunteers and the community.

Furthermore, this kind of hands-on learning often results in the volunteers enhancing their skills, which enables them to learn from each other. Theoretically, this type of learning, where volunteers are given a significant amount of freedom, is also associated with the concept of reflexivity. This involves participants engaging in critical self-reflection during the learning process, where they feel empowered to discover new ways of thinking and working for themselves (Boni & Calabuig, 2017; Larsen, 2014).

In addition, the learning experience, and the workshops of the learning program, such as the 'non-violent communication' workshop, contribute to the interpersonal development among the volunteers, who become closer to each other. This, combined with the experience of living in a community, fosters personal development. The personal development of the volunteers is a result of both the social context of the eco-village and the environmental experiences it provides. During their stay, the volunteers engage in self-reflection and self-discovery, which leads to a heightened awareness of their personal needs and values. This is a significant trigger for self-development, according to existing research (Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010; Kirillova et al., 2017). For an eco-community that welcomes volunteers not to run the risk of becoming a mass tourist attraction, it needs good learning programs. These learning programs, which bring about a change in the behavior and lifestyle of the volunteers,



are what differentiate it from mass tourism. Therefore, ecovillages require good management and adaptation of these learning programs.

However, the learning program is not the only factor that influences volunteers to become better environmental stewards. Place attachment, which is formed during the volunteers' stay at the ecovillage, is also a significant factor. According to research, place attachment is a two-dimensional concept with two subdimensions: place dependence and place identity. However, this study includes an attachment to the community as a combination of both subdimensions. Attachment to the community is formed through the functional relationship between people and place, as well as the cognitive process of developing a sense of belonging to a place and its people. This attachment to the whole community drives the volunteers towards environmental stewardship. First, attachment to the place itself influences volunteers toward environmental stewardship. Second, attachment to the people, including other volunteers and community members, is a driver toward environmental stewardship actions. The gatherings for meals and music, the welcoming culture, and the social fabric itself all contribute to the process of place attachment. As the community represents the totality of the experience for the volunteers, they become attached to the community itself and the feeling of being together with other people, which leads them towards environmental stewardship. The ecovillage's high environmental standards and eco-friendly lifestyle also contribute to the volunteers' environmental stewardship.

6.1 Implications

This thesis establishes a link between the concepts of place attachment and transformative learning, which serve as driving forces in the implementation of environmental stewardship. The theoretical implications of this thesis involve connecting these concepts through the perspective of voluntourism and experiences in eco-communities.

As such, the study adopts the widely used concept of place attachment as a two-dimensional framework, comprising the sub-concepts of place identity and place dependence, which emerged as the basic framework of the concept during the interviews conducted in this study. The sources cited in this study include Boley et



al. (2021), Dwyer et al. (2019), Gross & Brown (2006), Guo et al. (2018), Kaján (2014), Shen et al. (2019), and Tsai (2012).

The primary objective of this thesis was not limited to generating theoretical insights; it also aimed to identify the types of volunteers and learning programs in ecovillages that can positively influence participants to implement environmental stewardship actions. Given that learning in ecovillages, with a community as a place to reside, presents an opportunity to transform individuals into environmental stewards, it is evident that effective and high-quality learning programs are crucial (Baird et al., 2021; Bush-Gibson & Rinfret, 2010; Kapeller et al., 2022). This is especially significant in the current context of climate change that the earth and humanity are confronting. Hence, ecovillages must have access to good learning programs.

To optimize the learning experience, it is advisable to create hands-on learning programs, as research has demonstrated that volunteers learn best when they are outdoors. The most successful learning program is one that provides a small amount of theory, typically through workshops, along with a significant emphasis on practical and applied learning. It is crucial to allow volunteers to have as much freedom as possible for their personal growth, enabling them to learn both individually and collaboratively within the group. Learning from other volunteers in the group has been proven to be highly effective, so it is reasonable to prioritize this type of learning. Since volunteers originate from diverse backgrounds and cultures, they possess knowledge that they can impart to other volunteers or community members through workshops.

Furthermore, ecovillages should take into consideration their impact on the social structure in which they exist and where volunteers are integrated. This research has demonstrated that even without a structured learning program, volunteers have already demonstrated a shift in attitude and an improvement in environmental actions. This knowledge can be leveraged to further enhance the impact of ecovillages on promoting environmental stewardship.

To manage volunteer tourism effectively, it is essential to minimize bureaucracy as volunteers do not respond well to rigid rules and formalities. Thus, the application process should be made simple to reduce the burden on potential volunteers. It's worth noting that even those who may not be willing to fill out forms can still contribute to



the community and the learning process. To facilitate the volunteers' self-development and social interactions, it is recommended to incorporate free time into the learning program. These factors have been shown to positively influence the volunteers' development into environmental stewards.

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, there is a shift in tourism demand from mass tourism to alternative forms of travel (Giampiccoli et al., 2020; Paul et al., 2022). Sustainable tourism is gaining attention in tourism research, and eco-communities are a focal point (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Climate change, on the other hand, is a major concern across all areas of research and for humanity in general. Recent studies have described climate change as the greatest threat to humanity. For example, according to OHCHR (2022), *“Climate change is the greatest threat the world has ever faced.”* Various research fields are working together to find solutions to slow down climate change, and policymakers are exploring possible solutions and signing agreements to reduce carbon emissions or achieve specific targets. The recently published IPCC report presents potential solutions, such as:

“Climate resilient development integrates adaptation and mitigation to advance sustainable development for all and is enabled by increased international cooperation including improved access to adequate financial resources, particularly for vulnerable regions, sectors and groups, and inclusive governance and coordinated policies (...). The choices and actions implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years (IPCC, 2023).”

Thus, sustainable development is viewed as a crucial aspect of mitigating climate change. However, there are various ways to establish a procedure to make oneself, companies, or other entities more sustainable. It is effortless to outline the overall objectives in reports from official institutions. Nevertheless, it is often not apparent to individuals what they can do to contribute. The majority of people are not reached by simply publishing such a report. Additionally, the report mentions the concept of climate resilience development. Resilience can be interpreted as the process of adapting effectively to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility while adjusting to internal and external demands (APA, 2023).



However, using sustainable development and climate resilience development in the same sentence is not only done in the IPCC report, but this is also often used in the context of eco-communities (Guo et al., 2018). Eco-communities can be seen as resilient communities, where people with similar worldviews and goals in mind move together to form a community. Their goal is mostly to live more sustainably (Blažek, 2016; Feng et al., 2017; Lennon & Berg, 2022). With the last sentence of the quote from the IPCC report, it becomes clear how important it is to put more focus on such ways of living and alternative approaches to sustainable and resilient development of life. Because the decisions that are made now and the approaches that are pursued now have far-reaching effects on the future of humanity (IPCC, 2023).

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

No study is without limitations, so this thesis also has gaps or there are aspects I could have done better. Apart from the methodological limitations that I have already outlined, there are also others.

The own target of interview partners was higher at the beginning than the achieved 11 interviews. Even with this number of interviews, there were different perspectives, experiences, and views among the interviewees. However, with a larger number of interviewees, an even more diverse data collection and analysis would have been possible.

Unfortunately, only two of the volunteers who had already stayed at ecovillage a few years ago came back and agreed to be interviewed. Therefore, the focus of the interviews was on people who were about to finish the volunteer program or on people who stayed in the ecovillage afterward. However, more experiences and personal changes after leaving the ecovillage would have been helpful to be able to assess the perspectives of these persons more precisely. For example, in 9 of 11 cases, the data are from interviewees who were at Cloughjordan at the time of the interview. However, the perspective of transformation is very biased when volunteers are still in the ecovillage environment, as they have not yet had to make a change outside of that environment. Accordingly, they are not yet able to judge whether what they have set out to change is feasible to implement.



This study has mainly focused on the self-assessment of volunteers who have gone through a stay and learning process in an ecovillage. The data collection was done through one-time data in the form of interviews. For future research, it would be interesting to conduct a long-term study with the same people. Here, a three-stage model for data collection is of particular interest. Thus, in the first step, interviews should be conducted during the volunteer program. In the second step, interviews should be conducted shortly after the end of the stay in the ecovillage. As a last step, interviews should be conducted again a few years after leaving the ecovillage. In this way, data could be collected from the same groups of people several times at different points in their learning program. A detailed assessment of the practicability of what has been learned in the learning program is thus feasible.

In addition, conducting a similar study in different ecovillages is of interest. In this way, ecovillages that are more radical than the one in Cloughjordan, because they can be classified as mainstream ecovillages, could also be mapped. There, the volunteers could experience different behavioral patterns and transformations due to the more radical basic attitude of the community members.

Also, it is interesting to use the focus of future studies even more on storytelling and listening in a narrative approach. It is helpful to conduct studies with open-ended questions and not semi-structured interviews. This can ensure that the interviewees are even more open about their learning experiences, memories, and moments of success than was the case in this study.

Focusing the research on the hosts in the ecovillages, i.e., on the one hand on the community members, and the other hand on the organizers of the learning programs in ecovillages is important to better understand the relationship between hosts and volunteers. The interactions between these two groups of people are of great importance for the creation of place attachments for volunteers. However, an assessment of the transformation of volunteers through the perspective of community members of an ecovillage is also not yet present in the research. Assessing volunteer transformation by looking at the one learning program at ecovillage Cloughjordan is not enough to assess this holistically. Therefore, it is also important to examine learning programs in other ecovillages and their impact on volunteers towards stewardship actions.



7 Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has investigated how ecovillages impact environmental stewardship by using transformative learning and place attachment. The findings indicate that involvement in eco-communities can significantly transform volunteers, resulting in personal growth and a deeper bond with the natural world. Volunteers acquire knowledge and skills through their interactions with other community members, enabling them to become environmental stewards. The volunteer workers learn about various sustainable practices like organic farming, renewable energy, and other eco-friendly ways of living, which they implement in their daily lives in the ecovillage. This knowledge is both practical and theoretical as it equips them with the tools necessary to lead a sustainable lifestyle.

Environmental stewardship is significantly influenced by place attachment. When volunteers form a strong emotional connection with the ecovillage and its natural surroundings, they feel compelled to conserve and protect the environment for future generations. The volunteers assume responsibility for maintaining the ecological balance of the area and are ready to take action to achieve this objective. In addition, the research highlights that transformative learning is a critical component of developing environmental stewardship. As volunteers experience personal growth and development during their time in ecovillages, their mindset shifts, and they become more conscious of their impact on the environment. This awareness motivates them to make positive changes in their lives and adopt sustainable practices.

Additionally, this research has outlined some actionable recommendations for those interested in participating in ecovillages and environmental advocacy. These include volunteering in an eco-community or attending workshops on sustainable living practices to gain knowledge and skills that enhance their ability to become effective environmental stewards. In summary, this thesis has demonstrated that being a part of eco-communities can significantly influence environmental stewardship through transformative learning and place attachment. Volunteers who spend time in ecovillages undergo personal growth and development, leading them to become passionate advocates for sustainability and environmental protection. By promoting these values in communities worldwide, we can work together to build a more sustainable future for ourselves and future generations.



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Appendix 1 Interview Invitation

Want to share your experience?

My name is Maximilian Kress, and I am doing a master's degree in tourism and sustainability at Linnaeus University in Sweden.

I am currently writing my thesis on how time spent in Cloughjordan Ecovillage has impacted your life and your values. I am therefore interested in your experience of living in the ecovillage Cloughjordan and would be grateful if you could spare some of your time to participate in an interview.

The interviews will take place either in Cloughjordan (between the 22nd of March and the 26th of March) or via Zoom (between the 22nd of March and the 6th of April). The interviews will take between 30 and 60 minutes and they will be about your experience of volunteering at the eco-village, what you learned, and how it felt. All your answers will be kept completely anonymous and will be dealt with confidentially.

I would be very grateful if you would be willing to participate in my research project.

Please contact me via email (mk224xd@student.lnu.se) or text me via WhatsApp (+46 793598582) if you would like to participate. You are also welcome to contact me if you have questions about my research project.

Sincerely,

Maximilian Kress



Appendix 2 Interview Guide

Formalities

Welcoming the interviewee and thanking them for the help and time they are investing in the interview

Explanation of the structure of the interview and the approximate duration of it

Inform the interviewee that the interview can be stopped at every time

Ask for permission to record the interview

Explain a bit about myself and what I'm studying and why I chose the topic

General Questions

1. Tell me about your stay, how was it and what did you do?
2. Tell me about the plans you had for the future before you started at the eco-village.

Place Attachment

3. What attracted you to the eco-village? What felt special about it? What is special to you about it?
4. What memories did you bring back from the eco-village?
5. Tell me about something you learned.
6. Did you ever come back to Cloughjordan after your stay there, or are you planning to? If yes, tell me more about it. How was it? What made you do it?
/ If they are still in the ecovillage while conducting the interview: Are you planning to come back in the future?

Transformative Learning

7. What was an important thing that you learned in the volunteer program in Cloughjordan?
8. What do you think, helped you learn that?



9. How do you feel the organizers contributed to your learning experience?
10. What was the most memorable experience, situation, or skill you learned in the eco-village?

Environmental Stewardship

11. How did you live an environmentally conscious way at the eco-village?
12. Was it any different than how you lived before? Did it influence how you live now? How so?
13. What are you taking care of: recycling, waste reduction, energy conservation, environmentally conscious transportation, eco-friendly purchasing? If something applies, what are you doing for it? (Ask specifically about the points not mentioned in 11 and 12)
14. Tell me about the skills you learned. How can they be used in your life afterward?

Closing Questions

15. So, would you say you got attached to the eco-village and its people?
16. So, would you say you had a learning experience that transformed you?
17. So, would you say you became a better caring person for the environment?
18. Is there anything you would like to add that we didn't talk about so far?



Appendix 3 Illustrations of the Eco-Village

Appendix 3.1 Water heating plant



Appendix 3.2 Community-Farm





Appendix 3.3 Vegetable Pick-up Station

