Edmund Rice International (ERI)

A Year of Living Sustainably

Twelve Projects that Reduced our Ecological Footprint
Introduction

In 2012–13, ERI challenged the Edmund Rice Network (ERN) worldwide, to publish or begin projects that would reduce the ecological footprint of a group in their local area. Twelve people volunteered for this, and thus was launched …

The ERI Year of Living Sustainably

To be precise, some projects took a bit more or less than a year, and there was no 12-month period where everyone could work at their projects simultaneously, as different countries organise their years differently. We could say the *Year of Living Sustainably* ran somewhere between 2012 and 2014, with many projects, of course, continuing into the future.

The selection of these twelve projects was made to show a variety of places and ideas, with a wide scope, from the micro (a single household) to the macro (a whole school system), from the local (a shopping centre) to the global (a Province covering several countries), from within the ERN (a Province centre) to the wider world (several rural villages).

Needless to say, each project carries the imprint of its designer, because the human persons making up the ERN can only let the charism of Edmund fly free when they can be themselves, within the supportive environment the ERN offers them. Naturally, they also met resistance and inertia – as did Edmund in his era. These stories are also personal journeys into living the charism of Edmund in a new world.
None of the twelve people would claim complete success, in terms of their goals, but all claim some success. They are published here to show how ecological sustainability can galvanise people within the ERN to partner Earth, support their local ecosystems, reduce their footprint, and inspire others to do likewise.

**Introducing our Animators**

- Ona Bessette
- Daniel Devicenzi
- Terry Dowling
- The Gaillard Community
- John Giacon
- Gerard Keating
- Renato Llerena
- Kevin Mascarenhas
- Anthony Mdhlongwa
- José Rozel Santa Cruz
- Steve Rocha
- Johnstone Shisanya

**Overview of the Projects**

- **Zimbabwe** — Greening a Shopping Centre in Bulawayo
- **South America** — Coordinating Earth Hour across Five Countries
- **South Africa** — Creating an Eco-Friendly Retreat Centre in Stellenbosch
- **Peru** — Doing Ecotheology in a Secondary School
- **North America** — Energising a School System to Covenant with Earth
- **Kenya** — Harvesting Rainwater in Rural Villages around Nairobi
- **Ireland** — Reducing Footprints across a Network of Communities
- **India** — Integrating Earth Hour into a School System
- **France** — Increasing Biodiversity in a Suburban Garden in Gaillard
- **Australia** — Reducing a Community’s Energy Bill in Canberra
- **Argentina** — Greening a School through Environmental Education in Buenos Aires
In South America, some of our schools were already (in 2006) beginning to 'green' their local area. Our school in Lima, Peru (Fey y Alegria 26) had started planting trees and shrubs and caring for them, on the steep barren slope above the school, linking it to the neighbouring houses. That grew into José Santa Cruz’s Ecotheology Project (see below). Another school (Colegio Cardenal Newman), in Buenos Aires Argentina, began an Environmental Education program, after attending our ERI Training in New Orleans in 2008. (That grew into another Sustainability Project. See below.)

It was Renato’s genius to coordinate the five South American countries where we have a presence into an Earth Hour Spectacular, which celebrated the achievements of so many Brothers, staff and students passionate about caring for Earth, in March 2013.
Daniel and Glennis came back from the Schools Justice Network Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, and introduced a comprehensive Environment Education program into their school – Colegio Cardenal Newman, with the help and support of many other committed staff members.

Their good energy spread to other schools such as Colegio Stella Maris in Montevideo (Uruguay), an Edmund Rice school. There they inspired an Environment Education program under the guidance of Olivier Manchoulas.

Maria Eugenia Paz (P) and Leonardo Mas (VP), asked the children to share the pledge, based on a series of activities carried out together with their teachers and pastoral instructors. As a symbol of their commitment the children were given a plant to be cared for by all the students. This will remind them of their pledge. Final words asked the children to teach their parents and elders the importance of caring for our planet and for the poor. The children's commitments varied: some promised to take care of the plants, to turn off lights, close water taps and even recycle garbage. Other promises were broader: taking care of natural resources, protecting Mother Earth, and even praying every day for God's creation and for the poor.
The St Francis Pledge

I/We Pledge to:

PRAY and reflect
on the duty to care for God’s Creation
and protect the poor and vulnerable.

LEARN about and educate others
on the causes and moral dimensions
of climate change.

ASSESS how we —
as individuals and in our families,
parishes and other affiliations —
contribute to climate change
by our own energy use, consumption, waste, etc.

ACT to change our choices
and behaviors
to reduce the ways we contribute to climate change.

ADVOCATE for Catholic principles and priorities
in climate change discussions and decisions,
especially as they impact those who are poor
and vulnerable.
José and Brother Rafael Inga have built a program which José calls Ecotheology (ecoteologia) at Fey y Alegria 26, on the arid slopes of Canto Grande in Lima. He is inviting the students to deepen their own spiritual lives by sensitive contact with the trees they are planting and caring for. The students testify that the presence of the trees has made a big impact on them and strengthened their ‘inner ecology’.
Ona Bessette

The Edmund Rice schools in the USA and Canada met in conference in New Orleans in 2011 and decided to form a Social Justice Network (SJN). This was the same conference that inspired SJN active members Daniel and Glennis (see Argentina). Ona’s job is to coordinate and encourage the schools in their fidelity to Edmund’s charism. After a second conference in Tampa, Florida, she threw them a serious challenge – the Edmund 250 Challenge.

To celebrate and deepen their commitment to the movement begun when Edmund opened his first school, in Waterford, in 1802, Ona invited each school, 250 years later, to take the ‘St Francis Pledge’. She sent them a timeline for getting started and called for resources they could use, and share, across the network.

By the start of the next school year, she had five schools already pledged. Some had developed vegetable gardens in the school grounds; others had publicised the pledge through posters, assemblies and websites; others invited in a speaker on Climate Change or included it in their curriculum. Ona also inspired 80 school student leaders that year, through their annual ACTION gathering in Florida, to champion the Earth.

It’s not easy to mobilise a whole school system especially when the schools are in a loose coalition, not a formal structure. The physicists tell us the mass of the object increases its inertia! But Edmund Rice schools are full of passionate people, both staff and students, and Ona’s message is getting through, as individuals and groups act to care for Earth.
Johnstone and his team of volunteers took time to visit several small villages around Nairobi, where drought and land degradation had reduced the chances of producing enough food for the villagers. Without pretending to be visiting experts, Johnstone’s team used a community engagement model to encourage local leadership to emerge to respond to this problem. With some sensitive facilitation, the villagers were able to install rainwater tanks and even lobby their local government to provide more tanks.

In total, they worked with five villages (Kibwezi, Siaya, Malava, Oleilaisa and Kabinjary, each with a school), one large school in Nairobi (at Embulbul) and two centres in slums (Ruben and Mukuru), both with schools. With the villagers and school students, they planted over 5,800 trees, to reduce evaporation, provide timber and firewood, increase biodiversity, enhance the beauty of their environments, and enrich the soil. Their ultimate aim was to mitigate Climate Change, caused by carbon emissions.
Anthony and his ‘Climate Champions’ (senior students) looked around their local area in Bulawayo and saw a shopping centre that was hot, dry and barren, dirty and unsightly. They moved in with young trees and planted them, creating a space that was much greener, and would soon be cooler and more pleasant to visit. The trees, in turn, attract birds and insects, and so bring the local ecosystem closer to the people.

They also planted a lawn and installed litter bins. This reduced the heat and dust, and removed much of the rubbish, by inviting the local people to cooperate in beautifying their centre. They received much well-earned publicity for their civic contribution, and they had also mitigated Climate Change by absorbing carbon dioxide through their plantings.

In all, they covered about 135 square kilometres with trees (in some cases planting a small forest!), and worked with over 200 primary and 1,300 secondary students to ensure the trees would be cared for (watering, weeding, and protecting them from stock). In all five sites, they also set up a nursery, with seedlings of useful fruit trees and indigenous tree seedlings grown from local seed.
Terry was confronted with a major challenge – to renovate a whole site and, in particular, a set of old buildings, to make the Stellenbosch Retreat and Conference Centre attractive and eco-friendly.

First, he situated the project within the District-wide eco-spirituality and sustainability program to which he was already contributing actively. This involved school leadership teams, Brothers’ communities, and young adult members of the ERN, with workshops on both the spirituality and the practical aspects of sustainability.

Then he drew up plans with an architect for a whole-site development, so the site would become a teaching example of sustainable living in harmony with Earth and the local ecosystem. This will be done in stages, as funding permits.

Thirdly, he is working on bringing together local people (especially those living in poverty), academics and environmentalists, ERN members and local churches, to use the space at Stellenbosch for courses and retreats, inspired by the new cosmology.

Within a year, Terry (and his building teams) had installed natural lighting and air flow, solar panels, filtering and recycling of grey water, recycled plastic furniture (for outdoors), recycling of wastes, a vegetable garden, and an electricity reduction program. All in twelve months!

There is already a rich synergy building between the Stellenbosch site, the Edmund Rice Network South Africa (ERNSA) Centre in Cape Town, and the Green Point Community.
Kevin’s galvanised a scattered collection of Brothers’ communities across Ireland, to reduce their ecological footprint and boost their sustainability. He began with a workshop in Cork, providentially during a blackout after a car collision brought down power lines. That accident certainly brought energy issues into focus!

In Cork, seven communities (Birr, Glasheen, Glasthule, Killarney, Mardyke House, Mount St Joseph, Old Parish) planned for a more sustainable lifestyle. Kevin collated these plans – thus making history, for nowhere else in the Edmund Rice Network had Brothers’ communities gathered to make such commitments, and shared them collectively. Most of the Brothers present were already willing to engage with reducing their ecological footprint. But, without Kevin’s energy, they would not have stepped forward and committed themselves. This shows the importance of animators.

How would the communities fare in the next stage, especially when some members were not present on the planning day? Much had to be negotiated with the others (in some cases, the majority had not been present). Everyone initiating change in a group knows of the wide range of responses that come into play, from resistance through indifference to support. Brothers’ communities have structures for negotiating (community meetings, shared prayer, meals, household roles, etc) but that does not make the negotiations any easier!

Kevin now simply collected the final plans, and left the communities to live out their commitments, offering help to allow them to monitor and evaluate their own efforts at sustainability.

Then came stage three – making changes and living the new lifestyles they had planned for themselves. Obviously, there were no fixed criteria for judging outcomes, and individual responses would have varied in strength and duration. Communities also changed as members came and went.

Finally, Kevin reviewed and summed up what had happened – the successes and failures, plus all that was learnt from such an ambitious exercise.
Steve Rocha

Steve is the Advocacy Coordinator in India, linking the Province with ERI in Geneva and New York. He thinks big, plans big, and achieves some spectacular results for human rights. Steve responded to ERI’s world-wide campaign for Earth Hour by galvanising the school students in ER Schools in India, through PRATYeK, the local NGO that trains young people in Child Rights and Earth Rights.

Each school tackled the issue in its own creative way. The students of St Josephs, Bow Bazar, in the centre of Kolkata, made a presentation to the whole school through their weekly assembly, calling on everyone to ‘turn off the lights (and other appliances)’ for Earth Hour. Then the students went out into the neighbourhood, knocking on doors, asking the local people to do the same.

This was a great exercise in community outreach and building social capital, but was not without its challenges. Apart from using their persuasive skills and background knowledge to sell the idea, the students were sometimes forced to think on the spot. A big challenge came when people said: ‘But the cricket test is on TV that night!’ Some bright students then suggested that two or three families watch the test on one TV set, and turn off the other sets for Earth Hour. And this was done!
The ERI Team (minus their New York member, Kev, who visits each year) forms the Gaillard Community. They decided to reduce their footprint by various means, and to measure this as best they could.

After a year of conscious effort, they reduced their electricity bill by €420 and water usage was down. Solar heating (of water) accounts for a third of their electricity usage. Almost all clothes washed are dried by solar or household warmth. The garbage actually collected by the local service is minimal, after rigorous recycling of glass, aluminium, paper, cardboard, PET plastics, batteries, printer ink, and larger items. Travel to work each day (20 km return) is on bicycle or public transport.

Their two compost heaps recycle all non-meat household food scraps, and are used in the gardens for enriching the soil. The local strawberries, raspberries, cherries and tomatoes, plus many herbs, all feed the community and visitors ‘in season’. Rainwater is harvested through three tanks and is used for gardening and some cleaning. Some grey water is also used on maintaining the grounds.

Biodiversity is encouraged by leaving some areas to re-generate local species; by recycling clippings and grass cuttings; by not using pesticides or fertilisers on the grounds; by installing a small pond and a meadow; and by feeding birds through the winter. Hedgehogs have now been reported in the garden, as well as wood mice, voles, bats and shrews. There has been a steady increase in the number of different birds, insects and other non-vertebrates recorded, as well as in the number of native species of shrubs and plants germinating, including a native orchid in the meadow.
John, in Canberra, lived in an energy-inefficient community house under a harsh climate (dry summers and cold winters) with low local biodiversity. But he had plenty of energy for change and he challenged the community to respond by serious investment and some changes in lifestyle. Needless to say, it took research, many meetings and much consultation and negotiation. He was well into this project when YOLS started, so it covers a 7-year period (2007–14). The results speak for themselves.

John reported, in April 2014, that carbon emissions were down by 62% in the community house and water usage had fallen by 67% over the seven years. There was an average saving per year of $7,200, and 22% return on their $33,000 investment in solar electricity panels, insulation, sealing, solar hot water, rainwater tanks, and a replacement gas heater. So the project paid for itself in five years.

By May of 2014, the net cost (in the first three months of 2014) of electricity, gas and water to the community was zero, as the solar electricity had generated enough ($615) to cover these costs.

Biodiversity was also increased, including 30% of the block planted with re-introduced local species, a frog pond with breeding populations of two species of local frogs, and at least two species of native birds breeding in the grounds.

Vegetable gardens were established and produced about $1,000 worth of produce per year, with less grass to mow and zero transport/packaging costs.

But John had energy to spare! So he undertook a more ambitious project, to try and conscientise members of the Province Leadership Team, in terms of monitoring and reviewing all province projects on their ecological impact.
This was a huge task, as there was no designated committee handling this, though it was a clearly stated Province goal, for 2007–14. It also spread over several directorates, involving as it did energy use, travel, vehicles, new buildings and renovations, maintenance of plant, and training and formation of people. John also included the leadership of EREA (the Australian ER School system) in some of his correspondence and suggestions.

Even trickier, as a grass-roots member of the Province without a designated role in the Province or EREA, John was working with no access to specific details. In this, he sets a fine example of what one passionate individual can achieve within a large multi-national system – though he largely confined his examples to Australia.

John’s research and contemporary examples of good practice produced a steady stream of communications and suggestions subsequently followed with discussions and negotiations. The topics John covered included:

- the balance between Province policies & individual sustainability initiatives
- Province policy on vehicle purchase & turnover
- recent Province building projects
- the example of EREA recording electricity consumption in schools
- energy reductions at Australian National University
- fossil fuels and cars
- the link between Edmund’s charism & care for Earth
- province-wide monitoring of our energy & ecological impact (inc staff to do this monitoring & reporting)
- emissions targets in EREA schools

A post script to John’s efforts was found in the report of the Province Bursar to the Province Chapter in June 2014. Although this document is confidential to the Chapter, it can be revealed that a page of the report detailed over fifteen contributions the Province had made to ecological sustainability. It’s safe to say John’s concerted lobbying had influenced these good practices.
Gerard courageously tackled his own workplace, and asked if it could reduce its ecological footprint. The special twist was that his workplace is the Oceania Province Centre which straddles Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Timor Leste. So, the implications for the whole province are clear: if the hub can reduce its footprint, so can all the spokes (communities, ministries, other centres).

Gerard’s professional report details his strategy and the results. The plan was for all members of the Province Centre to report their vehicle usage in litres (of fuel) and their work flight hours. Gerard converted this figures into tonnes of carbon emitted, and he added these to the carbon emitted for the running of the centre (from gas and power bills).

The (rounded) totals of those who submitted data were:

- Vehicles: 20 tonnes
- Flights: 96 tonnes
- Building: 49 tonnes
- Total: 165 tonnes

To cover those who did not provide data, Gerard added 33% so the real total is about 220 tonnes.

More importantly, he invited a team of workers to take part in what was, in effect, an ecological audit of their carbon footprint. He gained their support (over 66% participated) and they engaged in important action research. Now they can make decisions about a more sustainable workplace on the basis of some clear data.

For example, it is obvious from the summary above, that air travel was the major component of their carbon footprint. Even more importantly, the Province Leadership Team has announced to the whole Province their commitment to reducing air travel in 2014. They hope to use more of the electronic means of communication available. (Yes, such technology also has a carbon footprint, but it is much smaller than air travel.)