

Alex, your surname sounds Polish...?

I understand that Cicelsky comes from the Polish word “cieśla” which I understand is a house carpenter – Is that true? [Yes, it is!] I was born in the USA because my grandparents escaped just before WWII. I studied agriculture, welding and design before moving to Israel at the age of 22 to be a founder of Kibbutz Lotan [on the Arava Desert].

Kibbutz was founded in 1983. What was the beginning?

When we arrived there was literally nothing on the Kibbutz: one tree, only rocks and sand from horizon to horizon. We planted date trees and harvested onions, melons, corn and tomatoes using drip irrigation in the winter months that were sent to the European markets and for local consumption. In time a community grew, couples got married, children were born and today Lotan is a small town of 200 people.

How could you describe kibbutz Lotan?

We are an intentional, incoming sharing community, practicing progressive and egalitarian Judaism and are ecologically minded. We focus on respecting and empowering individuals and expanding their potentials. We aim to manage our community professionally through taking responsibility, positive interpersonal interaction and transparency. We are not an ideal society but we are committed to living according to ideals of caring for each other and striving to be healthy, active participants in this world. We celebrate life cycle rituals and holidays together in creative and artistic ways. And we spend a lot of time outdoors.

What is the most important strategy/philosophy in the kibbutz?

I would say that a central philosophical tenant is that we humans have a purpose on this planet, to be active participants in “creation” - that it’s our responsibility to meet our needs as well as to be stewards of nature, and that we, all humans, were created equally with a divine spark. That means that the strategy of community is to develop an economy and society where all people are given equal opportunity to reach their unique potential. In time we’ve learned that our actions impact nature harshly even if they were unintended and we’re considering how to continue our development without harming the environment.

Do you manage to live in harmony with the assumptions of permaculture?

Some people define permaculture as self sufficiency. We cannot be self sufficient for food production because the summer is too harsh to grow food and we do not have enough water. We have taken big strides towards producing our own electricity using solar panels but this is currently limited by government regulations and the high investment costs.

The environmental challenges are hard but the solutions we've learned are not so different than those needed in urban environments, especially now as climate change is making many cities hot both during the day and night.

It is ironic that a different definition of sustainability is what made us to choose the site we are on. We were unwilling to build Lotan on land that was part of the territorial conflicts between Israel and her neighbors. We settled on the Arava desert because basically no one wanted to live on this land and there was no question that it was Israel's.

How do you build your houses?

We realized that the prefab houses we given (and had to pay for) were very inappropriate for the climate so after many years of spending far too much money for electricity needed to cool them in the extremely hot summer days and nights, we researched the architecture and engineering solutions that would give us comfortable houses using small amounts of electricity and made from natural materials. The straw bale, geodesic framed dome houses in the EcoCampus use less than half of the energy needed to cool them compared to the standard houses and no heating is needed in the winter at all - they heat up sufficiently by sunlight shining through well insulated, south facing windows.

You do implement the permaculture on desert. Is it hard?

Yes and no. The idea of permaculture, as I see it, is to develop systems that take into account the People in the specific community, the specific site and its climate, and the resources that are available and correspond with the client's ideals. Our work has been to initiate changes that take all of these into consideration. We started recycling despite the inability of the regional authority to collect the waste so we used the non-biodegradables it for construction, paper as a fiber additive to earth plaster, and organic waste was composted. We tried out food production without any pesticides, herbicides or industrial fertilizers and found that we could build up the sand to become soil by adding compost and conserved water by covering the drip irrigation pipes with mulch. Migratory birds started flocking to the gardens and we purchased the land adjacent to the kibbutz which was abandoned sand quarry and by planting fields of alfalfa and making small pools of water it became a nature and bird reserve.

Tell me more about bird reserve and park, please.

The best time to experience the bird reserve and nature park is very early in the morning. Some of our members are professional tour guides specializing in local flora and fauna - they lead visitors into the park at daybreak when the migratory and local birds are active and then continue on to one of the last sand dunes on the Israeli side of the border (with Jordan - only meters from the Kibbutz). It's amazing to see the wide variety of animals who's tracks remain

as they traversed the dunes during the night: snakes, lizards, beetles, scorpions, owls, mice and gerbils, foxes, wolves and even hyenas. The desert appears empty at times but it is teeming with life – but it is a fragile ecosystem that depends on our protection.

Do you implement biodynamic agriculture?

Leah Zigmund, our head gardener, was a professional biodynamic gardener in West Virginia before moving to Lotan. She continued that for a while but eventually just focused on organic.

What do you produce?

We produce a variety of lettuces and spinaches, bok choy, chard, broccoli, cauliflower, sunflower, sweet potato, a variety of heritage corns, brussel sprouts, onions, edible flowers, many herbs and spices including basil, mints and anise, turnips and radishes, cactus fruits, olives, guava, mulberry, figs, dates. We were the first farm using CSA - community supported agriculture - where people purchase a season of produce and sent weekly boxes with a wide variety of vegetables to Eilat, Sde Boker and Jerusalem. Our students became producers and urban community gardens have since sprung up throughout the country so now the garden is for education, community production and supplying our Solar Tea House with fresh produce. Just today the Chief Minister of Rajasthan, his ministers and the staff of the Indian Embassy in Israel came for a vegetarian meal which they said was excellent.

Center for Creative Ecology – what is it?

The Center for Creative Ecology is our education, research and outreach institution. We offer workshops and courses from one day to a full college semester in sustainable engineering. The most popular course is our six week Green Apprenticeship course (we've had two Polish graduates to date) which is an advanced Permaculture Design course which includes many hours of hands-on experience in organic gardening, natural construction, no water sanitation, do-it-yourself structural engineering, solar cooking and community building skills.

What are you most proud of?

Our children and our students. Most of our children choose to volunteer for a year of social justice work before they have to enlist in national service. Our students do amazing work in Israel and around the globe. A few of their initiatives include: managing eco-education parks modeled after Lotan's in Palestine and Jordan, administering Permaculture courses in Palestine, community empowerment organizing in China, building a heritage performing arts center in Ghana which employs a village, building an orphanage-farm in Namibia, teaching organic farming in Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria, running a farming summer camp for city kids in Aspen Colorado, vermiculture (worm composting) education in Berkeley California, implementing gardens in schools in Cambridge MA, Idaho, New York City, teaching healthy

food cooking in the 'food desert' of Lynchburg Virginia, developing sound sanitation systems in Ecuador and Peru and producing the Free EcoGuide App for iphones and now all computers and smartphones at www.kibbutzlotan.com/ecoguide.

Can everyone join you as a volunteer?

We have limited space for volunteers. Our eco-volunteers work in the garden, site maintenance and are educators so we need for them to commit for an extended period. We prefer to select volunteers that have completed our Green Apprenticeship program so that they can participate fully in our education staff. For folk that want to come for a short stay we offer 'pay your way' opportunities - you pay for your room and board and you work/learn with us as part of the team and audit some of the classes being taught during your stay.

Thank you for the interview.