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The Attention Economy

Why scaling ecological civilisation means scaling a quality, not a structure

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We know how to build eco-communities. Across the world, thousands of them exist — functioning, learning, adapting. The knowledge is there. The prototypes are there. And yet ecological civilisation remains a horizon, not a reality.

This provocation asks why. And it proposes that the answer is not structural. It is perceptual.

The missing ingredient in the transition to ecological civilisation is not more eco-communities. It is the quality of *attention* that makes an eco-community work — and the near-total absence of that quality in the dominant culture that surrounds them.

> *"The bottleneck is not design. It is attention."*

What attention actually means

Ecological attention is the capacity to perceive what is actually present in a living system — its patterns, its rhythms, its feedback signals, its silences. It is the difference between *looking at* a landscape and *reading* it. Between being in a place and belonging to it.

This capacity is learnable. It is teachable. It has been practised and transmitted by indigenous cultures for millennia, and by ecological practitioners in the contemporary world. I personally experienced this with a close friend of mine, the indigenous community elder Sharpi Coulthard, who took me into the Australian wilderness for many days. We walked, we observed, and we talked about the dynamic relationship between all forms of animate and inanimate life. Critically, this knowledge is systematically absent from the institutions, the metrics, and the education systems that shape how the majority of humanity relates to the natural world.

The eco-community, at its best, is not primarily a housing model or a governance experiment. It is a container for the cultivation of ecological attention. That is what makes it a prototype. And that is what the wider culture urgently needs.

The metrics problem

Here is the structural expression of the attention problem: we cannot measure what we cannot see, and we cannot value what we cannot measure.

The dominant metrics of civilisation — GDP, productivity, efficiency, return on investment — are structurally blind to ecological attention. They cannot see the value of a Beijing urban planner who returns from a week crawling around a Scottish peat bog

and begins to notice the quality of light in his city. They cannot account for the knowledge held in forty years of attentive relationship with one specific place. They cannot put a price on the moment a child holds living soil for the first time and understands, in her body, that it is not dirt.

This is not incidental. It is the central design flaw of industrial civilisation: it built a measurement system that made the living world invisible, then used that system to make decisions about the living world.

A PROPOSAL

Three Threshold Metrics

Perceptual Depth. The range and richness of what a person or community notices in their immediate ecological environment.

Reciprocal Responsiveness. The degree to which a community adjusts its practices in response to ecological feedback.

Temporal Patience. The capacity to act on timescales longer than the electoral cycle, the financial quarter, or the lifetime.

These are not metrics for a spreadsheet. They are metrics for a civilisation. And they point toward a fundamentally different question than the ones our current systems ask.

> *Not: how much did we produce? But: how well did we listen?*

The question for the workstream

The eco-communities represented in this workstream have, between them, centuries of accumulated practice in cultivating ecological attention. They have learned, under real conditions, what enables it and what destroys it.

The question this provocation puts to the room is this: *how do we extract the quality of attention from the container of the eco-community, and make it transmissible to the wider world?*

Not by scaling the container. The container — a specific place, a specific community, a specific set of relationships — cannot be scaled without being destroyed. But by distilling the principles. The practices. The threshold experiences that reliably produce the shift. And by asking what institutions, programmes, tools, metrics, and stories could carry those principles into the dominant culture.

Mossdale cannot be replicated. But the crossing it offers — the threshold — can be understood. And understanding it is the first step toward making it available to a world that urgently needs to cross.