

Impact case study



Institution: Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne

Title of case study: Beyond Growth: reimagining prosperity in an age of environmental limits

SUMMARY

Dr Samuel Alexander has stimulated and informed the high-stakes public debate on a sustainable future for humanity. His research on planned economic 'degrowth' and voluntary simplicity has challenged modes of thought about sustainability and the nature of human society. He has contributed to the knowledge base for a growing grassroots movement which rejects consumerism and the pursuit of limitless economic growth. Dr Alexander's creation of a pioneering flagship community project, the Wurruk'an ecovillage in rural Victoria, has been the subject of a popular feature-length documentary.

Dr Alexander's work has a broad reach – he has affected the way people think about sustainability at the local, regional, national and international level. He has written books, articles and opinion pieces, some of which have been translated into other languages. He has spoken to a wide range of community groups and media outlets. Through this work he has taken a place at the frontier of the degrowth debate, and has become an active voice in the wider debate on how humanity can respond to – and thrive in the face of – climate change and other environmental crises.

UNDERPINNING RESEARCH

Environmental sustainability is one of the most pressing issues facing humanity today. While some argue that problems like climate change can be addressed by "greening up" capitalism and pursuing limitless economic growth, Dr Sam Alexander takes a radically different approach. His research examines how planned economic degrowth in the most developed nations is required to respond to sustainability crises.

Dr Alexander joined the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute as a Research Fellow in mid-2013. Since then he has written three books and co-edited a fourth. Most are available online on a "pay what you want" basis, which helps account for the success of his outreach.

Dr Alexander's research argues that our growth-oriented civilisation is coming up against environmental limits to growth – perhaps disastrously so. Dr Alexander calls for economic degrowth; a planned and equitable economic contraction in the richest nations. As part of this, affluent societies would learn to live – and thrive – with much less. Dr Alexander argues that rejecting consumerism and embracing "a simpler way" would not only allow humans to live within the Earth's limits, it would also help people lead happier, healthier lives. Technology alone, he argues, will not save us.

Dr Alexander developed these themes with the 2013 book *Entropia*, which imagined a fictional utopian community in



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the year 2009. With industrial civilisation having collapsed, the residents of Entropia set about crafting a simpler way of life. *Entropia* has been translated into French. Turning from the future to the past, Dr Alexander co-edited *Simple Living in History* with Dr Amanda McLeod in 2014. This examined how people have lived with less, from Aristotle and Gandhi to the modern permaculture movement.

In 2015 Dr Alexander published *Prosperous Descent*, which unpacks some of the broad theoretical underpinnings of the degrowth movement – touching on macroeconomics, ecology and sociology. In the same year he wrote *Sufficiency Economy*, laying out a strategy for a post-growth society.

Dr Alexander has also published articles in a range of respected academic journals, including *Environmental Politics*.

Inspired by *Entropia*, a Victorian landholder provided 20 acres and significant funding for Dr Alexander's action research – setting up an experimental ecovillage. With a documentary-maker on board, Dr Alexander invited ten people to live for one year in the community, which is located in Gippsland in rural Victoria and is called Wurruk'an. Residents live in tiny houses without electricity (except in the shared living space) and use composting toilets. They practice a simpler way of living based on permaculture principles, allowing each to spend less than \$100 a week.

The resulting feature-length documentary *A Simpler Way: Crisis as Opportunity*, was co-written and co-produced by Jordan Osmond from Happen Films and Dr Alexander. It was financed by an extensive crowd-funding project involving 139 donors. The launch event was sold-out. The open-access documentary has been officially selected by two international film festivals and has been viewed 155,000 times on YouTube in the four months since its release.

Building on his underpinning research and his experiences with Wurruk'an, Dr Alexander has written nine articles for *The Conversation* publication. These articles examine degrowth, the pains of consumerism, the tiny house movement, and the challenges facing ecovillages.

REFERENCES TO THE RESEARCH

Alexander, S. (2013) *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation*, Melbourne, The Simplicity Institute. ISBN-13: 978-0-9875884-0-1.

Alexander, S. (2014), 'Voluntary simplification as an alternative to collapse', *Foresight*, vol. 16, no. 6, p. 550. doi:10.1108/FS-10-2013-0057.

Alexander, S. (2014) 'Ted Trainer and the Simpler Way: A Sympathetic Critique', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 25(2), 95. doi:10.1080/10455752.2013.845589.

Alexander, S and McLeod, A. (eds) (2014) *Simple Living in History: Pioneers of the Deep Future*, Melbourne, The Simplicity Institute. ISBN-13: 978-0-9875884-9-4.

Alexander, S. (2015) *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits*, Melbourne, The Simplicity Institute. ISBN-13: 978-0-9941606-0-7.

Alexander, S., & Yacoumis, P. (2016) 'Degrowth, energy descent, and 'low-tech' living: Potential pathways for increased resilience in times of crisis', *Journal Of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.09.100.

Alexander, S. (2016) 'A prosperous descent: telling new stories as the old book closes', *Griffith Review*, vol. 52, 4-24.

DETAILS OF THE IMPACT

Dr Alexander's work has had local, regional, national and international reach. His ideas on degrowth and simpler living have informed a lively and important public debate on the future of human societies and the planet. Dr Alexander has influenced the way people think about a sustainable future, and stimulated wider public interest in these themes. The evolving, timely debate about alternatives to a pro-growth, consumerist way of living is largely a public debate, fuelled by individuals who are concerned about sustainability and society. Dr Alexander's work has added intellectual rigour to the debate. It has contributed to a knowledge base.

His work is not only a substantive critique of the growth economy, it is also normative, presenting and debating alternatives from an informed perspective. This is a direct challenge to established modes of thought about sustainability and the nature of human society.

Dr Alexander's work has permeated public debate directly, via his documentary, books, websites and speeches. The Wurruk'an ecovillage is a pioneering flagship community project with both regional and international influence - the resulting documentary has been translated into Spanish, French and Portuguese. The ecovillage project has placed Dr Alexander at the forefront of the debate around practical attempts at radical forms of sustainable living. In creating Wurruk'an, Dr Alexander has also created a model for potential adoption elsewhere. His documentary and writings provide a readily available guide.

Dr Alexander regularly speaks at community events. He is co-director of the Simplicity Institute and writes for the Simplicity Collective.

Dr Alexander was a keynote speaker at a 2015 community conference in Castlemaine, Victoria, called Local Lives Global Matters. He appeared alongside international thought leaders including Helena Norberg-Hodge and Rob Hopkins.

His work has also affected public debates indirectly, via the media – allowing Dr Alexander to reach a wider audience. He has written nine articles for *The Conversation* website. Together these have received 214,000 page views, mostly from outside Australia (21% of views are from the US). Dr Alexander's articles have been shared on Facebook more than 40,000 times and tweeted more than 1,500 times. They have been re-published by many sites including SBS and Gizmodo. Dr Alexander is ranked 19th out of more than 1000 *Conversation* authors from the University of Melbourne in terms of readership.

Dr Alexander has been interviewed by ABC Radio National and Melbourne community radio station RRR. He has appeared in Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper, *The Australian* newspaper, and *The Weekly Times*, which covers the region where the ecovillage is situated.

The notion of a 'prosperous descent' and the lessons from the Wurruk'an ecovillage were the subject of an essay Dr Alexander wrote for *The Griffith Review* in 2016. Dr Alexander appeared on a panel at the Melbourne Writers Festival to discuss his essay.

Dr Alexander has contributed to high-level academic debates about sustainable living. While he avoids flying for work due to the emissions involved, he gave a Skype presentation to a 2014 conference at the Universitat de València, Spain, themed 'De-growth, austerity and wellbeing'. His paper appeared as a peer-reviewed book chapter.

SOURCES TO CORROBORATE IMPACT

1. *A Simpler Way: Crisis as Opportunity* (2016) - full Documentary, YouTube.
2. "Life in a degrowth economy, and why you might actually enjoy it", *The Conversation*, October 2014, 71,000 page views, 18,000 Facebook shares, 758 tweets, 521 comments. Re-published on *Eco-Business* and *RenewEconomy*
3. "If everyone lived in an 'ecovillage', the Earth would still be in trouble", *The Conversation*, June 2015, 59,000 page views, 19,000 Facebook shares. Re-published on *IFLScience* and *The Ecologist*.
4. Interview with ABC Radio National *Life Matters* program, 1 October 2015.
5. Swedish author and thought leader Helena Norberg-Hodge, director of Local Futures and author of *Ancient Futures*, has provided written testimony on Dr Alexander's work
6. UK writer and activist Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition movement, author of four transition guides and handbooks, has provided written testimony on Dr Alexander's work
7. David Holmgren, environmental designer and co-originator of the permaculture concept, has provided written testimony on Dr Alexander's work
8. Dr Alexander is co-director of The Simplicity Institute, a public-facing education and research-focussed website: <http://simplicityinstitute.org/>
9. The Wurruk'an ecovillage in Gippsland, Victoria, is a small ongoing community. Regular working bees allow others to learn about the project.