

# The Power of Practice and Community: A Case Study of Environmental Living in El Bolson, Argentina

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**Abstract:** *To combat environmental problems, it is necessary to investigate and draw inspiration from people who live in environmentally friendly ways. This paper describes an environmentalist community in El Bolson, Argentina, and identifies some of the key factors that explain its success. El Bolson is well known in Latin America for being a centre for citizen driven environmental action and for environmentally friendly living. Based on anthropological fieldwork, the paper presents and analyses how the environmentalist community in El Bolson is organised, and shows how practice and community are two decisive driving forces. These driving forces can be used to inspire environmentally friendly actions elsewhere.*

**Key words:** *Anthropology; environmentally friendly living; practice; community; El Bolson, Argentina.*

## 1. Introduction

Environmental problems and the awareness thereof have increased significantly over recent decades. It is generally agreed that human activity has caused and continues to cause the most serious threat to the environment (Gore 2006, Lovelock 2006, Stern 2007). In the second half of the 20th century, private daily life consumption has increased enormously and therefore also accounts for a larger and significant part of the human impact on the environment (Durning 1992).

To address environmental problems it is thus necessary to examine the way people live their daily lives, and analyse how environmentally friendly lifestyles develop (Sitarz, 1994). Until now, most studies have focused on how to change people to engage in more environmentally friendly ways of living. The

most important studies within the field concern how emotional experiences of the environment can move people to act (Barlett 2008, Kals *et al.* 1999, Milton 2002), the influences of community-based environmental organisations on people's daily lives (Middlemiss 2011), and how economic incentives can make people live in a more environmentally friendly manner (Bicchieri 1997, O'Donoghue *et al.* 1999, Bénabou *et al.* 2006).

However, a focus on changing the way people live their daily lives tends to overlook the fact that people do not just *react*, but *act* and sometimes develop their own solutions to living in an environmentally friendly manner. Fairhead and Leach (1996) point out that there is a tendency to misunderstand cultural examples of environmental living especially in non-western contexts, when in fact these examples

are highly valuable and could serve as inspiration for developing environmentally friendly lifestyles elsewhere. For this reason, I will examine the case of El Bolson in Argentina, which is a town known throughout Latin America for an unusually high percentage of people living in environmentally friendly ways.

El Bolson constitutes an interesting example of environmentally friendly living for several reasons. Firstly, it is situated in a part of the world which has previously not received much attention with regard to environmental issues, despite being pioneer in environmental living. Secondly, the lives of the environmentalist inhabitants (understood as those who try to live in an environmentally friendly way) are substantially different from environmentally friendly living in Western Europe and the US, a fact which may suggest new solutions to an old problem. Thirdly, it poses an example of citizen driven environmental action since it developed as a local initiative rather than through government intervention.

Thus the aim of this paper is to investigate environmental living in El Bolson with a particular focus on the key factors that explain its success. To this end, I present the history, the people, the citizen driven approach to environmentally friendly living, and the daily activities of the environmentalists. I then argue that daily practices and communal activities are key factors in explaining the success of El Bolson as an environmental project.

## 2. Methodology

This study of environmental living in El Bolson is based upon empirical data collected during six months of fieldwork from January to July 2009. The fieldwork was comprised of participant observation and interviews obtained through snowball sampling. Participant observation was conducted through sharing time and space with people and participating in their activities, and in that way gaining an understanding of their way of thinking and acting through a bodily experience of participating in their lives (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2003). During the fieldwork I took part in people's everyday lives through working, cooking, sharing meals, leisure time and living with my informants. While working together I chatted with people, asked them

questions and discussed relevant topics in informal settings. I also participated in eight communal working days, several local gardening classes and four workshops about different sustainable methods of house building and gardening in order to achieve part of the knowledge, which my informants had. The method of snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint 2001) was used to select various people to accompany them in their daily work in the garden and around the house.

In order to elaborate on and supplement the data obtained from the participant observation, ten interviews with various key informants were made, drawing on Spradley's (1979) interview model. Three of the interviews were semi-structured, four were focus group interviews with three to eight participants, and the remaining three were life story interviews. The different interview models explored individual perspectives, group opinions, and life contexts, respectively. I followed a broad range of the population of El Bolson, including volunteers, farmers, teachers of sustainable methods, and old and experienced environmentalists of the community.

The historical background provided below originates primarily from local knowledge among the environmentalists, particularly the elder generation that has witnessed and participated in the development of El Bolson since the 1970s. Five additional life story interviews also provided information for the historical data. Finally, data obtained from conversations with the municipal workers in the environmental department provide an additional supplement. An investigation of local historical archives from the municipal library was used to verify the local knowledge.

The data was subsequently analysed by organising and finding patterns in the fieldwork material. The interpretation is based on theoretical discussions about the analytical levels of practice and community, which opened up the possibility for understanding the fieldwork data. The anthropological concepts used in this regard include the phenomenological concept of *skilled practice* (Ingold 2000), and the concepts of *community of interest* (Lave and Wenger 1991), *exchange* (Mauss 1990) and *collective consciousness* (Durkheim 1973). All personal data is anonymised.

### 3. Environmentalism in El Bolson

El Bolson means 'the pocket' and is named after its geographical location of a nook in the midst of high mountains. The small town is situated in the region of Patagonia right on the 42nd latitude in one of the series of valleys that run through the Andes (See Annex 1: The location of El Bolson). The nearest big city, Neuquen, is 550 km away, and the capital, Buenos Aires, is 1700 km away. The local economy based on agriculture and tourism.

The temperate climate of the area is similar to that of Northern Europe. It is characterized by four seasons with a cold winter with average temperatures between  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $7^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and warm summers with average temperatures between  $7^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $24^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The similarity in climates is reflected in the crops, as many of the environmentalists in El Bolson buy seeds from Northern Europe. The area is part of the Valdivian temperate forest ecoregion, which is separated from climatically similar areas by ocean barriers to the west and desert to the east. It is known for being a place of particular natural beauty and biodiversity. Because of this, a national park, Lago Puelo, was established at the edge of the town in 1971, and the area has been given the status of a biosphere reserve by UNESCO in 2007. However, El Bolson is particularly well-known for being the largest centre for environmental living in Argentina.

#### *Historical Background*

The environmentalism found in El Bolson dates back to the hippie movement in the 1960s and 1970s that started in San Francisco and slowly spread to the rest of the world. In the mid 1970s it reached El Bolson, which was one of few places in Argentina where the movement really gained a foothold. The hippies who came to El Bolson were mainly people from Argentina's big cities who had identified with the worldwide hippie movement. El Bolson constituted a perfect setting due to the natural beauty of the location and the high percentage of indigenous people living in the area. These two elements fitted well with the hippie values of living off the land and embracing native lifestyles. In the 1970s, the hippies founded the feria of El Bolson, which is a huge market selling diverse local products. The market has since expanded and is now being held up to three times a week. It attracts many people from the surrounding towns, and many tourists visit in the summer.

The hippie movement of El Bolson was also rooted internationally and engaged in world debates of the time such as the Vietnam war and nuclear energy. Thus El Bolson became the first and only region in Argentina that declared itself a nuclear free zone in 1984 - a claim that is still strongly emphasized today.

According to the environmentalists, the hippie movement in El Bolson slowly died out in El Bolson during the 1980s, but many of the values lived on and manifested themselves among the population, who no longer called themselves hippies but identified themselves as environmentalists. The values that lived on were particularly related to practices of organic farming, the use of alternative energy, ideas of living off the land and anti-capitalism. This transformation gained a foothold throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

At the end of the 1980s, community leaders within the group of the environmentalists started to engage with the municipality which had hitherto not taken part in the movement. Cooperation began that, in 1991, resulted in El Bolson being declared the first ecological municipality in South America. The collaboration between the community leaders and the municipality eventually ceased, but the environmentalists kept developing El Bolson as an environmental centre, and the municipality maintained its ecological status.

Since then, the development accelerated. During the 1990s, the population increased by 35.8 % (Indec 2001) which is unusually high compared to other small towns in Argentina. This population increase was partly due to immigration of people attracted to the environmentally friendly way of living, and partly due to the development of tourism.

In 1994 two of the leading people within the environmental community signed an agreement with the US based foundation Ecology Action laying the ground for establishing Centro de Investigacion y Enseñanza de Agricultura Sostenible (Ciesa) as an internationally known research center and educational demonstration garden for an organic agricultural technique called the biointensive method (Pia 2008). The American foundation funded the start-up, after which the center slowly developed its own economic resources. Ciesa's income is now based on regularly held workshops and the sale of

organic vegetables at the local market. Ciesa was the first institution in the region that developed an official volunteer programme, establishing a volunteer movement. The movement is now very popular in El Bolson and continues developing and growing. Ciesa started out housing a few volunteers, and today more than ten volunteers work full time at a time and in return receive free board and accommodation.

In 2001 a similar project called Centro de Investigación, Desarrollo y Enseñanza de Permacultura (Cidep), a research centre for permaculture, was established (Cidep 2009). Presently it is organized by a group of eight experienced permaculturists who work in the region, and it is situated on a 12 ha piece of land. Cidep also adopted the volunteer model of Ciesa, and has slowly developed a work crew of approximately 20 volunteers. Within the last ten years Cidep has expanded and presently runs several permaculture courses a year and undertakes research into composting toilets, solar heated showers, natural house construction, and organic farming methods. The garden provides approximately half of the food consumed at Cidep while the goal remains 100 % self-sufficiency. In addition to these centres there are numerous other small scale projects that have been developed throughout the last twenty years.

### ***The Environmentalists and their Organisation***

Currently there are approximately 13,000 people living in El Bolson municipality of which approximately 4,000 live in the town. The population is a mixture of descendents of early settlers, indigenous people who have lived there for generations, and a large group of newcomers. The newcomers are divided into two groups: People who have settled in the area to make their living off tourism, and the environmentalists. There is limited interaction across the different groups due to cultural differences and the secluded lifestyle of the indigenous group.

The environmentalists constitute 10-20 percent of the population in El Bolson, depending on the seasonal influx of volunteers. This may appear to be too small a percentage to label El Bolson an environmentalist community. However, I suggest that compared to average society, this is an unusually high proportion of the population. Further, what makes El Bolson remarkable is not just the percentage of environmentalists, but what these environmental-

ists do. Even though they only account for a fifth of the population, they have managed to become the most visible group in the area, and maintain the environmental reputation of the town for more than four decades. The environmentalists can be divided into two groups: The permanent residents and the volunteers.

The permanent residents have moved to the area to get away from the city and/or find a place where they can practice environmentally friendly living in the company of like-minded people. They have mainly come from other parts of Argentina and to a lesser extent from Chile and other South American countries. Most of them own smallholdings in the countryside just outside of town, where they keep an organic garden and work on constructing houses with natural materials. Others have organised themselves into groups and run the two official research centres, Cidep and Ciesa.

The volunteers come from far and near. El Bolson is a magnet for young volunteers especially in the summer, when this group more than doubles. They are mainly from different Latin American countries, but Europeans and North Americans are also represented. Most of them start working at one of the research centres that have well organised volunteer programs. However, after some time it is common that some arrange different stays with private people. In the autumn many go home, though some stay in the area for a year or two. Some also settle in El Bolson. In that respect there is no clear line between the permanent residents and the volunteers who have stayed in the area for a long time.

The environmentalists are organised in different ways. The two research centres, Ciesa and Cidep, follow their own course. Ciesa is today run by a family, whereas Cidep is run by eight organizers. Cidep meets weekly for an organizational meeting, where work programs, emerging problems and future plans are discussed. There is no official leader and all decision making is consensus based. However, the view point of the most experienced permaculturists is given greater weight than those of the lesser experienced group members.

The rest of the environmentalists are not formally organized. On communal working days, the standard procedure is that everyone meets at the beginning

of the day to plan the activities. Furthermore, lunch gatherings usually prompt discussions about work methods, potential problems and planning of future activities. The space is open for everyone to talk, although usually the host or the most experienced people initiate the discussions. Here all decision making is also based on consensus.

#### ***A Citizen Driven Environmental Project***

Despite the fact that El Bolson was designated an ecological municipality in 1991, the environmental projects are strongly citizen driven. This is due to the fact that the municipality has very few economic resources to spend on actual projects, which is a general problem in most Argentine municipalities. Furthermore, the few initiatives of the municipal department have been received with suspicion among the citizens of El Bolson, because of their mistrust toward governmental institutions. This is consistent with the fact that the level of mistrust is statistically higher in poorer countries (Putnam 2002).

The citizen driven projects are generally successful and for this reason citizen driven environmental action is also used by the municipality. An example of this was seen when the municipality in 2007 received funding from an international NGO to build a new waste dump and recycling depot outside of town. The municipality arranged with the environmentalists to take over the practical work. The environmentalists then arranged meetings with the citizens of each neighbourhood in town, informing and educating them in separating the garbage and how to communally collect the separated garbage in small recycling stations.

The citizen driven procedure has now become the standard in most environmental projects in El Bolson. It works in two ways. The municipality provides (sparse) funding and hands over the planning and the implementation part of the project to a group of environmentalists as exemplified above. Alternatively, the citizen driven environmental projects happen independently of the municipality, where private people fund a project carried out on his/her land, as it has been the case in many reforestation projects.

#### **4. Daily Activities**

Daily activities form and develop the environmental way of living in El Bolson. As one of the environmentalists stated:

*'The good life is an environmentally friendly life, which means performing everyday activities that do not cause any damage to the environment - or ideally improve the environment.'*

Through their daily activities people make a significant effort to become more and more environmentally friendly. In the following section, the four most common daily activities are discussed in detail, namely gardening work and methods, sustainable house construction, communal work days known as *mingas*, and the economic and social system known as *trueque*.

#### ***Gardening Work and Methods***

Gardening is one of the most common daily activities among the environmentalists in El Bolson. On average, people spend at least half of the day every day in the organic gardens except in winter. The garden work is centered around the use of no less than four growing methods: The biointensive method from USA, the biodynamic method from Germany, the Fukouka method from Japan, and the permaculture method from Australia<sup>1</sup>.

The biointensive method focuses on intensifying the garden yield by double digging so that the vegetable roots can grow longer (Pia 2008). The biodynamic method focuses on accommodating the practices in the garden to the cycle of the moon and the energies of the universe that are believed to influence the growth of plants (Steiner 2005). The Fukouka method implies throwing small clay balls filled with seeds in the garden and in that way imitate natural and random sowing processes (Fukouka 1978). Permaculture is a method centred around designing human settlements and agricultural systems that can be integrated into nature. It attempts to model natural ecosystems and is based on studies of pre-industrial sustainable land use (Morrow 2008).

Each of the four methods has made its way to the area independently of the others - through word of mouth, books, development programs, and people's contacts with other environmentally interested

people or environmental projects in the world. Participant observation revealed that the most common way knowledge is spread is through workshops. Every year approximately ten workshops about the different gardening methods are held. The workshops vary in duration, and last from two days and up to two weeks. They are usually arranged by one of the research centers, Cidep or Ciesa, or a group of privately organised people who have an interest in a particular gardening method. The teachers at the workshops are mostly local environmentalists affiliated with the research centers. They have many years of experience and spend a great amount of time travelling to other environmental communities in South America to teach or participate in other workshops or projects. In that way, knowledge about the different gardening methods is constantly developed and exchanged throughout the continent. At the time of my fieldwork in 2009, strong collaborative bonds were being developed between El Bolson and an upcoming environmentalist community in Brazil, where environmentalists from Brasil and El Bolson exchanged places in the summer to teach at workshops and take part in the daily work.



*In the bio-intensive gardening method it is possible to plant the vegetables closer to each other as the roots are longer due to double digging of the seed bed.*

It is also common that prominent environmentalists from outside South America teach at the workshops. At the time of my fieldwork, a greek master of the Fukouka method visited El Bolson and held a four day workshop and a public speech. Each workshop consists of a combination of theory and practical exercises. They are open to everyone and usually inexpensive.

Although different people in El Bolson favour different methods and the research centres focus on using one method, generally everyone is practising, trying out and observing a mixture of the different methods. However, everyone has their own personal preferences and different experiences applying the methods to their land.

The products that are grown in the organic gardens are similar to those in Northern Europe. Carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, beet root and onion are common. One of the most popular garden products is potatoes of which there are many varieties. This is most likely due to the fact that South America has a long tradition of growing potatoes. Fruits and berries such as apples, pears and blackberries are also typical. Cereal crops like wheat, barley and rye are grown to a lesser extent. Although the climatic conditions for growing these products are present, the narrow valley, steep mountain sides and lack of agricultural machinery present challenges to efficiency. Hence, the agricultural conditions are not exceptional and compared to the fertile Argentine lowlands, El Bolson is a marginal farm land. However, what makes El Bolson interesting is not what is grown, but the way it is grown by the people.

The activities in the garden follow the seasons. In spring the garden beds are prepared and seeds are planted. The timing is particularly important in this regard, as the planting needs to happen as early as possible, but not before the soil is free of frost. The planting also needs to be timed so that there are fresh vegetables for the longest possible period of time: Being self-sufficient is not about growing as many vegetables as possible, but growing them 'intelligently' so that different produce can be harvested throughout the year. More specifically, seeds must be planted not only in spring but also throughout summer and autumn. If tended to carefully, crops can even be grown in winter, though not as intensely. Farmers avoid frost by planting in

home-made green houses and carefully maintaining the optimum temperature. If the temperature drops below 0°C, the greenhouses are covered in blankets. During these times of year, farmers also favour the most cold-resistant plants. Some plants grow relatively well at colder temperatures, while others hardly grow at all. Practical experience and good advice from neighbours and friends usually help the environmentalists to identify the right garden products to grow. A number of informants also pointed out the importance of the garden work being carefully balanced between personal need, work load and expected output. Although the output may be small, if the labour input is equivalent, it may be undertaken. This is for example the case with the winter produce. Growing vegetables throughout the year, also contributes to economic freedom. Although the winter produce is rarely sold, it is used for household sustenance, and thus reduces costly food expenditure.



*In the Fukouka gardening method small clay balls filled with native seeds are formed by hand.*

Through the daily activity of working in the garden, people form and develop their environmentally friendly living. They do so by e.g. increasing the size of the garden, raising the percentage of self-sufficiency or intensifying the yield of the garden by changing to an agricultural method that suits the conditions of the soil in their garden better.

### ***Sustainable Construction Work***

Another common daily activity is building, renovating, and maintaining houses with natural materials, as such houses are believed to be healthier to live in. They are also a significant way of reducing the

damage of the environment by using only degradable materials. The houses are made of straw, mud, sand, wood, recycled pallets, glass and bottles. Starting with a structure of wood, the walls are constructed with pallets filled with bottles and straw. Subsequently, a thick blend of mud, straw and sand is prepared and manually applied to the walls. Applying the blend of mud in several layers is a time-consuming process that engages a lot of people at the same time. The work does not require any particular skills and everyone can join in the process which is usually considered an enjoyable task, as people get to form the walls directly with their hands. The mud walls together with the wooden pallets filled with straw and bottles make up the insulation of the house. The houses are usually heated with home-made energy efficient clay ovens. The roof is generally made out of turf, and the windows are either old car windows or locally bought windows with wooden frames. Building a house is usually a very personal project, and none of the houses look alike. According to natural construction expert Gernot Minke, the construction method fully meets modern insulation standards (Minke 2009). Knowledge about sustainable construction is likewise spread through workshops. Each year approximately five workshops are held by local as well as foreign teachers, who have specialized in sustainable construction.

Throughout the daily activity of building, renovating, and maintaining houses people form and develop their environmental living, as the sustainable construction work means better insulation for the winter and decreased energy consumption.



*Sustainable construction of houses in El Bolson implies using natural or recycled materials like mud, sand, clay, wood, straw, glass and bottles.*

### ***Mingas - Organised Communal Work Days***

Another common aspect of the regular activities is the so-called mingas. Mingas are organised communal work days held regularly, where a group of people gather on a particular person's land and help with garden or construction work. In return, the host serves food and later volunteers at other people's mingas. Some mingas are announced at short notice and only a few people turn up. However, other mingas are very well organized. A group of about 40 smallholders have made an official annual schedule of mingas where everyone has their turn. Each month several mingas are held in and around El Bolson.

The environmentalists generally described the mingas as being a popular event, where people are in high spirits. They have a good time, and at the same time they get more work done than had they worked alone. Usually the people who join have different skills, and people inspire each other, gaining inspiration which they take home and use in their own daily work. Up to several days after mingas are held, people talk about the event and share stories for the entertainment of friends and family.

### ***Trueque - an Economic and Social System***

The *trueque* system is an organized exchange system that constitutes another common daily activity. It is an alternative to money transactions and involves people gathering in local halls and exchanging home made products ranging widely from tools to clothes, labour and knowledge. There are traditions of exchange systems all over South America (Paerregaard 1997, p 98), but the trueque system in Argentina gained particular importance during the economic crisis in 2001, where people had limited access to money. At the peak of the economic crisis, 450 official trueque clubs in 20 of Argentina's 24 provinces were reported (Krauss 2001), and the number of participants were estimated at more than one million, with an annual circulation of the equivalent of 40 to 60 million US dollars (Pearson 2003, p. 219).

After the economic crisis, the trueque system slowly declined, and people returned to money transactions. However, in Patagonia where El Bolson is situated, the trueque system has retained its popularity among two groups of people: The poor people who still benefit from it economically and the environmentalists. To the environmentalists, the system has

an appeal beyond economic benefits. The system is met with great admiration, contrary to the rest of the inhabitants of El Bolson who look down upon it as the poor people's business. Several interviews indicated that the reason for its popularity is that the system facilitates recycling and thereby enabling a maximum utilization of objects, causing less environmental impact. Small scale trueques are therefore frequently arranged, and they have significant social value: Food, knowledge, tools labour, and gossip is exchanged between neighbours, friends, and work communities. Although the economic benefits of the system are rarely in focus for the environmentalists, the system is nevertheless a way of earning a living. The environmentalists rarely talk about money, but rather talk about the goods they need and what to exchange in order to acquire the needed item.

## **5. The Meaning of Daily Activities**

The daily activities of gardening work, sustainable house construction, mingas and trueques described above constitute a meaningful way of living to the environmentalists. This meaning will be analysed from an anthropological point of view below.

There are two distinct levels to the daily activities of environmentally friendly living in El Bolson. First and foremost is that of practice; people engage with the environment through the daily activities of construction and garden work. Secondly, at a community level people engage with other people in mingas and trueques. The meaning of each of these levels will be analysed in the following two sections.

Practice is in this context understood phenomenologically in order to capture the close relationship between people and the environment. It will be seen as the activities in which the environmentalists engage on a regular daily basis, which are the activities of garden work and sustainable construction. The focus will be on practice as a meaningful act of doing that involves and develops the whole person both mentally and bodily. This definition of practice is inspired by the phenomenological theory of Ingold (2000).

The concept of community will be understood as a *community of interest* in Lave and Wenger's sense of the word (1991). This means that it is a group of people who share a common interest for a particular



thing, which in the case of El Bolson is the shared interest in environmental living. Hence, community will refer to the 10-20% of the population in el Bolson who call themselves environmentalists. Different levels of interest is acknowledged within the group, and the group is considered dynamic, as new people join and experienced people move on.

***Practice: 'Trying and Observing'***

People in El Bolson engage directly with the environment through their daily practices of doing garden work and building natural houses. Throughout these daily practices the common principle which guides people's engagement with the environment is 'trying and observing'. It is a principle made explicit numerous times by various informants. As one of the informants explained:

*'We need to try the Fukouka method, some people are sceptical and don't think it'll work here because it's too cold, but Ricardo uses only Fukouka, and he says it works. I'm going to try the method in the corner of my garden to see whether it works. In the rest of the garden I'll keep using the biointensive method. That method works really well, I've seen that. It's important to think that not just one method works. We need to try different ones and then observe whether it works... try and observe...'*

This shows how 'trying and observing' is a key concept guiding people's practices and which is constantly present in their gardening and construction activities. In the garden people are trying out the different agricultural methods and subsequently observing closely how they work. Sometimes one method does not work, because of practical challenges: the soil is too sandy, birds come and eat the seeds, or they may have planted the garlic too close to each other so that they do not grow enough. If one method works well, they apply it to a larger area of the garden and distribute their new experience to neighbours and friends. Likewise the principle of 'trying and observing' is constantly present in the construction work. Blending the mud to apply on the walls requires constant sampling to see what blend fits the walls. If the blend is too runny it falls off and if it is too dry it does not stick to the walls. Because the ingredients of the blend consist of local materials of sand, clay and straw that vary in texture and usefulness, the proportions need to be adjusted each time through a process of trying

different blends and observing which one works most effectively.

The principle of 'trying and observing' suggests a particular relationship between people and the environment. Tim Ingold's phenomenological theory provides a relevant explanation of the meaning of this relationship. Ingold sees the relationship between people and the environment as an active interrelation, where the environment develops with the people at the same time as the people develop with the environment (Ingold 2000, p. 20). This two-way process is what happens in El Bolson, as people and the environment respond to each other through the continuous process of 'trying and observing'. This continuously close relationship between people and the environment also means that people develop and strengthen the meaning and value they ascribe to the environment. Thereby they come to care more about the environment (Milton 2002). However, something else also takes place at the practice level. The more people in El Bolson try and observe, the better they also become at practicing their environmentally friendly way of living. Through testing different agricultural methods on the land they manage to grow better gardens and build better natural houses, and thus improve their ability to live in an environmentally friendly manner.

It is a matter of learning through hands-on experience. This is, in Ingold's terms, a *skilled practice* that comes into being as an attentive involvement with the environment, resulting in care, judgement and dexterity for the matter (Ingold 2000, p. 291). Environmentally friendly living in El Bolson is hence a dynamic process embedded in practice. Throughout this process the value and meaning of the environment are strengthened, and the actual skills, which are needed to perform this living, develop.

***Community: Exchange Systems and Collective Consciousness***

The environmentally friendly living of El Bolson also takes place at a community level, as people frequently engage in the social activities of *mingas* and *trueques*. A distinctive property of both of these social activities is the underlying principle of exchange. The *mingas* are based on the idea that people offer their labour to other people's projects in return for receiving the same people's labour for one's own project at another time. Similarly, the

trueques are based on the principle that one gives away something one does not need in return for receiving something one does need.

The mingas and trueques are not just neutral exchanges of labour and goods, but meaningful events where people maintain and develop a strong relationship with each other. As Mauss argues, reciprocal exchange systems are not just the case of material goods getting exchanged; it is also a matter of people building up social relationships with each other through the exchange, and thus exchanging goods is the glue of society (Mauss 1990, p. 4). The exchange also strongly supports people in carrying out their environmentally friendly living and even strengthens it. The trueque system makes it possible to avoid buying new things and the mingas facilitate people helping each other and benefitting from each other's skills. Furthermore they become dependent on each other: If a group of people help one day, the person receiving the help feels an obligation to help the other people when it is their turn to be the host at the mingas. It leads to a mutual interdependence between giver and receiver, which means that although exchanges in theory are voluntary, they are de facto mandatory (Mauss 1990, p. 3). It also encourages some people to live in more environmentally friendly ways than they perhaps originally planned to: Although the environmentalists of El Bolson have certain similarities, they nevertheless practice different levels of engagement. By entering into the exchange system of the mingas and the trueque, they become woven into a network, where the level of engagement is very high, and because they are dependent on each other and feel an obligation to return what they receive, it also raises the level of activity to a high common denominator. The boundary between being part of the community and living environmentally friendly can be said to be dissolved in this way. In fact, some people in El Bolson develop their environmentally friendly living more because they are part of the community than due to an actual intention to do so. The importance of the community for living in environmentally friendly ways has been observed in other environmental projects (Kals 1999, Middlemiss 2011).

In addition to the reciprocal exchange system embedded in the social context of the mingas and the trueque, there is also the shared idea of people being together *because* of their communal interest

in the environment. People in El Bolson often state explicitly that one of their main reasons for coming to El Bolson is the wish to live with like-minded people with whom they can share their environmental interest. What is at play can be said to be a form of what Durkheim terms *collective consciousness*, which refers to a shared belief system that unifies people (Durkheim 1973, p. 135). In this way the relationship between the community and the environmentally friendly living is dialectical. On the one hand people join the community *because* of their environmentally friendly living, and on the other hand their environmentally friendly living develops *because* they are part of the community.

## 6. Conclusion - Environmentalism in El Bolson

It has been shown that environmentalism in El Bolson relies on two factors: Practice and community. Firstly, adopting an environmentally friendly living is a dynamic process embedded in practice. It is through practice that people form a meaningful relationship with the environment and strengthen their sense of care for the environment. It is also through practice that people develop the skills needed to perform their environmentalism, as people do not automatically know *how* to live environmentally friendly, but learn by doing. Secondly, the environmentalists are unified by a collective attempt to develop their environmentally friendly lives, and their environmentally friendly way of living develops as an integral part of the communal exchange system. The community has a powerful effect because people entering the community are drawn into an upward spiral, where they inspire, help and commit themselves to each other to develop their environmentally friendly way of living. In this way being a social person automatically involves being an environmentally friendly person. Thus, practice and community are two decisive driving forces of the environmental living in El Bolson.

Furthermore, practice and community are not separate entities. They are connected to each other since practice is not just an individual affair, but performed and developed in communal settings like the mingas. In addition, when practice is communal it becomes a positive experience that people enjoy taking part in. The community is likewise embedded in practice since the collective consciousness

is unified around the practices of gardening and construction work.

Environmental behaviour is often explained on the basis of rational choice theory that presents behaviour as a result of people's knowledge and attitudes. According to this theory, it is knowledge, economic advantage and rational choices that determine individual behaviour (Bicchieri 1997). The present study of El Bolson, on the other hand, suggests that promoting environmental behaviour does not come from changing people's attitudes, but from bringing people to engage practically and communally in environmental ways of living. People do not come to El Bolson out of economic or for rational grounds, but they do so to experience environmentalism in practice and be part of an environmentalist community, and what is just as important is that *because* they practice environmentalism and are part of the community their environmentally friendly living develops. In this way, El Bolson can serve as a source of inspiration for promoting environmentally friendly living and strengthen citizen driven projects elsewhere. We need to develop practices and new social dynamics that engage people directly in environmentally friendly living.

## Notes

1 These methods are also used in many other places of the world, although among minority farming groups rather than commercial farmers. By comparison, the ecological food production as it is known in Denmark and Europe is simply based on not using pesticides and chemical fertilizers. The four methods found in El Bolson can be said to be developments of the general ecological food production. So far it has only happened at a small-scale, and thus is still rather unknown.

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## Annex 1: The Location of El Bolson



*The red arrow on the map marks the location of El Bolson (Esri, NAVTEQ)*