

Building a New Society, One Book at a Time

by John Ivanko and Lisa Kivirist

excerpted from *ECOpreneur*: Putting Purpose and the Planet Before Profits

The publisher of *ECOpreneur*, New Society Publishers, sits on a western Canadian island so remote we have yet to find it on the map. Their network of designers, editors and artists are linked together seamlessly through the Internet. Co-Publishers Chris and Judith Plant live on Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada. They state their earth mission as: "Working towards living in community within the gifts and limitations of a particular place. This 'bioregional' view of the world is one that never fails to inspire us."

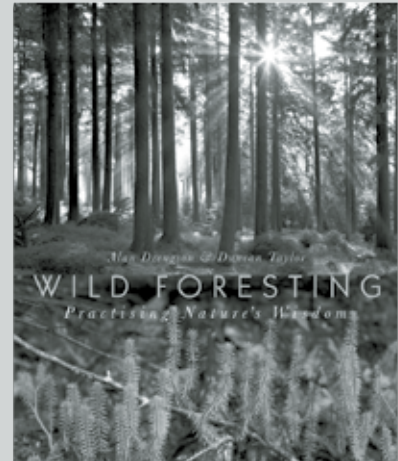
Chris and Judith Plant have long been the visionary beacons for one of the most progressive and forward-thinking publishers on the planet. Their New Society Publishers has emerged as the leading activist publisher, walking the talk their books advocate. More than 25 new titles a year contribute in fundamental ways to building an ecologically sustainable and just society, and do so with the least possible impact on the environment. Besides printing all their books devoted to various sustainability topics on 100 percent post-consumer-waste, recycled, ancient-forest-friendly paper since 2001, they're the first North American publisher to be carbon neutral, recognizing that climate change can be solved through more responsible business practices.

"Publishing was the means by which we could act as a catalyst, help many people to bring their ideas and experiences to an increasingly wider audience," explains Judith Plant, who shares the publisher responsibilities with her husband, Chris Plant. They started in the publishing industry as the publishers of both *The New Catalyst*, a bioregional journal addressing local issues from the context of global environmental and social justice movements, and Judith's first book, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, published by New Society Publishers, then a non-profit collective based in Philadelphia under the umbrella of the movement for a new society.

After time together with the Nisga'a First Nations peoples of Northern British Columbia, Chris and Judith and their three children joined an intentional community in the southern interior of British Columbia in the early 1980s. During this time they published *The New Catalyst* while living off-grid, growing most of their own food and home-schooling their children. With the opportunity to partner with their friends and colleagues at New Society Publishers in Philadelphia and technology being what it was in 1989, Chris and Judith made the decision to move to Gabriola Island, one of the beautiful Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia,



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where they could plug into the grid allowing for fax machines, telephone lines – all necessary to the publishing industry and unavailable from their remote mountain commune. On Gabriola Island, they planted some seeds of their own on ten acres that would change their impact on both the peaceful small community and planet forever. In 1996, thanks to the financial backing of an angel investor who cared as much about the bioregional and sustainability movements as they did, they purchased the world rights for the existing titles from New Society Publishers in Philadelphia that at the time was planning to shutter their operations. Sharing their values and vision, they recreated a model for what the publishing industry could be; by 2001 they were publishing books without cutting down a single new tree for paper.

Chris and Judith formed a new limited liability company, keeping the New Society Publishers name but shifting its publishing focus from non-violent social change to sustainability themes that now include conscientious commerce, ecological design, environment and the economy, education and parenting, gardening and cooking, globalization, natural building, peak oil and renewable energy. Most books are published primarily for the North American market, with 80 percent of their total sales coming from the United States, though distribution includes the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

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telecommunications, the company — while proudly dedicated to the local community (the company is one of the larger employers on an island of 4,000 people) — fosters creative working relationships with ten employees and numerous subcontractors who serve as editors, proofreaders, layout artists and cover designers, many of whom work from home offices scattered throughout North America. Technology, mindfully applied, has allowed New Society Publishers to cultivate an interconnected collaboration of dispersed creative individuals. “We have adopted this structure because it allows people to work in the midst of their ongoing lives. Families first, work second,” explains Judith, reflecting on one of the original priorities she and Chris set forth when first recreating New Society Publishers. Their staff receives six weeks paid vacation and extended healthcare benefits as well as bonuses whenever possible.

“As partners in life and business, our relationship has had to succeed in terms of mutual respect and trust,” adds Judith about working with her husband. She’s quick to point out that they do work in separate offices. “This gives us space, a precious commodity for those who do everything together,” she happily beams. While Judith and Chris shoulder the financial and administrative aspects of the business, they extend numerous decision-making responsibilities for the business and book project development to their creative staff who share their values and commitment to the planet.

By going carbon neutral and printing on ancient-forest friendly, post-consumer recycled paper, New Society Publishers continues to change with the changing times. Many titles are now offered in electronic book form. Such commitment to social and ecological values boosts New Society Publishers’ bottom line. “These initiatives have given us, our staff and our authors confidence that a difference can be made and that there is some sort of honor in the world of business,” shares Judith, relating to their company’s carbon-neutral operations and use of recycled paper for their books.

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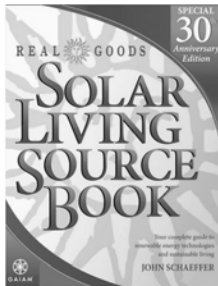
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Real Goods Solar Living Source Book 30th Anniversary Edition, by John Schaeffer (New Society Publishers): This is the ultimate guide to renewable energy, sustainable living, green building, homesteading, off-the-grid living, and alternative transportation, written by experts with decades of experience. This fully updated edition includes brand new sections on Peak Oil, Climate Change, Relocalization, Natural Burial, Biodynamics and Permaculture. It also contains the latest product listings.



Green Building Products, edited by Alex Wilson and Mark Piepkorn (New Society Publishers): *Green Building Products* contains descriptions and manufacturer contact information for more than 1,400 environmentally preferable products and materials. All phases of residential construction, from sitework to flooring to renewable energy, are covered. Products are grouped by function, and each chapter begins with a discussion of key environmental considerations, and what to look for in a green product.

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Unlike those of larger publishing houses, New Society Publishers' more than 150 authors play a central role in bringing each book to market, providing input and direction on the cover and design of their books, while initiating their own marketing efforts. "We feel that each book project is like a birthing process with many midwives along the way, but the 'baby' is the author's, New Society Publishers is the agent." Their authors are driven by their passion for change, not royalties.

Sidestepping anything that resembles retirement for these activist entrepreneurs, Chris and Judith intend to foster the continued growth and evolution of the company, continuing to turn over the day-to-day operations to seasoned staffers who have been with the company for years — and who are also their neighbors. They've rededicated themselves to reaching out to both their local community, through donations to their Community Kitchen that provides food to area residents, and those who might struggle to find Gabriola on a globe by heading to Green Festivals and renewable energy and sustainable living fairs, sustainability conference and green expos. They're constantly taking the pulse of the planet, shepherding new books that improve the health and well-being of all life on Earth.

"We're keeping the channels of communication open between New Society Publishers and the various movements for social and environmental change, responding to the issues of the day by building up the list with books that put tools into people's hands to truly build a more just and sustainable world," says Judith.

New Society is also the publisher of The New Village Green by the editors of Green Living Journal.



My definition of an expert in any field is a person who knows enough about what's really going on to be scared.

—PJ Plauger