

# Community Living:

## What's the point?

Christobel Munson begins the first of a series of articles about the pros and cons of community living, and the different options available

In Byron Shire, there are at least 37 existing Multiple Occupancy (M.O.) communities. In the Lismore Shire, there are about 64.

Since it's a hell of a lot simpler to buy a single block and build your house on it alone — without the complications that happen when there are others involved

— why is it that so many people have decided to live in communities?

Recent years have surfaced the 'Sea-Change' type aspirations of so many people yearning to return to a slower, easier way of life, complete with the organic and/or permaculture garden, a nice Steiner school for the kids, and a bit of alternative energy like solar power for the phone and internet connection, and maybe a mudbrick house.

A variation of this return to the simple life is the dream for many of us to leave the anonymity of the cities, to live instead where there is interaction with others in small rural communities, where you are seen for who you are, and your efforts, life and work is acknowledged by those around you, and your very existence counts for something.

More and more people are showing up in the Byron Shire looking for something more 'alternate' than what's on offer in other coastal towns along our eastern seaboard. With surveys showing 30% of Australia's population are likely to live somewhere between Coffs Harbour and the Gold Coast in coming decades, heaps of them are heading our way.

For the ones hoping to live on some sort of community, what are the choices?

### How it's been

Many local M.O. communities began 10 to 20 years ago when there were no alternative legal structures available for people wanting to share land.

Often they were formed by people with a dream to live a certain way on their shared land. A motivating force behind some was a desire to repair the environment. For others, there was a need to find the cheapest way to build a home. Perhaps the inspiration was a common belief in a particular spiritual path.

Following the 'cheaper by the dozen' principle, the community benefits from sharing the costs of land, environmental repair or farming.

A M.O. means that a number of people have the legal right to establish a community with several households, that number determined by the size of the land. In Byron Shire, you're allowed to apply for one house per each 3ha.

The land is usually owned communally through a tenants-in-common agreement, a partnership or a company. Ideally, the set-up cost on an M.O. is cheaper than Torrens Title structure.

### Envro feature

The community is responsible for providing houses with services like water and electricity. This inspired companies like the Rainbow Power company in Nimbin, which provides alternate power, (not necessarily cheaper than mainstream supplies.)

Early communities in Byron Shire bought land cheaply that was too steep for farming. Hilly and overgrown, it was also a challenge to build houses. People experimented with alternative buildings and social structures. For all its ground-breaking value, there were lots of downsides with the M.O. set-up:

- Houses were often badly sited on inaccessible but dreamy locations, needing expensive roads to be built to reach them (and pricey maintenance after heavy rains.)

- Community facilities, like halls or roads, often took a long time coming, people being initially pre-occupied with building their own houses, and after that, too tired to care.

- Often communities didn't bother to set up a community-operated land management plan, and only some people ever turned up at working bees.

- When few people ended up doing most of the work, or only those in work had the money to provide for projects like the community hall or road, resentments surfaced.

- Not all communities had a clear statement of its aims, residents' responsibilities, or a process for dispute settlement.

### How it is now

Everyone knows, or has heard of someone who put down \$5,000 with a few friends and ended up with 100 acres in the hills outside Mullum or in Goonengerry, planted a few tee pees and caravans, and voila: paradise on earth.

With prices the way they are now (up 130% in the last three years alone, according to the NSW Valuer General), it's nuts to think that sort of deal is possible today.

Meanwhile, not only have Byron land and building prices been quietly skyrocketing, there's also been change in the ways it's possible to set up a community.

Where not even 10 years ago, the only way to go was Multiple Occupancy, now an intending community has the option to establish a Community Title, long the stuff of dreams.

*(Stay tuned for the next exciting instalment of Days of our Community Life, which will outline the pros and cons of Community Titles.)*

*Christobel Munson is a founding member of the Jindibah Community, outside Bangalow.*



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