

EcoNet: the Ecology Network

by J. Scott Christianson and Dan Wendling

A recent survey conducted by Golin/Harris Communications reported that approximately three fourths of Americans believe the government should make environmental protection a priority, even if it means slower economic growth. A majority of the people polled want the government to take "serious action" against polluters, even if it means closing down some factories and the loss of jobs in their own communities.

No longer an alternative or radical viewpoint, environmentalism is beginning to change our lives and our world view. The online world is also changing out of concern for our common habitat. Many BBSes now carry environmental conferences and echoes. And some BBSes are devoted solely to environmental topics (see *Boardwatch*, November 1991). Online environmental communities can be found on large commercial services such as CompuServe (Outdoors Forum, Good Earth Forum), America Online (Environment Club, National Geographic Online), and the WELL (Environment). This article explores EcoNet, a service devoted solely to environmental conferences and topics.

EcoNet is a fairly large system. The software and hardware have changed several times since EcoNet was first started in 1984 on four Apple computers. EcoNet now operates on a Sun SPARCstation II with 64 megs of RAM and 3.5 Gigs of hard drive storage.

Usually a system of this size is operated for one main reason: money. Not so with EcoNet; it is strictly non-profit. In fact, EcoNet is just one of many networks administered by the Institute for Global Communications (IGC), a non-profit corporation that develops low-cost access to computer networking for activists outside the United States, especially in non-industrialized and Southern Hemisphere countries.

Econet Users

Currently EcoNet has over 3,500 subscribers and is growing by about 200 users per month. A recent article in *World Watch* magazine commented on EcoNet's size: "Given the size of the United States, this may appear to be a fairly small group, but it is one with considerable leverage. More than 60 percent of EcoNet's members are organizations or individuals representing organizations. Indeed, EcoNet's online phone directory, which gives the names and addresses of all of its users, reads like an bibliography of the American environmental movement."

EcoNet users come from diverse backgrounds. Some, like Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute, are well-known environmental researchers who are working to create a sustainable society in which everyone on the planet can live. Others, like members of Earth First!, are known for their preservationist attitudes and for the militant tactics they often employ.

The common denominator of this online community is that these environmental activists have realized that if they want to be as successful as the industries and Political Action Committees (PACs) that they lobby against, they need to be more sophisticated in networking and organizing people for their cause.

Many organizations have established private conferences on EcoNet. These conferences are available only to the members or officers of that particular group. For example, the EcoNet newsletter reports: "The Green Party of California (GPOC) has been coordinating some of its organizing efforts online. GPOC uses private electronic conferences to iron out some of its internal disagreements rather than devote limited and infrequent face to face meeting time to this necessary but not so pleasant part of developing a party. The low cost of a state-wide meeting taking place online doesn't come close to what they'd have to pay for long-distance telephone rates or even a general mailing."

Cost

Because EcoNet is not in the money-making business, connecting to this service is relatively cheap. Besides an initial fee of \$15, a subscription to EcoNet costs \$10 per month, which includes one hour of off-peak time. Access to EcoNet via SprintNet costs \$10 per hour for peak-time (7am-6pm), while off-peak time (6pm-7am) costs only \$5. EcoNet can also be accessed through the Internet (via Telnet) for only \$3 an hour, off-peak or on! Users can also call EcoNet directly in Menlo Park, California, for \$3 per hour (anytime) plus phone charges.

FEATURES

The EcoNet interface is very basic and offers 3 main functions: Mail, Conference and Database. EcoNet doesn't offer any graphic menus, although the capability exists, and all the command prompts are on a single line. The user manual explains: "If IGC adopted a multi-line or graphic menu of commands for all users, the US subscribers would only see a tiny increase in cost. For overseas users, the cost could increase enormously, since they pay according to the number of lines of text sent via a Packet Switching System."

EcoNet is well connected to other networks. In addition to the mail linkages that result from connections to Internet (including connections to Fido, CompuServe, America Online, MCI Mail, the WELL, etc.), EcoNet users can send mail to GlasNet (a computer network in the Commonwealth of Independent States, formerly the Soviet Union), Padisnet (the Pan African Documentation Centre Network) and several other networks.

A new feature of EcoNet allows users to send faxes and telexes while online. Using this feature, an EcoNet user can read a bulletin about the newest clean water legislation, type a letter to his/her Senator or Representative while online and then immediately fax it to Congress. A typed letter can be in a congressperson's office fifteen minutes after a constituent reads a legislative bulletin!

An EcoNet user from Venezuela explains how he uses EcoNet's telex abilities: "Telex service here requires a three minute minimum for sending to Cuba and Uruguay. To make matters worse, it sometimes takes more than a week to get a telex connection to Cuba from Caracas. Now I send short one minute telexes (through EcoNet's telex service). It is a paradox to go through a US service to get better connections to Cuba!"

EcoNet's growing list of online databases includes: UN NPPA, a United Nations list of National Parks and Protected Areas; Harbinger File, a directory of citizen groups, government agencies and environmental education programs concerned with California environmental issues; DEER, the Directory of Environmental Education Resources; RG-Energy, energy cost analysis system sponsored by Real Goods; Events, a searchable calendar of events posted by IGC users; and EPA, bibliographic citations compiled by the US Environmental Protection Agency library network. All of these databases are accessible without additional charges.

EcoNet's power lies in its enormous number of conferences. Over 500 EcoNet conferences are available, as well as over 300 related conferences from other networks, including UseNet and other IGC networks (PeaceNet, HomeoNet and ConflictNet).

EcoNet users can create a "visit list" of their favorite conferences. This handy feature allows people to type in a list of the conferences they are interested in only once, instead of each time they log on. After setting up this list, users can select "v" and the computer will transfer them to the first conference in their visit list. When they want to move on, selecting "v" again will move them to the next conference in the list until all the conferences on the list have been visited.

EcoNet's online conferences have become an extremely valuable tool for environmentalists. For instance, EcoNet was used to coordinate and plan the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that was held last June. Jean-Claude Faby, director of the New York UNCED office, told reporters before the meeting that the best way to stay informed about UNCED was to "Use EcoNet."

Held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, UNCED was the largest United Nations conference in history. EcoNet has over 30 conferences pertaining to UNCED. Most of these were used by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to prepare for UNCED. Most of the official UNCED documents are available from EcoNet in several different languages (English, Spanish, French and Portuguese).

One of the most impressive UNCED documents posted on EcoNet is the Rio Declaration. This declaration is a set of goals and objectives for building a sustainable society; a sustainable society is able to support its people without sacrificing the resources that future generations will need to live healthy lives. This idea is expressed in the familiar saying, "We do not inherit the land from our parents, we borrow it from our children." The Rio Declaration recognizes that all humans are "entitled to a healthy and productive life" and that countries have a "right to develop." (Unfortunately, it will, of course, take much more than a well-worded declaration for our global society to become sustainable.)

EcoNet is the home to many online environmental newsletters. Online newsletters include: The Energy and Climate Information Exchange (ECIX) newsletter; Develop Net

News—Online News and Views on Technology Transfer in International Development; and TIEMPO, a Bulletin on Global Warming and the Third World.

EcoNet has been experimenting with publishing daily newsletters from international conferences. EcoNet volunteers or staff attending a conference write a short newsletter after each day's meetings. This newsletter is immediately transmitted to EcoNet and other networks. People on the network get blow-by-blow reports from meetings that aren't in the news everyday. An important advantage of this type of meeting coverage is that people who read the daily newsletters and decide that their viewpoints are not being represented by their country's emissary can fax or telex a message to him or her, before the next day's set of meetings. Last year, this technique was implemented during the third meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention of Climate Change in Geneva, Switzerland.

Global Link

Global Link is an offline mail reader for EcoNet written by David Mansey-Kano (EcoNet id: dkano). Global Link is more than just an offline mail reader, it is also a text editor and a communications program. A nice feature of this program is that conference and mail indices are maintained on your computer, so files can be selected for downloading prior to connecting to EcoNet. And, as with any offline mail-reader, it's not only easier to use, but can also save you money in connect charges. Global Link is available for the shareware fee of \$50 and runs on IBM compatible computers.

FTP

EcoNet offers free access to selected files via ftp (file transfer protocol) to anyone with Internet access (anonymous ftp to igc.org). These files include several newsletters and the UNCED documents (in the pub/UNCED directory).

More information

For information on EcoNet contact: EcoNet, Institute for Global Communications, 18 De Boom St., San Francisco, CA 94107. If you would like more information about online

environmental resources, download the Guide to Online Resources for the Conservationist, by Dan Wendling and J. Scott Christianson, from The Coin of the Realm BBS at (301) 585-6697. There is also an excellent book on this topic: *EcoLinking: Everyone's Guide to Online Environmental Information* written by Don Rittner (Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 1992, 352 pages).

J. Scott Christianson is a Research Specialist at the Mason Institute of Ophthalmology in Columbia, Missouri, and writes an environmental column for the local newspaper. Dan Wendling lives in the Washington, DC, area and is the SysOp of the Coin of the Realm BBS: Tools for Knowledgeworkers in Research, Writing and Publishing, and a member of the Capital Area SysOps Association. ■