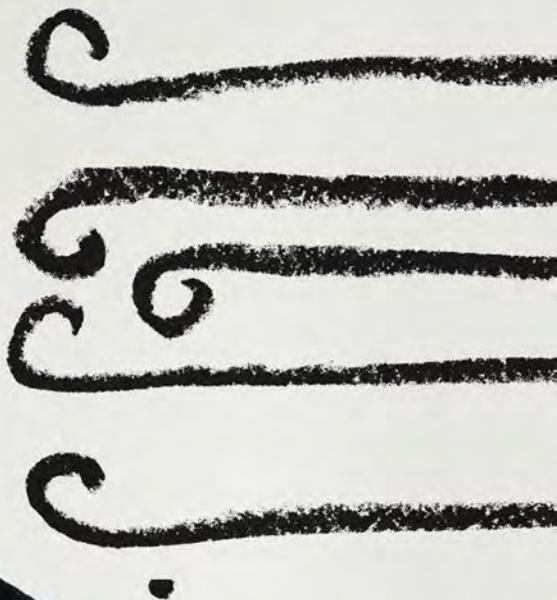


eco  
STUDIO



MALCOLM RANDS  
**ECOMAN**

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FROM A GARAGE IN NORTHLAND  
TO A PIONEERING GLOBAL BRAND

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## CHAPTER 1

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# THE DREAM BEGINS

**I**n the early summer of 1984 I walked with three friends up a dirt track that wound four kilometres back from the Northland coast, deep into a valley whose scrubby farmland hillsides rose gently to meet a neighbouring reserve of native forest. Our footsteps broke the air into pieces, but if we stopped and held our breath, a heavy warm silence enclosed us, broken only by birdcalls.

We walked right to the back of the block of land — ‘up the gully’ was how Brian Clements, the farmer selling us the property, described it. Little streams wriggled down from the native reserve, feeding a wider stream that meandered along the foot of the valley. All of us could feel it rising in our chests: *We love this place*. It was what we’d been looking for. It would be our turangawaewae, our place to stand. This was where we would build our lives.

I moved onto the land in 1985 with those friends and soon was joined by my girlfriend, Melanie. For the first year or two we didn't have a house, but we camped in tents and caravans and cooked over an open fire. It was quite a romantic time of our lives. We were making our dream real.

Eventually we built six houses at the head of this 150-acre block of land — six houses that cluster together to form a living community that we call Mamaki. We call it an ecovillage because our whole project has been developed along the ideas of permaculture — looking after the land, looking after our neighbours.

As a group, we liked to set ourselves challenges. We knew that the water trickling onto our land from the neighbouring reserve was some of the purest water on the planet, and so we said to ourselves: 'Let's try and make sure that the water leaving our land is as pure as the water coming into it.' We were quite smug about our ability to do that. Our land practices were pretty good. We were all organic gardeners. We were opposed to the use of pesticides and fungicides and artificial fertilisers — so we were pretty sure that there wasn't going to be a problem. We were full of hubris — 'we'll show the cow cockies how to do it!'

But then we realised: what about the water coming out of our houses? We'd need to be mindful of that as well, because in the end what leaves our homes will end up in the waterways, down into the water table and in local streams. We went and looked at the bottles of products we used to wash our homes and our bodies — the dishwashing liquids, laundry detergents, shampoos, conditioners, soaps and moisturisers which were just all the usual supermarket products — and we were horrified. The chemicals we were using inside our homes were actually *worse* than the stuff we'd been campaigning against on the land. They were inside our houses, all over our bodies.

What was even worse was it had been almost impossible to find out what ingredients were in the household cleaners. The manufacturers didn't have to put anything on the labels, and they didn't even have to test the chemicals they used. It's still that way today. It's like the wild Wild West of chemicals. We realised that if we were to keep using these products, they would damage the quality of

the water and the land on which we were living.

With the body products — soaps, hair products and moisturisers — the manufacturers do have to put the ingredients on the label, but the names are so complicated that no one knows what's going on anyhow, especially back in those days before the internet.

It was our light-bulb moment. We — 'we' at this point becomes our family not the whole village — became aware there was a huge problem. Looking around to see if there were any alternatives, we found some in tiny, ma-and-pa-type operations. And of course we did the whole white-vinegar-baking-soda-borax thing, but that was never wholly satisfactory. And none of the alternatives were easy to get or easy to use, and borax has turned out to be quite toxic.

We were a couple of intelligent, curious people. If it was hard for us to do our basic household tasks without damaging the environment, it must be hard for other people, too. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that if *we* were interested in this and were trying to find solutions, wasn't it likely that the whole world would be interested in this one day? I started to think that maybe I could put together a business which could specialise in these sorts of products. Because these things are important to us every day. They are basics.

That was the birth of ecostore. Our company grew out of this genuine desire to make it easy and pleasurable to clean our own house and bodies, without risk to the environment, or to our health. ecostore's roots are in the clean soils of Mamaki, but these days its branches are in your local supermarket because that's where most of us do our shopping.

We asked a friend to bring over his digger, and we set about creating a warehouse space under our house. ecostore began life as a mail-order business, and we started collecting together products that we thought were the very best for a green and healthy lifestyle. As I worked I could hear my daughters running around the house above my head. Melanie worked late into the night, writing personal notes to our early customers. This was always a family affair.

We soon began to get letters from our customers — we've had literally thousands over the years — saying that since using our products their eczema had cleared up, they didn't sneeze any more

when they were cleaning the house, their rash had gone away, their asthma was getting better.

That was the big breakthrough, and another light-bulb went on for us. We realised that not only were petrochemical cleaners bad for the environment, but they were also bad for human health. So almost from the very beginning this became a key part of our business and it still drives us today.

The United Nations Environmental Programme estimates that around 80,000 chemicals are in common use throughout the world, with 1000 new ones being developed every year. No mandatory testing is required for these products before they are sold, and you don't necessarily know from looking at a bottle what's in it because the manufacturers of cleaning products are not required to list any ingredients on the label. Legislation simply hasn't kept up with chemical development, and now, long after these chemicals have been made available for everyday use, links are being made between some of these chemicals and health concerns like hormone disruption, allergies, asthma and even cancer. The jury's still out on the safety of chemicals like triclosan, parabens, sodium lauryl sulfate, and cocamidopropyl betaine, all of which are used in many everyday household products.

It's a hugely complicated and complex area, so our attitude is: rather than wait for conclusive scientific proof that such chemicals can harm us (by which time it may be too late anyway), we use the precautionary principle — *if there's ever any doubt about the safety of an ingredient, we'll find a safer one.*

It's been an incredible 20-year journey. We've moved the business to Auckland; we now employ one of the country's leading formulation chemists, Sir Ray Avery, to work with our own scientist, Huia Iti, and to lead the team developing our product formulas; we manufacture our own range in a factory that has the highest environmental certification of any factory in Australasia.

And our customers can now buy our products in the easiest way possible — simply by picking them off the supermarket shelf and popping them into their trolley. Our products are easy to spot. In their white bottles with Deborah and Mark Smith's black-and-white photography or gorgeous, whimsical John Reynolds artwork on the

labels, they are an oasis of calm among the fluorescent scream of the multinational cleaning products.

Growing so that we are in supermarkets in New Zealand and also in Australia has been a vital part of our strategy. We want to make a difference for people and for the planet. Obviously the supermarket is where most people buy their dishwashing liquid. I would never advise anyone to sell dishwashing liquid by mail order — it's just wrong. Maybe one in a thousand would buy that way; I was grateful to the people who bought dishwashing liquid by mail order, but always interested in the other 999.

But the other vital thing about ecostore was that it was never just a business that was going to make a lot of money for its owners. It is a *vehicle*: it is the fundraising arm of my not-for-profit organisation, Fairground Foundation, so it has to generate enough profit to seed projects that will help make a better future for us all.

Our business is based in Auckland now, and we are reaching out into the world. We are already in nearly 2000 outlets in Australia, and thousands more in the USA, Hong Kong and Singapore. We're poised for expansion into other Asian markets. Not bad for a couple of hippies from Northland.

But Mamaki is still the home of our heart, and Melanie and I go there as often as possible, with our grown-up daughters joining us when they can. I'm sitting here now as I work on this book. There has been rain after a long summer drought and the world outside my front door is green and gold and steaming. The dark green leaves of the puriri tree, under which Melanie and I got married, gleam, and the voices of chickens and people rise on the warm air. Neighbours have just dropped in for a chat — Bryan and Solange, two of my original partners in setting up this village nearly 30 years ago. Another more recent partner, Klaus, who has been here 10 years, has brought us a beautiful bunch of bananas and a paper bag filled with the most earthily fragrant mushrooms. That's how we do things here. We are still just as committed — if not even more so — to the ideals with which we set up this village: active neighbouring, and care for the land we live on.

This is the knowledge and the life that we drew on to bring ecostore into the world. I think it's an amazing story — and hopefully it will inspire others.

'We can all make a difference in the world.'



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## CHAPTER 2

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# LIFE AT THE ECOVILLAGE

**M**amaki means ‘spirit of the fertilising waters’, and it is a name that has been very auspicious — everyone who comes here seems to end up having babies soon after!

We moved on to the land in 1985, and for the first two years the three households camped at Mamaki in the summer, and in the winter moved down to Matapouri and rented a cheap bach. There still wasn’t a road up there and any rain made it wet, muddy and impassable.

Our first daughter, Ahi, was born in 1987 — she was to have been the first home birth in Northland, but due to complications the midwife transferred us to Whangarei Hospital; and our second daughter Keva was born in 1990 at home in the village itself.

This was a golden time as our village began to take shape.