

My Visit to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction about my reason for visiting Dancing Rabbit

Hoping to discover the simple life in a sustainable utopia, I visited a few ecovillages over the years, starting with my visit to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage (DR for short) during the summer of 2012. Ecovillages are intentional communities with a focus on ecological sustainability. Having been interested in sustainability and alternative lifestyles for some time while working in technology companies, I initially thought about becoming a farmer and volunteered at a few organic farms until I realized how difficult farming is. I shifted my focus to looking for sustainable communities and learned about DR on the Internet. DR is an ecovillage in Rutledge, MO that set itself apart from the mainstream by locally generating electricity from renewable sources, using composting toilets, building houses with natural materials, reducing fossil fuel consumption, and focusing on forming a close-knit community. For a period of two weeks from June 25th to July 9th of 2012, I lived at DR to participate in its visitor program for prospective residents. As a part of the program, we also visited Sandhill Farm, a small income-sharing community in the same town for a day. Immediately after my two-week visit, I stayed for two days in DR's sister village Red Earth Farms. In September of 2015, I visited two more ecovillages, spending one week at Earthaven Ecovillage in Black Mountain, NC and just one day at Sirius Community.

While the visit to various ecovillages showed me inspiring ways to re-design our neighborhoods and our day-to-day lives, I also realized that the simple life is not so simple, and starting newsustainable villages from scratch is an impractical solution on a massive scale. Since I stayed at Dancing Rabbit the longest out of the four ecovillages I visited, I decided to write an essay about it. Another reason for focusing on DR over other ecovillages is that I had the most favorable impression of DR out of all the ecovillages I visited. I occasionally talk about in other ecovillages in this essay to compare them against Dancing Rabbit.

Chapter 2. A Quick Overview of Dancing Rabbit

Dancing Rabbit is an ecovillage located on the outskirts of Rutledge, a tiny town in a rural part of northeast Missouri. The main town center of Rutledge is about two miles away from DR and had 109 people according to the town sign when I visited DR. DR itself had about 55 members and residents - these two roles have some distinct differences explained in "Becoming a Member" section - and 15 children, so the total added up to 70. I also counted about 20 visitors and wexers, or work exchangers. Work exchangers provided labor to the host families in exchange for free food and lodging. While the population of DR sounded small, it seemed to be one of the largest and oldest surviving ecovillages in the United States based on my quick research.

In 1997, a group of idealistic people, many from the West Coast, founded Dancing Rabbit as an ecovillage to explore more sustainable ways of living. They were looking for a place with inexpensive real estate and other conditions suitable to starting an intentional community, and Rutledge was a good fit. What helped the move was that Sandhill Farm, another intentional community, was already established a few miles away.

DR is composed of multiple legal entities, including the educational nonprofit arm and DR Land Trust. DR Land Trust owns about 277 acres of real estate with four acres of it more heavily developed as the main part of the town. The rest of the land consists of undeveloped prairies, forests, a large swimming pond, and 20 acres that got opened up for farming in 2012 before my visit.

Chapter 3. Infrastructure and Zoning

The interesting infrastructure feature at DR, which would turn out to be a common feature in all ecovillages I visited except for Red Earth Farms, was the common house. The common house at DR was a large, multi-purpose building with plastered straw bale walls. People used the large living room for meetings, activities, and dining. The bathroom area had multiple composting toilets, two showers, and a few energy-efficient laundry machines but no dryers. People dried all their clothes in the sun using clotheslines.

For intentional communities, a central community building where people can easily get together on a daily basis is essential in order to facilitate communication and coordination. It also serves as a no-cost social space with a roof, which is a refreshing departure from mainstream communities that tend to only have commercial third places like cafes. While most cities have libraries as third places free and open to the public, the main function of libraries is quiet learning and research, not social interaction. Experiencing the common house at ecovillages made me wonder how practical it would be to implement such places in mainstream cities.

The common house had some deficiencies that hinted at DR's slow group decision-making process. Despite the village being about 15 years-old by 2012, the common house did not have thermal curtains while pretty much all individual homes did. Many people I met at DR said that changes can happen very slowly at DR. It seemed more accurate to say people were fast at making decisions on individual matters but slow on group matters. Since the common house was very uncomfortable during hot weather, many people without a permanent home, mostly new residents, visitors, and work exchangers, went to the bar at the Milkweed Mercantile, the swimming pond, or Zimmerman's general store in Rutledge town center.

Rutledge and the surrounding areas had enough infrastructure for basic goods and services. The town center of Rutledge, about two miles away from DR, had an impressive general store named Zimmerman's, or Zimmy's, as it was affectionately called. The store had a small cafe that sold burgers and ice cream. People from DR would come to Zimmy's and spend a few hours just chatting and enjoying the cool AC breeze. About 12 miles away from DR was a bigger town named Memphis, equipped with a supermarket, a library, a department store, and even a local theater company.

DR had relatively dense zoning for a rural town where some buildings were as close as 5 yards from each other. Houses tended to have small yards suitable for gardening while lacking a driveway following the DR's ban on using automobiles within the village. DR's town structure was based on what members called the "European model": Homes were clustered together in a dense central area while a large area of farmland surrounded the central area. This structure allowed for more frequent social interaction and cooperation at the expense of not being able to constantly monitor the farmland.

Not content with this model, a group of former members formed the sister village of Red Earth Farms about a mile from DR. Former members who wanted to focus more on homesteading

structured Red Earth Farms based on what they called the “American model” - each individual house was surrounded by a large ring of farmland, which allowed each household a direct view and access to the farmland. At the time of my visit, Red Earth Farms had what I remember to be four households. Rather than having a more strict ecological covenant like Dancing Rabbit, Red Earth held annual ecological audits to see how they were doing and what they could do better next year. Similar to DR, Red Earth Farms also had a central parking lot at the edge of the village, but it had no central common house. The houses were so spread out that it took several minutes to walk from the central parking lot to the nearest house while at DR, it took only a minute or so to walk from the parking lot to the nearest house. Although DR and Red Earth Farms were technically two separate sister villages, they often functioned as one with villagers frequently visiting each other. People from Red Earth Farms would often walk for a mile to come to DR community events. The following is a conceptual diagram showing the town layouts of DR and Red Earth Farms.

