My Two-Week Stay at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

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Chapter 1. Introduction

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 (https://www.dancingrabbit.org/) during the summer of 2012. I will refer to Dancing Rabbit as DR for short for the rest of the document. 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 the Becoming a Member *(page 5)* 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 loedging. 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. The Visitor Experience

To be considered for the visitor program, I contacted Dancing Rabbit about six weeks before the first day of my visit and went back and forth, answering emails and filling out a questionnaire. When I was finally accepted, I submitted the fee to finalize my decision. I was living in New Jersey at the same, so while I could have flown in and arranged for a ride to DR, I decided to take the time and drive from New Jersey to Missouri so that I could see other parts of the country. After the visitors including myself parked ours cars in the central parking lot near the edge of the town, we walked on a short gravel path which lead us to the village courtyard where the host, a male DR member in his 20s, greeted us. The courtyard was a small grassy yard with picnic tables. The large common house, the Milkweed Mercantile Eco-Inn, and Skyhouse, a house owned by a sub-group, surrounded the courtyard. After an orientation, the host lead us to a campground with wooden pallets set up as tent platforms. The visitors pitched the tents they brought on the platforms. The Missouri summer heat made staying in the tents rather tortuous even when we pitched our tents in the shade. Our DR host brought us tarps to pitch over the tent for extra protection from the sun, which did help a lot.

The first week's schedule was composed mostly of formal workshops and tours. People gave an overview on what it was like to live at DR, finances, people dynamics, etc. We got to learn about permaculture from a member who was an experienced designer. A member gave us a lengthy tour of the outer properties of DR, which was very scenic yet riddled with chiggers and ticks. Much of DR land was wide and flat prairies with tall plants but not too many trees.

Touring the wild and undeveloped property made me realize that nature is not made for humans. Air conditioning and clean concrete buildings give us the illusion that natural threats that cause us harm and discomfort no longer exist, but after being in a rural village where the temperature reached over 100 F and the unpaved roads were full of ticks and poisonous plants, I realized that those threats were still very much real. A few days after my visit, while taking a shower at a motel, I felt a bump on my neck. It turned out to be a tick which had become engorged with my blood.

During the second week, we had some more workshops, but the focus shifted more onto hands-on work parties where we got to help people with building their natural homes and gardening tasks. Our afternoons and evenings were mostly free, so people got to participate in whatever events were going on. Some typical morning and evening events included yoga, meditation, song circle, and dancing. During one evening, a couple who had filmed their one-year quest to find the ideal intentional community did a free showing of their documentary.

One particularly memorable part of the second week was helping a member with his garden after he had given us a tour of his farm. This member was a very skilled farmer and artist who was working on some serious agricultural projects. He had started a vineyard and an orchard with some free-roaming goats on the outskirts of the village while maintaining a sizable garden near his house within the village center.

In one work-party experience that initially seemed gross but turned out to be okay, I helped plaster a member's house with earth plaster based on the member's favorite recipe - earth, sand, water, and

aged cow poop. I was nervous about odor and pathogens, but the aging process had neutralized both concerns. The whole process turned out to be messy but interesting and odor-free.

Visitors got to observe the regular Sunday meetings, called "week in preview," which frankly were long and boring. People went around in circles, coordinating projects and announcing next week's events. With 50 residents and members, the meeting took more than an hour. I could see the length of the meeting becoming a problem with additional members. After the meeting was over, we participated in cleanup of the common house.

During more serious meetings for making community-wide decisions, DR employed a consensus-based system. Consensus as DR interpreted it did not imply full agreement, just consent. DR members emphasized that in a properly functioning consensus system, each participant should dissent at most only two or three times in his or her lifetime. If people were frequently dissenting, it implied that the system was not working properly. As my visit was short, I did not get to observe the consensus system in action.

Chapter 4. Becoming a member

After the end of our visitor program, we had time to reflect on our visit and figure out where to go from there. We were not under any pressure to make a decision right then. We were given a long period - six months, if I remember correctly - in which we could make the decision to apply as residents at DR. *Residents are akin to exploring members in other intentional communities.* Before visitors can become full-fledged Members, they must first live in DR as residents. Those who did not apply in the six-month timeframe would need to participate in the visitor program again to apply for residency. Some people felt strong enough to apply pretty much right then while others were not so sure. One lady in the program wanted to move to DR but felt she had to work a little more to build up enough savings.

Not all who applied passed the approval process to become residents. Current members and residents of Dancing Rabbit participated in this selection process, which DR people emphasized was a relatively low-key process. After at least six months and at most two years of living as residents, residents could apply to become members, thus making a long-term commitment to live at DR.

While residents and members shared many similarities, members had more significant responsibilities and privileges, most notable of them being required monthly dues, not being allowed to own private vehicles, and having the right to build permanent buildings on DR land leased for 99 years.

There was another route to starting the membership process at DR besides coming in as a visitor: Coming in as a work exchanger, commonly called wexer. Wexers were hosted by individual members at DR. In exchange for shelter - usually be a simple tent site -, food, and all basic expenses at DR such as water and power, wexers would work a set amount of hours per week for their hosts. Wexers did not receive money in many cases. Some of the wexers I talked to felt they were putting in a lot of effort for small compensation.

To summarize the membership process at DR, it would look ilke this:

1. Visitors or Wexers, which stand for.
2. Residents akin to exploring members in other communities.
3. Members who are akin to full members in other communities. They have the right to build and own housing on DR land.

Chapter 5. 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.

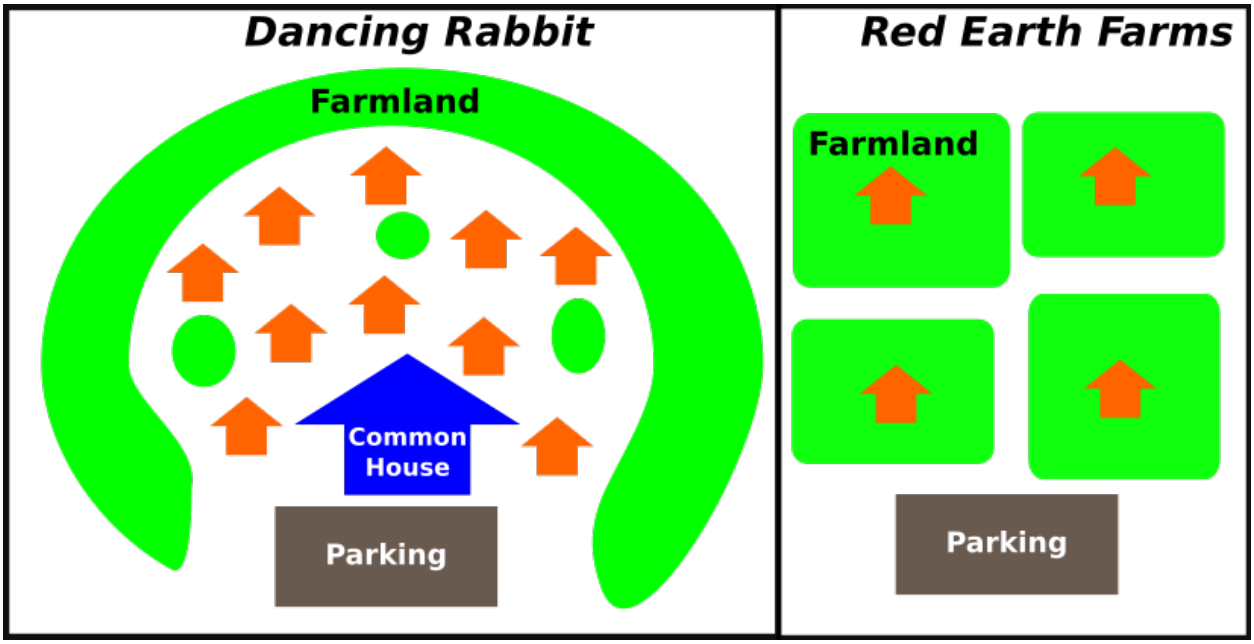
For intentional communities, a central community building where people can easily get together on a daily basis is essential in order to facilitate communication and coordination. It also serves as a no-cost social space with a roof, which is a refreshing departure from mainstream communities that tend 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. DR's discouragement of using cars presented some challenges for people finding employment in other towns too far to go by foot or bike. More details are discussed in the Transportation section. *(page 8)*

Not content with this model, a group of former members formed the sister village of Red Earth Farms (http://redearthfarms.org/) 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.



Chapter 6. Transportation

My favorite aspect of Dancing Rabbit was its high walkability, made possible by the close proximity of buildings, ban on motor vehicles inside the village, and a central parking lot at the edge of the town. Since the village roads were designed for people and human-powered vehicles, they were only as wide as a single-car lane. Adults and children could safely run around the town without worries of getting hit by a car. The high walkability allowed for more spontaneous interactions between villagers. Due to the close proximity of buildings to each other, going from one place to another often took five minutes or less. On one occasion where a truck needed to deliver a large load of straw bales to use as insulation for a house being built, the people at DR were flexible enough to allow the truck to come through.

DR's commitment to reducing dependency on the automobile was not without challenges. While residents still exploring membership are allowed to own personal vehicles, once they become full members, they must surrender their personal automobiles and only use shared automobiles as a part of their ecological covenant. Since DR was located in a very remote part of Missouri, this requirement severely limited the members' work options. A resident who worked as a nurse would commute for several miles each way to get to her workplace. Other members and residents saw this inequality as a source of tension.

After visiting Dancing Rabbit, other ecovillages I visited later sometimes felt like automobile-dependent mainstream suburbs. Earthaven Ecovillage, which I visited in 2015, was the opposite of DR when it came to transportation and street planning. Many early members of Earthaven opted to build homes far away from each other to enjoy the isolation, some being more than a mile away from the common house. One member explained that many members regretted the decision due to the distance making it difficult for people to socialize on a regular basis or help each other. Earthaven had narrow unpaved roads with no separate sidewalks, meaning pedestrians had to be very alert to avoid cars zooming down the road. Serious car-related accidents have happened at Earthaven. I honestly felt disappointed by the lack of foresight in an aspiring ecovillage that at times felt more dangerous than a car-dependent mainstream city with proper sidewalks. I wanted to enjoy walking around the village without worrying about getting hit by a car, which was not a concern at Dancing Rabbit.

Chapter 7. Energy

The buildings at DR were powered by solar cells and mini wind generators. The original ecological covenant of DR required the community to be off-grid. Some time before my visit, it had made one major change by connecting to the local power grid. It still retained the spirit of the covenant by planning to put back twice more power to the grid than what it took in.

These renewable power generation methods had some weakness. The most noticeable problem with the wind generators was their high noise level. The ones at DR were about 30-feet high with propellers that were about 2-feet wide. These are only my estimates based on memory. The propellers made high-pitched whines during times of heavy wind, including at night, which I found to be very distracting. The solar cells, while being dead quiet, had one long-term problem: The lifetime of the solar cells and the attached battery systems are only about 20 years.

Since the homes were very well-insulated, people could stay relatively comfortable inside homes without using active cooling from ACs. For generating heat during the cold Missouri winter, people often resorted to burning wood, which creates problems with air quaility according to the members.

Chapter 8. Housing and Buildings

DR was located in an area with no strict building code requirements, so people were free to experiment with all kinds of materials and techniques. That turned out to be a double-edged sword based on what I saw. Many of the older homes were poorly built in terms of waterproofing and insulation, so the owners of these homes were working hard to retrofit them. The owners either built the homes themselves or bought them from the previous owner, inheriting their problems. I heard some horror stories of poor design, but I will leave them out.

Many houses at DR used 18 inch-wide strawbales as insulation and mud or other natural materials for the walls. Thermal curtains placed in windows provided additional insulation against the hot summer sun and winter heat loss. Skilled builders would angle the houses' awnings to block the summer sunlight when the sun is at its highest while allowing sunlight during the colder seasons when the sun is lower. Some houses used vinyl sidings, which seems an odd choice for an ecovillage. A member who is a builder explained that the ecological covenant has some shortcomings in requiring wood sidings to come from sustainable sources but has no clear requirements for other material types. Based on my first-hand experience, the homes had impressive insulation performance against the hot Missouri summer weather. When the visitors toured some of the homes in 90 F to 100 F weather, the homes stayed comfortable, if not cool, without using AC or fans.

Housing was where the main difference between being a member and a resident came into play. DR members had the right to build their own houses or buy existing ones that were available for sale. Residents could only rent houses, but could not own or build them. Since housing was in short supply at DR, only a few lucky residents managed to rent old buildings from members. Most residents ended up renting undeveloped land and living in temporary dwellings like tents or yurts.

Interestingly, members and residents could lease land from DR Land Trust, but they could not own any portion of the land. That meant even when members were building their own houses on DR land, they were leasing the land, not buying it for permanent ownership. This arrangement had the potential to create problems when members decided to depart DR for whatever reason. I did not pry too much into this topic during my visit, but in all the cases I had heard of, members who were leaving DR managed to sell their houses to other members. From a more cautious perspective, members who decide to invest their money into building permanent homes at DR should accept the possibility of losing money since the market for the homes are limited to DR residents and members.

Based on my rough estimate, most of the houses I saw at DR were less than 800 sqft, with some of them being as small as 200 sqft and a few being over 1000 sqft. Most of them were built with either natural materials or salvaged materials. I saw lots of variety - converted school buses, grain bins, cob (an ancient building material composed of sand, clay, and straw), straw bale with earth plaster, timber frame, and so on. Many members built their homes with their own hands using 18-inch wide straw bales from local farms to for insulation and load-bearing structure. After the straw bales were stacked like bricks to form walls, builders would coat them with plaster or earth plaster for water protection.

Looking at the intriguing homes at DR gave me an idea about schools offering mandatory courses on building shelters. Schools nowadays focus too much on teaching abstract knowledge while neglecting more practical and physical skills such as auto repair, home building, cooking, gardening, financial responsibility, and sewing. I wonder how society would change if education shifts more to teach these tangible skills.

Chapter 9. Water and Sanitation

Adjusting to the water at DR was a huge challenge for me. The water at times had a funny taste to it, and I suffered extensive stomach problems throughout my entire two-week stay. Based on the taste of the water, I think it was more than my body adjusting to the water.

DR only had composting toilets as far as I know. As visitors, we got to use the composting toilets in the common house and outhouses scattered throughout the village. I am a fan of composting toilets, assuming they are implemented well. Compared to septic systems and centralized sewage plants, well-designed composting toilets can be much simpler, safer, and cheaper. The problem with the toilets at the DR common house was that they were not suitable for large-scale use as they had to be emptied often.

The toilets were based on Joe Jenkins's system as explained in his book, *The Humanure Manual*. The toilets were regular plastic buckets stored inside wooden boxes with toilet lids on them. Before using it for the first time and after each use, we would add sawdust to mask the odor, absorb moisture, and increase the carbon content. Once the buckets had become full, the content would be dumped at a separate composting site.

While the Jenkins toilets were easy to implement and use, they started becoming problematic with heavy use. The smell tended to be strong and with many visitors and wexers using them, they required almost daily emptying. Some wexers opted to empty the toilets into a composting pit at the bottom of a hill in exchange for some money since their work exchange arrangements often did not provide any income. The Jenkins toilets would work well for a small family, but not for a large community of 70+ people. A more effective long-term solution would have been in-situ (in-place) composting toilets with venting pipes. Private homes at DR had in-situ composting toilets with almost no odor. This discrepancy was another possible demonstration of financial challenges and shortcomings of group behavior at DR.

Chapter 10. Food

Contrary to the common stereotype that ecology-focused intentional communities are food self-sufficient, all ecovillages I visted were very far from achieving the ideal. DR had several kitchen co-ops where people pay a monthly fee to share the cost of eating. Usually, it was around $7 per person per day. Food co-ops would mail-order grains, oils, dairy, and meats from organic providers in bulk. Most people at DR took care of their food needs primarily through these food co-ops. Sunflower was the main co-op at the common house, which was open to everyone while other co-ops were exclusive. The other co-ops had their own separate kitchens, and candidates had to build a rapport with the existing members to be accepted into the coop.

DR visitor program participants were assigned to a strict eating schedule where they rotated through five different kitchen co-ops. The taste of the food I had at DR was a complete gamble depending on who was cooking. Some meals were amazing while some meals had much to be desired. Most of the food I got at DR during the visitor program was vegan, which I had no problems with as I eat a lot of vegan food at home, but some dishes were simply not very flavorful. Since the cooks had to accommodate all diet restrictions of the visitors, the food was often reduced to the lowest common denominator: vegetables and beans. We once got to enjoy a meal of raw kale salad and unseasoned boiled kidney beans. Since members and residents eat at their own kitchens or their own co-ops, their diet would not be so restrictive. To be fair, we enjoyed some awesome dishes like vegan curry, baked potatoes with sour cream and bacon, and barbecued meats from a massive party. After finishing our food, we composted all leftover food and waste, including meat and inedible parts. DR people emphasized being careful with water use while washing dishes. Some actually leaked their plate thoroughly after they finished eating so that they would use less water when cleaning the dishes.

Gardening for vegetables was very popular at DR, but very few people grew more calorie-dense food sources such as grains, fruits, beans, and nuts. A few members had just started an intensive agricultural project involving food forests and livestocks. While the animals were happily established on the land, it would probably take at least five years from 2012 for the nut and fruit trees to produce food.

Chapter 11. Economy

Generating income while living at DR was a big challenge for many people due to DR's remote location. It was a common problem I would observe at other ecovillages since they were usually located in economically and socially isolated rural areas with inexpensive real estate that allowed for experimentation. DR was an income-independent community, meaning that members did not share their income with other members except for full members paying 2% of their income as a maintenance fee. The system was different from income-sharing intentional communities such as Twin Oaks in Virginia and DR's own neighbor, Sandhill Farm, that put all members' income into a pool and distributed it evenly among the members. At DR, people got to keep most of what they earned, in exchange for the challenge of being fully responsible for their own living expenses in an economically-limited environment.

Most people at DR did not have conventional full-time office jobs because such jobs were simply not available in the area unless they were willing to travel 10 miles or more in each direction. DR's ecological covenant allowed full members to only use shared vehicles, which was expensive and impractical for commuting long-distances. Since residents were allowed to own cars, some residents were commuting long-distance to go to their jobs in nearby cities and towns.

Some people at DR did not have to worry about income as much since they were retirees who were well-off coming in. Among the remaining majority who had to work for income, some popular options were working online or living outside the community for a part of the year to build up enough savings for the rest of the year. The term for temporarily living outside was called "off-farm." The off-farmers tended to hold seasonal jobs in tourism, agriculture, construction, etc. Some people worked as consultants and would go outside the community whenever a project became available. One member was working for a non-profit remotely. He had to fly out a few times a year for the job.

It was possible for DR people to support themselves with income from working only a part of the year due to the extremely low cost of living at DR. Based on the up-to-date finance chart on the DR website I saw in 2012, you could live at DR for as low as $3000-$4000 a year, and even less if you grew your own food. Having said that, deciding to build a house on DR land after becoming a member would still be a big financial challenge for many people. It could cost from $3000 for a very simple DIY home using salvaged materials up to $50,000 for a nice home built by experienced builders. The construction could take as short as six months to a few years.

The village had a limited number of local businesses, so not all members could earn their income from them. The most notable local business was the Milkweed Mercantile Eco-Inn, an inn and a tavern right in the heart of DR. It was owned and operated by a couple who had been members at DR for several years. A member who was a skilled natural home builder got a lot of business from other members who needed housing. Some members also got paid to run an informal preschool for the children there. A female member was struggling to start a general store. Her main challenge was a lack of capital.

As DR produced very little material goods and food on its own, people were very dependent on online shopping. I observed UPS trucks coming in almost everyday. One member bashfully commented, "If the Internet goes down, we would be in trouble."

Chapter 12. Relationships

It became obvious over the course of two weeks that not everybody at DR got along. I realized I will likely clash with some of the people at DR should I end up living there. During my first day, I already had a run-in with a long-time member who dismissed my interest in yurts as stupid and went into an angry rant. He criticized yurts for not being well-insulated. When I suggested to him that Mongolians have been using yurts (or more accurately, ger) for a long time in an environment with hot summers and cold winters, he said that just because something is old does not mean it works well. His concerns were valid, but the way he presented them came off as rude and militant. This incident happened five minutes after I had met him.

Since people were living together in a close-knit community and sharing limited resources, conflicts would inevitably arise. One evening, a member angrily complained about the swimming pond being closed off due to the mens group using it to perform a ceremony. He had just worked extensively on his house, so his body was coated in mud. He wanted to take a dip in the pond to clean himself off, but was unable to do so. He ended up using the shower at the common house, leaving a muddy mess, which then upset people coming in to use the shower.

For being a small community, people at DR had a lot of variety in terms of personality and lifestyles. At the risk of oversimplifying, here are some of the different traits I noticed during my visit: relaxed, aggressive, monogamous, polyamorous, mystics, engineers. I personally found the mystical bent of some people at DR to be a bit uncomfortable. If I were to live there, the difference is something I would need to embrace. During my visit, many female members and residents were into Enneagram of Personality. A father expressed his frustration with this trend behind closed doors. He noted that in such a small community, there is a tendency for people to group think and trends can spread quickly.

One memorable incident with a mystic made me feel briefly like I was in a different world. An openly queer female wexer spread her palms over a watermelon and did some kind of energy-giving/ blessing ritual. Her hands were shaking visibly from the effort.

On the opposite end of the mystical spectrum, I met a quiet married man in his 40's at Skyhouse. He was peeling carrots as he explained that he and his wife moved here after having lived in Twin Oaks for a while. His wife was working as a nurse while he was mostly staying in the village helping with chores. He later let it slip that he used to work as a researcher for NASA.

Not everybody at DR ended up staying there forever. People would leave for various reasons - personal conflicts, wanting to try new things, no longer in line with the vision, economic difficulties. One of the most common reasons for departure I witnessed was romantic breakups. Following a breakup, depending on how bad it was, one half of a couple would leave DR while the other half would stay.

Some people had trouble finding partners after they had moved in, which was another source of frustration that could contribute to people leaving. As a part of the open Q&A session between visitors and members, a visitor asked members what they wish they had brought when they moved to Dancing Rabbit. A large male resident with a burly beard said, without any hint of humor,

"A girlfriend." My impression prior to visting ecovillages was that in smaller and more isolated communities, everybody would have an easy time pairing up due to the lack of choices. I shifted my thinking as I observed cases of a few people taking most of the spoils.

I suspect the small size and the isolated location are the some of the main deterrents that kept new people from joining Dancing Rabbit. In such a small community, I feared that personal conflicts could magnify and people could at times feel like they could not retreat into their own peaceful place. There was a catch-22 in that the small size makes people hesitant to join, but people not joining keeps the community small, contrary to DR's vision of growing into a larger community of about 500 people.

Growth and expansion were hot topics during my visit. Since consensus system starts to break down in large groups, a large community needs to either adopt a modified consensus system composed of representatives or divide itself into smaller and highly independent units if it wishes to maintain a practical consensus-based system. People at DR were often discussing the proposal for a bigger common house and the need to update DR's consensus system.

An ominous vision I got during my visit was that due to DR's slow decision-making process, the community would have already gotten too big and too problematic by the time it had come up with an effective solution for expansion with everyone's consent. As an example, remember the problems I saw with the common house's humanure system and lack of thermal curtains, which had been that way for years.

Chapter 13. Conclusion

DR was set apart from the mainstream in many ways, and the mainstream could definitely benefit from studying it. What impressed me the most about DR was its car-free village design which made it safer, healthier, more sustainable, and much more social. The well-insulated homes that managed to stay cool without AC demonstrated that with proper design, passive temperature control is possible even in hot weather. Despite having had a lot of positive experiences at DR, I ultimately decided not to move there. Visiting DR helped me realize that the term, "simple life," which people often use to describe rural life is a misnomer. Instead of externalizing many complexities and discomforts of life using specialization, technology, and corporations, the people at DR had internalized them using their owns bodies, skills, knowledge, and social connections. Composting your own food and bodily waste, a task people in the mainstream would never do, were daily tasks at DR. Most DR members built their own homes by hand and maintained their own power system, skills most people in the mainstream do not have.

The people at DR were tough. I do not think they chose this lifestyle because it was altogether easier. Many people at DR had past lives working as successful corporate employees in urban environments. They could have stayed with the mainstream, dealing with long commutes through urban sprawl, wondering when they should buy a new car/phone/TV, paying mortgages on a nice air-conditioned home, and visiting hot new restaurants during the weekends. The people at DR had given up the stresses and comforts of their past lives for a challenging life in the country, experiencing physical, financial, and social challenges that came with working to create a more sustainable rural village.

I realized my motivation did not exactly line up with the tougher reality at DR. I was looking for a more leisurely life by living at an ecovillage. The visit suggested that living at DR was a complex mixture of leisure and challenges. Sure, people would take slow afternoon swims in the pond, but they would also work hard with their own hands to build homes and struggle to meet their financial needs. I jumped in hoping for a utopia, but I sensed that people were not always completely happy. There is a lot of stress and work involved in keeping a small intentional community together. I got the feeling some of the residents and members themselves envisioned a paradise and were feeling discontent with the messy reality.

Having had a brief but real taste of living at a sustainability-focused rural community, I was not sure if I had the right combination of energy and mindset to develop social bonds, learn new skills, build a house, pursue my interests, and live a sustainable lifestyle in a potentially isolating village of about 70 people. I anticipated the social aspect to be one of the most challenging parts of living at DR. I did not completely click with the people, and as described before, clashed with some. Another big deterrent for me joining DR was financial challenges. I felt I did not have enough money to take the risk. I also had no idea what kind of work I would be doing to generate income since I was only used to doing very specialized work in large corporations.

After some traveling and relaxing following my visit to DR, I ended up returning to work for corporate IT. The pull of Dancing Rabbit was not strong enough during my visit to make me want to pick up everything and move there, but the experience increased the sense of doubt I had about my

mainstream lifestyle. Soon after returning to work, I got a bike and started biking more frequently. I had been composting food waste before my visit, and the experience made me stick with the practice. I also continued saving money in hope of being able to make a radical move when the time arrives.

The main takeaway from my visit to DR was that for our society to become more sustainable on a massive level, changes need to start where we are, not by building new villages in remote areas of the country away from already developed cities. As problematic as mainstream cities can be with crumbling roads, sprawl, low walkability, unaffordable housing, etc, their infrastructure, density, culture, and methods of production still have tremendous value. All the ecovillages, including DR, still depended on the outside world for essential supplies, services, and economic opportunities. The near-daily UPS shipments arriving at DR and people going off-farm for seasonal work acknowledged that dependency. Not only is it impossible for all of us to leave our cities and create new sustainable cities from scratch, leaving our cities entails giving up both their problems and strengths.

To clarify, the people at DR never insisted that everyone should pack up their bags and move to ecovillages. They viewed DR as an experimental village that would demonstrate sustainable concepts and practices to the greater world. A more realistic and practical vision would be for mainstream cities and idealistic ecovillages to exist in symbiosis, learning from each other and sharing their resources. I continue to wonder how mainstream cities would function if they adopted aspects of DR I found to be positive and innovative such as car-free neighborhoods, composting toilets, and multi-purpose community buildings.