

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 is often used 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 own 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.