

Reality TV meets environment

A Bronx couple is introduced to a nearby Missouri ecovillage

Elizabeth Sandhu
for the Index

In rural northeastern Missouri, a hand-painted wooden sign is the only indication you have arrived at a part of reality television history.

Documentarian Morgan Spurlock, best known for the documentary "Super Size Me," chose Dancing Rabbit, an ecovillage in Rutledge, Mo., for his summer series on FX, "30 Days." The show ran last July and featured a couple from the Bronx as they attempted to survive a life of solar electricity, organic vegetables and no flushing toilets for 30 days.

The community at DR comprises individuals from all walks of life who are committed to using minimal energy sources such as diesel and electricity, conserving natural resources and not polluting the environment.

Founding member Cecil Scheib said Spurlock found out about DR on the Internet while searching for ecovillages for his show. Scheib said he thinks DR was chosen for both the village's willingness to be filmed and the fact that the villagers live completely off the power grid, meaning everything is either solar- or battery-powered.

Three months after the show aired and the hype died down, this small environmentally conscious community feels the impact of the village's exposure to several million viewers.

"That's a lot more than get our newsletter," Scheib said with a laugh.

Scheib said the community was not shocked when FX contacted them because DR already had been the subject of a documentary and several short films, but this was the largest market they had had the opportunity to reach.

Because outreach and education on sustainable living is part of DR's mission, many of the members are thrilled with the publicity, Scheib said. Sustainable living is a lifestyle that avoids using non-renewable sources such as motor oil and does not create ecological degradation with products such as aerosol hair sprays. The 30 to 35 inhabitants at DR strive to achieve this, Scheib said.



Members of honor fraternity Phi Sigma Pi took an overnight camping trip last weekend to the Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in Rutledge, Mo. The students took a tour Saturday during DR's open house. A reality television show called "30 Days" was filmed at the ecovillage and aired last summer on FX.

Seeking this lifestyle, village member Jennifer Russo said she first came to DR after FX had finished filming "30 Days." But after watching the show, she said she was less than pleased with the portrayal of DR.

"[They] made it look like we're all really radical and narrow-minded and aren't willing to accept people who don't have a history with environmentalism," Russo said.

Despite the inaccurate portrayal, Russo said she did think the show gave DR more publicity and is glad for that.

Scheib said that because of the show, DR received more than 300 e-mails, phone calls and letters. DR also has had a significant increase in the amount of visitors, some who live there now, as a result of viewing the show.

"The main thing is that only a small fraction of people are going to be interested in what we have

to say or donating money, and even a smaller number are going to live here," Schieb said. "So to find those people, we really have to cast our net very broadly and reach as many people as we can."

Nicole Dionne has lived at DR for more than a year and said many people have interacted with DR as a result of the show who likely never would have otherwise. But Dionne said it is not always what they expected.

"We've definitely had some random calls from people who call at 2 a.m., just kind of rambling on and on," Dionne said. "I think it has kind of upped the weirdness factor."

Many of the members of DR were encouraged by the responses that flooded in by phone or e-mail, Scheib said. He said it was great

to hear from other people around the nation who are like-minded and appreciate DR's attempt at sustainable living.

"Hearing all these people that were inspired by seeing us was, first of all, totally heartwarming, and second of all, totally inspired us," Scheib said.

This personalized communication with individuals who both appreciate the DR lifestyle and are interested in how they could imitate it is the way Schieb said he prefers to spread his message. He said he has no interest in preaching to people and if given the opportunity to go on TV and speak of the importance of being environmental, he would say no.

Schieb said the responses from the series have allowed him to converse one-on-one with those who are truly interested in energy-efficient lifestyles and want to know more.

"We got a lot of questions about people asking, 'Where do I find compact florescent light bulbs? How do I save energy in my home? How would I go about

Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

When to visit
Time: 1 p.m.
Date: Second and Fourth Saturdays of every month

Contact:
Call 660-883-5511 or e-mail dancingrabbit.org before visiting

getting solar panels?" Scheib said. "It was very exciting."

Although the encouragement of viewers and the excitement of effecting change was certainly a reward from the show, the community also will have a more tangible return thanks to "30 Days."

Schieb said they plan to use the money from FX to install a new

hot water system in their common house. The new boiler system will have an airtight tank that gasifies the wood for maximal energy out of the wood heat.

"We'll use less wood for the same amount of warmth, but it will be less of time cutting, stacking, loading, stoking wood," Scheib said.

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