White Hawk EcoVillage- Internship Report

This summer, I lived and worked in sustainable living communities, or ecovillages, in Ithaca, New York. Although I planned on dividing my time between different ecovillages, I spent most of my time in White Hawk Ecovillage, a fairly new intentional community still in the process of gaining new members. During the summer of 2015, seven families lived there in separate units, with future plans of building 30 units in total in a circle around a common outdoor recreation area. According to their website, founding families “have chosen to establish a neighborhood integrating ecologically sound principals and efforts towards community sufficiency.” Residents have freedom in different sustainable-minded projects such as space to raise animals, build greenhouses, and harvest timber.

While I was living there, I was able to interact and connect with several families going through the very beginning stages of contemplating making a move to White Hawk, as well as families already in the stages of designing their house for their lot. It was interesting to be there as potential new members joined in on general meetings and events. During my 8 weeks, I lived with different host families, taking on tasks of their household to learn more about their sustainable lifestyle. In addition, I spent a lot of my time working on projects for the entire community. Whenever possible, I attended general and specialty meetings, as well as large community events.

Tasks and Responsibilities

My main tasks can be divided into manual labor and other. While I lived with a host family, I would work in their individual garden doing tasks like weeding, planting, tilling soil,
watering, and picking slugs off crops. This was my first experience learning the in and outs of
garden maintenance. I also learned about families’ individual animal care projects, and I took
part in rabbit duty of cleaning cages, moving rabbits, and feeding them. I also took part in
chicken duty, and occasionally I helped other families with feeding and moving their sheep and
pigs. I also learned about the basics of beekeeping and took part in moving a swarm into a hive.

The most time-consuming manual labor projects were for the entire community. White
Hawk, unfortunately, endured some major flooding while I was staying there. Although the
houses were untouched, the road leading into the community had been mostly destroyed by the
water. I spent many hours fixing and maintaining the road by hauling and shoveling gravel into
the missing parts of the road. I usually worked with one other community member, but
occasionally, several White Hawk families would join and help.

Another project I worked on was the electrical work to connect the main well to power. I
worked with two other community members to push 200 meters of power cord through a
conduit. These main projects were not only a chance for me to learn skills in maintenance and
electrical work, but also an opportunity to work and talk with community members for many
hours about the community, their lives, and the work we were doing.

When I was not doing physical labor, I was attending general meeting and specialty
logistics meetings. Marketing and outreach became my favorite meeting to be a part of, where
members freely discussed how they wanted their community to be advertised and what they were
looking for in new members. I was given the task to look up advertising options for White Hawk
through different in-print and online magazines. Attending these meeting gave me the
opportunity to learn about the interworkings of an organized sustainable living community and also experience decision-making based strictly on consensus of all community members.

**Experience Gained**

Although I learned an incalculable amount about the management and organization of a sustainable living community in my two months, I learned even more about myself and my interests. My low points of my internship were when I was most lonely, without people my age or family. However, it was the first time in my life I was making decisions with no one to advise me, and I was the one to choose what community projects I wanted to take part in. I also hit a low point when other ecovillages that I was communicating with the past semester were no longer responding to my emails and phone calls of my requests to volunteer or visit with them. However, my high points were the strong connections I made with some families in the community. As a result, I was invited to dinners, game nights, outings, runs, and even a wedding ceremony. I also was forced to learn how to make and follow through my own schedule and lists of tasks. I had to create my own deadlines and stay self-motivated without any outside pressuring sources, which may have been one of the greatest lessons learned to take back to Sewanee.

**Future Goals**

Of course, my time living in a sustainable living community not only pushed my passion for sustainable life practices but expanded my ideas and knowledge of what a sustainable lifestyle can entail. Living in an alternative housing system pushed my comfort level at times and truly gave me the opportunity to explore what interests me in future career possibilities. I do know I want to continue to study and work in the field of environmental sustainability, but with a strong focus of individual practices. I believe the only way individuals can make a difference in
the ecological challenge facing the world today is by reducing our consumption levels and redirecting our resources to support local and organic systems or taking part in a self-reliant system, such as alternative forms of energy and growing one’s own food. I’ve learned the benefits of a community and trusting one’s neighbors with sharing resources and skills. I believe these small actions changes can quickly travel up the power chain and affect big business and government if done with many individuals. I want to continue to explore sustainable alternative housing and community system trends throughout my next year as I consider applying to the Watson Fellowship to continue my study of this topic.