

1-1-2001

Eco-Cottage

John Roberts
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Roberts, John (2001) "Eco-Cottage," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol43/iss4/7>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.



Eco-Cottage

Eight Furman students take part in an experiment in the art of 'green' living.

By John Roberts

As one of eight residents of Furman's Eco-Cottage, Jennifer Hutchings has given many interviews and fielded media inquiries from throughout the country.

But each time Hutchings and her roommates welcome a reporter or photographer to their home, they get the same blank stare at the door.

"So, this is it?" said one reporter, glancing around the modest square cabin.

Upon first inspection, the Eco-Cottage, located beside the lake in the shadow of the Bell Tower, looks like a typical college student's apartment. The living room's a bit untidy. Books and papers are strewn about. The stereo's playing, and someone is always on the phone or using the computer.

But there are no "Save the Planet" posters. No one's wearing earth shoes

and beads or munching on granola. "Most everyone who comes out here seems to be a little disappointed," says Hutchings. "It's like they expect to see some futuristic place or something.

"And we don't look like recycling nerds. Some of us are loud-mouthed. We wear go-go boots and like to go out. We're typical students."

That point is something Frank Powell, a health and exercise science professor and coordinator of the Eco-Cottage project, likes to drive home.

"These are not extraordinary women. They do not lead radical or unusual lifestyles," he says. "But what they have been able to accomplish by making just a few changes is both unusual and extraordinary."

Unveiled at the beginning of fall term, Furman's Eco-Cottage, an experiment in "green" living, began capturing media attention in September after the Associated Press circulated a story on the project.

It's a simple but novel idea, at least for most college campuses. Take two similar structures — in this case, the Cabin and the Cottage, located between the lake and tennis courts (next to the Hut and the Shack) and across from Lakeside Housing (for old-timers, the women's residence halls).

Outfit one of them (Cottage) with energy-saving devices such as solar panels and low-impact faucets and toilets. Then ask a group of students to live there and practice environmentally friendly behavior by recycling as much as possible and limiting their energy consumption and water use.

Furman will collect data about the students' efforts and compare it with that from the Cabin, which has not received any environmental upgrades and where the students have not been asked to make any lifestyle adjustments. Ultimately, the university expects to apply what it learns to other areas of the campus.

The Eco-Cottage has captured the imagination of academics, journalists and environmentalists, says Powell. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a publication widely read in academia, generated a number of telephone inquiries and e-mails.

"Once we fully analyze what we have learned, I think more people will be interested," says Powell, who expects to have enough material for a report by early spring. "The data we are collecting are very exciting."

In keeping with their pledge to behave in an environmentally friendly way, the students at the Cottage recycle almost everything, including apple cores and banana peels that are deposited in an outdoor compost container. By doing so, the "garbage" the group designates for the landfill each week fits in a plastic grocery bag.

The lifestyle changes, say the girls, are modest. Instead of tossing waste in the trash, they deposit what they can in one of three recycling bins. They wash dishes in bulk, avoid long showers and turn off the faucet when brushing their teeth. Turning off lights when not in use and opening blinds to allow natural light to flood the house's four bedrooms help save electricity.

Furman retrofitted the Cottage with solatubes to allow natural light to enter the house. Low-flow faucets and energy-efficient doors and windows help the students save in other ways, and the university has added insulation, gas heat, energy-saving appliances and electricity-generating solar panels. Powell says that on sunny days the Cottage's electricity meter actually runs in reverse.

The university has also installed carpeting made of recyclable material and will soon fashion a system to collect roof water to irrigate an organic garden that will be planted at the Cottage this spring. Food compost will be used to fertilize the garden.

Although the eight women who volunteered to live in the Eco-Cottage get along fine, their camaraderie was occasionally tested in the early going. Some were more diligent than their friends in sorting the recyclables, and there were other uncomfortable moments — like the time the low-flow toilets overflowed.

And, of course, it took awhile for them to get used to living with one another.

"Really," says Hutchings with a smile. "I mean, eight 19-year-old girls living together can be a little catty."

But a poster-sized chore chart and

a little communication helped smooth over the rough spots.

With hometowns ranging from Atlanta, Ga., to South Africa, the students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some practiced recycling while growing up; others had never heard of composting. But after a few months of living in the Eco-Cottage, all have a greater appreciation for the environment. And the energy-saving habits they've developed are likely to last a lifetime.

"Once you start doing something and you do it for so long, it kind of becomes a habit," says Lauren Johnson. "I never really realized how much you throw away and what can be reused."

The Eco-Cottage is just one of several environmentally friendly initiatives recently implemented at Furman.

On the academic side, the faculty has adopted a concentration in environmental studies. This fall, the university provided students more than 20 bicycles to encourage less automobile traffic between the North Village apartments on the outskirts of campus and the more centrally located academic buildings. Students just grab one of the bicycles, ride it to their destination, then leave it for someone else to use.

Furman's most ambitious environmental endeavor will be the "greening" of Herman N. Hipp Hall. Construction on the building is scheduled to begin later this year, and its architects are

working with LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a national group that encourages the construction of energy-efficient buildings. Powell says that LEED offers a "green certification" to these buildings, which are constructed mostly of recyclable materials and minimize energy consumption.

"This project will likely produce the first LEED building in the state," says Powell. "It's a major commitment on Furman's part. There are a few LEED buildings under construction in the South, but there are a number in the Northeast and West, where environmental concerns are more pressing."

Like most universities, Furman traditionally has done little to emphasize environmentally friendly habits. While the school promotes recycling, students are not asked to limit their energy consumption. They leave lights on as long as they want and shower as often and as long as they wish.

But as the on-campus residency rate rises to roughly 95 percent next year, Furman hopes that what it learns from the Eco-Cottage and other efforts to "green" the campus will encourage the entire university community to find ways to take responsibility for their living and working environment — and to develop habits that will last a lifetime. ●



Opposite: A solar panel behind the house helps provide electricity for, from left, Eco-Cottage residents Jennifer Hutchings, Jenna Hatchwell, Sarah Pope and Shay Speights. Above: Keke Milling washes dishes the old-fashioned way. The low-flow faucet restricts water use. Left: Solatubes in the bathroom and kitchen ceilings supply natural light for Syreeta Williams and her housemates. (Photos by Charlie Register)