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Eco-Update

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Eight Furman women spent the 2000-2001 academic year as part of a living experiment in resource conservation and "green" living. As reported in the winter issue of Furman magazine, these students lived in the Eco-Cottage beside the lake, where they practiced an environmentally friendly ethic devoted to reducing, recycling and reusing.

Those of us behind the project appreciate how the women embraced the opportunity and contributed so significantly to its success. We believe that the Eco-Cottage experiment is a good test of the hypothesis that students will conserve when they are taught to value natural resources.

While the Eco-Cottage residents were practicing a new way of life, their neighbors next door in the "Cabin" found themselves randomly assigned the role of "control group." They accepted their role and continued to live in the typical way that Furman students do.

Each week since early October, the Eco-Cottage residents recorded the natural gas, electricity and water usage for both their home and the Cabin. They carefully recycled and composted most of their discards, to the extent that the amount of garbage they sent to the landfill each week barely filled a plastic grocery bag. They also began to consider the environmental impact of their purchases and avoided products with excess packaging.

We tend to value only what we can measure, and previously there was little data available to assess the energy and water use of a Furman residential student. But the facts and figures from the Eco-Cottage are compelling.

The residents used 9400 fewer kilowatts of electricity (70 percent less) than the Cabin residents. Photovoltaic panels, which use solar power to generate electricity, contributed 680 kilowatts of pollution-free energy during the first six months of residency — a figure that increased as the days of spring grew longer.

Retrofitting the Eco-Cottage with low-flow showerheads and 1.6-gallons-per-flush toilets helped reduce water use more than 40 percent. Each resident of the Cabin used about 70 gallons of water per day, which is typical for most Americans. Residents of the Eco-Cottage used only about 40 gallons — even though they did occasionally wash their cars.

At least half of the Eco-Cottage electricity savings resulted from retrofitting the house with better insulation, compact fluorescent lighting, tubular skylights, photovoltaics and a natural gas water heater. But credit must also go to the residents, who throughout the year became increasingly aware of such issues as water and electrical use and the disposal of both organic and solid waste.

And therein lies the real benefit of the experiment: the students' new mind-set. Although the Eco-Cottage students will move into other Furman residences in the fall, they are certain to remain sensitive to the lessons they learned this year. No doubt they will continue to practice an environmentally friendly lifestyle that is likely to catch on with their friends and acquaintances.

The university currently pays its utility bills without any real concern for holding students responsible for their usage. But the Eco-Cottage demonstrates that significant amounts of money can be saved. The water, sewer and electricity savings alone amounted to about 55 cents per day per student. When this figure is extended to the entire residential student body of 2,500, the savings possibilities grow to $300,000 per year.

Furman appears set to make a bold statement about conserving the Earth's resources. Aside from the Eco-Cottage, the university has introduced an academic concentration in environmental studies and is constructing a "green" academic building, Herman N. Hipp Hall.

Are you prepared to join us? If so, start by turning off your lights after you leave the room. And be sure to recycle this magazine — once you've read every word, of course.

— Frank Powell

The author has taught health and exercise science at Furman since 1974. With Bill Ranson of the earth and environmental sciences department, he is co-coordinator of the Eco-Cottage project.