

# Sustaining Svanholm

*The Possibilities and Challenges in a Danish Ecovillage*



*(Svanholm, own photo, September 2018)*

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Department of Human Geography  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Lund University

Author: Anders Johansson  
Supervisor: Vasna Ramasar  
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Department:	Human Geography
Address:	Inst. för Kulturgeografi och ekonomisk geografi, Sölvegatan 12, 223 62, Lund
Telephone:	+46 46 222 17 59

Supervisor:	Vasna Ramasar
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Author:	Anders Johansson
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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the Danish ecovillage by the name of Svanholm, with a special attention to how different areas of sustainability is being understood and carried out in practice in the ecovillage. Through a long-term fieldwork and anthropological methods herein, the paper seeks to understand Svanholm with all its possibilities as well as challenges, whether it be in a technical, environmental, economic, political or social area of sustainability. With postdevelopment theory, degrowth theory and deep ecology as the supporting theoretical framework and the concept of ecovillage seen in a broader context, the paper also investigates Svanholm from an outside perspective, whilst paying attention to the historical aspect of this Danish commune. The chapters on the different areas of sustainability in Svanholm are followed by a discussion that takes into account both a critique on the ecovillage concept, as well as looking into if and how ecovillages can seek to inspire. The paper is more focused on the empirical knowledge gained from fieldwork than on being theoretically heavy, and it seeks to let the voices of the inhabitants of Svanholm work as the main guideline in understanding the values and visions for sustainability in this Danish ecovillage.

Keywords: Svanholm, Ecovillage, Sustainability, Anthropological fieldwork.

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## Introduction

“There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.” (Carson 1962: 1).

This is the introduction to the famous book *Silent Spring* by American environmentalist and biologist, Rachel Carson. It describes an imaginary place in America, in which nature is thriving alongside human settlement. But for the reader of the book, these first few lines are the only happy part of the book. What follows, is a description of how this blissful place changes radically for the worse: how the beautiful natural surroundings are dying and everything turns from heaven to hell. Carson’s book goes on to talk about the detrimental effects of pesticides used within conventional farming and how such a chemical approach has created countless environmental catastrophes around the world (Carson 1962).

But could the joyous romantic first lines of her book have introduced another place situated in the real world? A place that did not need a description of the ensuing downfall, but instead described a place in which the aforementioned harmony would still be present today, more than 50 years later than the publication of Rachel Carson’s book? I had long yearned for such a place, especially after living in a residence that left me with sleepless nights and depressing thoughts. This was a place, where the morning scene would consist of broken bottles, cigarette buds and vomit from endless noisy partying that kept waking up the residents, all competing in the soundscape with the traffic and industries that lay around the building – a far cry from the serenity and natural beauty that I would find in Danish ecovillage of Svanholm – thus my journey would be a reverse chronology of the book by Carson.

Besides this very personal motivation for a change, I was on the more academic side of things curious about whether I could find people living out some of the ideas of sustainability that I had discussed with my classmates from human ecology, and my experiences of working in the field from my bachelor degree in anthropology were ready to be taken into use in a new field. Getting to experience

Svanholm naturally provided that I came to know of its existence. I had been talking to a human ecology student from the upper batch about my coming internship period and she advised me to take a closer look at a website for the organization called ‘Global Ecovillage Network’ (GEN – Website 1), which has a map with most of the world’s ecovillages. In here, I found Svanholm. I sent an application and luckily, they had space for me and I could begin my fieldwork. The two years that followed gave me a rich and nuanced perspective of the life of this ecovillage, which I seek to provide to the reader through the following questions:

## Research Questions

*Through values and visions for sustainability, how is this concept understood in the ecovillage of Svanholm and how are these values and visions carried out in practice?*

- How has the history of the Svanholm commune shaped its current values and visions for sustainability?
- Which technical and environmental solutions of sustainability are present in Svanholm and how are these solutions facilitated and used in practice?
- How does Svanholm organise when it comes to economy and decision-making, and which possibilities and limitations does this way of organisation entail?
- Which social values and visions are present in Svanholm, what are the possibilities of these, and what are the challenges in reaching them?

In order to avoid making myself the judge of how sustainability is measured and understood, I seek to let Svanholm’s own understanding of sustainability be the guideline for this paper. I will thus illuminate the concept in a very local frame, exploring the possibilities as well as the struggles that arise in the effort to live in consistency with Svanholm’s thoughts about sustainability.

## Structure

Before going into the local and empirically-based context of Svanholm, I wish to provide the reader both my aims for the paper, followed by a chapter illuminating the ecovillage concept. Subsequently, I engage in the theory of postdevelopment, degrowth theory and deep ecology, placing this ecovillage in a broader academic context. Following from this, a chapter on the methods used in my fieldwork is presented and in order to gain insight in the present day Svanholm, I have found it relevant to provide some background knowledge about the place, in the chapter entitled “Historic Introduction”.

I have chosen my research questions on the basis of offering a nuanced and holistic understanding of sustainability in Svanholm by incorporating various aspects of the concept in my research. I have sought to categorise these elements into three main chapters, entitled “Technical & Environmental Sustainability”, “Economic & Political Sustainability” and “Social Sustainability”. These categorizations may seem to be clearly divided, but they also influence and overlap each other, which I will illuminate as well.

Following these three categorizations of sustainability in Svanholm, I zoom out in my discussion on some of the critiques and possibilities of ecovillages in general, thus placing Svanholm in a broader academic discussion, before ending the thesis with my conclusions.

## Aims

I lived in Svanholm for a total of two years, and this indeed long-term fieldwork has provided me with many insights that would have not been possible to grasp, had I merely been a so-called armchair anthropologist. It is thus my hope that my ethnographic insights can contribute to academia with a rich exploration of different areas of sustainability, understood in a local and everyday context. This paper is not theoretically heavy and it thus falls outside of the scope of this paper to engage deeply in too many theoretical discussions. Instead, it is my hope that the explored practicality and inner workings of a place like Svanholm can highlight some of the many nuances that all partake in the life of the community members in the Svanholm commune.

This insight will hopefully be inspirational not only to the readers within academia, but maybe also to other ecovillages that can identify with the possibilities, discussions, experiences and challenges from Svanholm. And furthermore, the paper might serve to inspire people living more conventional lives, providing them with a holistic perspective on life in an ecovillage.

Having this said, it is also my hope that this thesis can help to build bridge between academia and non-academia, despite it being written in an academic language. In my view, there are plenty of ways, in which people working academically within the area of sustainability could cooperate more closely with people, who work with the same area on a more practical level, such as ecovillagers. Whether it be academics from the field of human ecology or similar sciences, I do believe that it would indeed be a fruitful venture and conversation, if more scholars went to visit ecovillages and alike, in order to see some of the possible small-scale solutions to the issues presented to the students in the university.

Similarly fruitful could it be for ecovillagers to partake in discussions and lectures in the university, hereby accessing some of the more theoretically interesting discussions and global perspectives that is being provided from a class of human ecology students coming from many parts of the world. In such a collaboration, discussions of sustainability could be enriched and advanced. It is my aim that this paper could be a small but important spark in such a scientific and human endeavour.

## **Ecovillage – Defining the Phenomenon**

In order to understand Svanholm in a broader context, it is necessary to take a closer look at the concept ‘ecovillage’:

“An ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all 4 dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology, economy into a whole systems design) to regenerate its social and natural environment. Ecovillages are living laboratories pioneering beautiful alternatives and innovative solutions. They are rural or urban settlements with vibrant social structures, vastly diverse, yet united in their actions towards low-impact, high-quality lifestyles.” (Global Ecovillage Network – Website 1).

This is one definition from the Global Ecovillage Network, also known as ‘GEN’ (Website 1), which, as I mentioned in the introduction, is an organization that seeks to



provide a network for all the ecovillages in the world. Choosing Svanholm was also a task that took some research, mostly because Denmark has, despite its small size, fairly many ecovillages. GEN's task of gathering all the ecovillages in the world is quite challenging. It is an on-going process, because many new ecovillage projects are being put on the Global Ecovillage Network map, although being merely at the phase of an idea. At the same time, many projects are also abandoned, which might not necessarily be reported to GEN. But still, this organization can be a good introductory way for people, who want to learn more about ecovillages and their manifold appearances.

When talking about ecovillages, there is another term worth mentioning, which is that of 'intentional communities', also known as IC's. This is a more overarching term, which describes different kinds of intentionally-made communities, whether it be collectives, communes, monasteries or any other kind of co-living project, in which people have come to live with similar intentions. This can take form both in spiritual, ecological, political or other ways, around which it is possible to form a community. Kenneth Mulder, Robert Costanza and John Erickson, all from the University of Vermont, are pointing to one aspect that the ecovillages can share: "These are communities that were specifically designed to enhance their residents' quality of life..." (Mulder et al. 2005: 14). There are many opinions on what constitutes an ecovillage, and thus many perspectives from which to perceive an ecovillage from.

Looking at Svanholm, it is interesting in itself to apply the term ecovillage, because this might not be the first term that all people living in Svanholm use to describe the place. It is a matter of perspective and priority, and it also shows the diversity of people living in Svanholm. In my time living in Svanholm, I have heard it being called 'an organic farm', 'a village', 'a commune' (the English words 'collective' and 'community' could have been used instead of 'commune') or indeed 'an ecovillage'. None of these titles are untrue, but it is a matter of choosing what to focus on. Some Svanholmers focus on the agricultural aspect, some focus on the housing and community aspect, and some focus on the more environmental elements.

## Theoretical Framework

### Postdevelopment Theory

Although this paper is mainly of an ethnographic character, I would like to present what I consider three relevant theoretical perspectives, from which to see my case. This first of these is postdevelopment theory. This theory arose in the 1980's, not long after the birth of the Svanholm commune. Scholars such as the two American anthropologists, Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson, as well as the German researcher in environment, development and globalization, Wolfgang Sachs, played a part in creating this critical theory (Matthews 2010). These social scientists illuminate and critique from different perspectives how the concept of development is understood and created. In this critique, they stress that the concept of development is created from a Western and neoliberal perspective, in which nations are categorised as being either developed or underdeveloped (Ibid.).

This approach to development leaves little space for alternatives, but this is where postdevelopment theory comes into the picture: "Postdevelopment theory is relevant...to all those interested in thinking of alternatives to the capitalist, industrialized way of life that has for so long been held up as an ideal toward which all should strive." (Matthews 2010: 1). Although Svanholm lies within the borders of Denmark, which is a country generally thought of as being indeed both industrialized and capitalistic, Svanholm is also part of a network of ecovillages that spans across the globe, as I introduced in the former chapter with the Global Ecovillage Network. These ecovillages find local ways and solutions towards sustainable living, whilst sharing ideas on a more global scale. I find the theory of postdevelopment compelling to my case, because it provides an ideological lens from which to see the values, practices and visions of Svanholm.

Another relevant point in postdevelopment is that "Postdevelopment theorists adopt a critical stance toward globalization, seeking to defend the local against the global." (Matthews 2010: 1). In this critique, Svanholm along with other ecovillages, can be seen as small local entities that practice different ways of living than their surrounding societies. Defending the local and hereby constituting a multiplicity of ways of living is noticed by the aforementioned anthropologist, Arturo Escobar, in his book entitled *Encountering development: The making and the unmaking of the Third World*: "The persistence of diversity means the existence of 'other ways of building

economies, or dealing with basic needs, of coming together into social groups” (Escobar 1995: 225). Such a statement fits indeed quite well with the case of Svanholm with their alternative practices in both economy, food and manners of building community, all on which I will elaborate in the chapters on sustainability in Svanholm.

Despite Escobar’s love for alternatives to the Western neoliberal way of thinking, it is to Escobar still important to keep in mind that: “There are no grand alternatives that can be applied to all places or all situations...one must resist the desire to formulate alternatives at an abstract, macro level.” (Escobar 1995: 222). As I understand Escobar, this assertion is in fact also underlining the importance of plurality – a decentralization of ideas. And such ideas are not weak by any stretch, according to aforementioned James Ferguson, in his, to postdevelopment, important book *The anti-politics machine: ‘Development’, depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*: “Thinking is as ‘real’ an activity as any other...ideas and discourses have important and very real social consequences” (Ferguson 1990: xv).

Such an argument again pertains to the postdevelopmental critique on the concept of development, in expressing the significance of daring to think alternatively and hereby challenging an existing capitalistic reality. And to the German social and environmental researcher, Wolfgang Sachs, there might a very compelling reason to think in alternatives to a global industrialized world, when warning in his book called *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power*, that “five or six planets would be needed to serve as mines and waste dumps” (Sachs 1992: 2), if the industrialized society should become truly omnipresent.

I find postdevelopment theory relevant and staunch, when it comes to questioning and criticising an existing neoliberal and capitalistic societal reality, and coming from a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, I find it undeniably compelling that postdevelopment thinkers are questioning the narratives, discourses and ways of thinking that most people might take for granted. To me that is one of the founding elements to sound anthropological thinking. Similarly, the critical stance from postdevelopment theory is in my view also very aligned with the philosophy and study of human ecology, when it comes to criticising a neoliberal ideology.

While postdevelopment theory has mainly focused on societies from outside Europe and North America, I find it applicable to the case of Svanholm. In this Danish ecovillage, a critical stance towards an existing neoliberal reality has been a

necessity from the beginning of the commune, in creating an alternative way of living. I will delve further into this point in the chapter on the history of Svanholm. Besides postdevelopment, numerous theories could be appropriate for this paper, but in the following, I will shed light on two theories akin to postdevelopment: degrowth theory and deep ecology.

## Degrowth Theory

Postdevelopment theory is not alone, when it comes to criticizing a neoliberal capitalistic Western society. Degrowth theory is targeting some of the same elements with a special focus on condemning the neoliberal focus on economic growth. In their article entitled *Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy*, environmentalist, Ashish Kothari, political ecologist, Federico Demaria and economist, Alberto Acosta formulate the core principles in degrowth theory: "...paradigms that call for more fundamental changes, challenging the predominance of growth-oriented development and of the neo-liberal economy and related forms of 'representative democracy'." (Kothari et al. 2014: 362). This formulation puts Svanholm on the map, both when it comes to economy and political organization, as I will explain and elaborate on in the chapter called "Economic & Political Sustainability".

Another key point in degrowth theory is the condemnation of the GDP as a marker for prosperity. This strictly monetary focus is unsuitable for degrowth theorists and should be replaced by other measures such as ecological or social welfare. In her book on the American ecovillage Ithaca, ecovillager Liz Walker also notices this point: "...the emphasis is shifting from economic achievement to post-materialist values that emphasize self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life." (Walker 2005: xiv). The connection between such post-materialist values and Svanholm will be explored in the chapter named "Social Sustainability". There are several foci within degrowth theory, which is also noted by Kothari et al.: "...housing and urban planning, financial issues and alternative money systems, agroecology and food systems...cooperatives, as well as transport and alternative energy systems." (Kothari et al. 2014: 369). As this paper will demonstrate, almost all of these areas are discussed and taken action towards in Svanholm.

## Deep Ecology

This theory is mostly labelled an environmental philosophy, but I find its relevance as a theoretical lens through which to see Svanholm, when it comes to some of the values of this Danish ecovillage. Deep ecology was coined by the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess in 1973 – a mere five years prior to the birth of the Svanholm commune. In his article: *The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary.*, Naess lays out the core principles of deep ecology: “There are deeper concerns, which touch upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism and classlessness.” (Naess 1973: 95). These principles connect to the idea that all living beings have an inherent worth, no matter the relation to human beings. This is quite a far cry from the profligate use of natural surroundings that is so ingrained in the industrialized way of thinking, whether it be deforestation, mining or depletion of the soil through pesticide use.

As I explained in the introduction to this paper, pesticide use and its horrific consequences was exactly the main theme in Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*, which I found highly relevant as a starting ground for this thesis. Interestingly, Arne Naess cited Carson’s book as a key influence in creating the deep ecology philosophy. And as I have understood this anti-anthropocentric philosophy of deep ecology, it certainly also resembles that of human ecology, in both being holistic philosophies that seek to look beyond human needs and instead see human beings as part of a greater ecosystem, in which all living beings are equal and in symbiosis.

In some social circles, this might sound like the ideas of a hippie, which I personally only would take as a compliment, but it might also have been said that the Svanholm commune was founded by a group of naïve idealists. Almost 40 years later, I interviewed several Svanholmers and in one of these interviews, the philosophy of deep ecology shone clearly through: “...there is focus to be happy and take good care of the earth. Because it is also very inspiring to see that some people are thriving, whilst their surroundings are also thriving.” (Interview 1: 55 minutes). And speaking of interviews, I will in the following chapter present my methods, used in my intense and long-lived fieldwork in Svanholm.

## Methods

All in all, I ended up spending about two years of my life in Svanholm. In other words: I become a part of Svanholm, and Svanholm became a part of me. Coming from a bachelor's degree in anthropology, I had in my studies become acquainted with long-term fieldworks such as the classic example of Bronislaw Malinowski in 1915-1918, taking place in the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific Ocean (Young 1979). Not knowing that I would spend approximately the same time on a fieldwork in my home country, this unpredictability is indeed one of many interesting aspects of conducting fieldwork – as in life, things evolve. Being in Svanholm for such a long time could seem exaggerated, but as one Svanholmer noted: “You do not just soak up the concrete reality in Svanholm in 14 days.” (Holm 1985: 43). This is to me certainly very true and there are numerous elements to highlight from this miniature society.

The depth of the fieldwork could also be viewed in relation to another anthropologist: Clifford Geertz. With his article, entitled *Thick Description: Toward*



*(Fieldwork, own photo, September 2020)*

*an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (Geertz 1973), Geertz seeks to go away from the earlier streams of anthropology, in which there was a search for universal truths and theories. Instead, Geertz tries to focus on the individual human being and how meaning is created for that person. In this thick description, there is a focus on both trying to understand the

individual's perspective, as well as understanding the context and the setting that the individual is surrounded by. In the ethnographic fieldwork, it is indeed possible to do both and I have sought to understand both the former and the latter in Svanholm. In other words: “...ethnography is thick description.” (Geertz 1973: 9-10). Another point made by Geertz, is the importance of being in the physical environment of the people that one is trying to understand. Put in Geertz's words: “Anthropologists don't

study villages...they study *in* villages.” (Geertz 1973: 22). This was what I ended up doing in the village of Svanholm.

In doing ethnographic fieldwork, many utensils can be employed from the ethnographic toolbox. In Svanholm, I made use of both observation, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, archival research, physical and digital documents on site, diary, fieldnotes, formal and informal conversations as well as participating in both festivities, ceremonies, formalized meetings and workshops. The mere observation is naturally a method that can be taken into use during the entire fieldwork, observing everything from where the different buildings are located in getting to know the geography of it all, to observing who is who and which actions takes place in the everyday life. This seems like a natural thing to do especially in the beginning, when you are still considered somewhat a stranger and relations have not yet been built between you as a fieldworker and the members of the community. But in general, the mere observation of the daily life is a good foundation for the fieldwork.

When it comes to the participant observation, the fieldwork becomes more intense and as an ethnographer, you submerge yourself in the field, participating in different activities and events that take place. This is where you get closer to the activities rather than merely observing from distance – as professor of anthropology, James P. Spradley puts it: “Participation allows you to experience activities directly, to get the feel of what events are like, and to record your own perceptions.” (Spradley 1980: 51). Participation can happen both in formal and informal situations and in the following, I will present an example of the latter, taken from my diary in Svanholm, in which my own perceptions evolved:

*This evening was indeed interesting. I have returned to my room after a night around the fire with several members of the community. There was music, stars and a feeling of belonging. I have had interesting conversations, as well as different small-talks. At one point, I found myself listening from a distance to a conversation between two Svanholmers, deeply embedded in a conversation about various worries and troubles, as well as hopes for the future. Another observant Svanholmer had sat quietly beside me and had paid notice to my curiosity. He told me that my listening to such a conversation really made me enter the ‘machinery of Svanholm’. This formulation stuck with me the rest of the evening and I understood the level of trust that was given to me by allowing me to listen to their straightforward and honest words.*

*(Diary, 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 2018)*

“If we want to find out what people know, we must get inside their heads.” (Spradley 1980: 10). On the above-described evening, it certainly felt as if I came many steps closer to understanding the thoughts of some of the Svanholmers. After a longer period of observing and participating in the daily life in Svanholm, I began formulating questions for interviews. I ended up with all in all 33 questions and conducted a total of eight semi-structured interviews, conducted in Danish and in this paper translated to English. The reason for choosing the semi-structured interview, was to enable the good compromise of keeping a certain degree of structure for the interview, whilst having the opportunity to let the informant go off topic or lead the conversation into new interesting directions. The semi-structuredness also takes seriously the relaxed atmosphere of the interview, in allowing a more fluid and natural conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

And as with the diary-based example in the above, about listening to conversations and the trust herein, so too do I find the element of trust important in the interview situation. This is also noted by anthropologist, Corrine Glesne & educational researcher, Alan Peshkin: “...trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make.” (Glesne & Peshkin 1992: 79). The informants that I conducted my interviews with, were persons with whom I had gained a certain level of trust. This fact can naturally be seen as a weakness in the research, because there might lack a degree of professional neutrality, but on the other hand, it made way for deep and meaningful conversations, whilst providing good and honest answers for my research. Such trust between researcher and informant is important, and it is one of many elements when it comes to ethical reflections on the side of the researcher. As Spradley rightly notes: “Ethnography research always pries into the lives of informants.” (Spradley 1980: 22). This fact has to be in the mind of the researcher, both whilst conducting the fieldwork as well as afterwards, when the data is processed.

It also touches on the central aspect of coming to the field with an open mind, which is also observed by the Danish psychologist, Svend Brinkmann and his Norwegian colleague, Steinar Kvale: “Being ethical means being open to other people, acting for the sake of their good, trying to see others as they are, rather than imposing one’s own ideas and biases on them.” (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005: 161). Such a task might seem very difficult, due to the near impossibility of arriving in a



field without any preconceived ideas, but being open for new directions in the research certainly seems relevant.

The methods described in the above adhere to the more qualitative types of conducting fieldwork, whereas more statistical and quantitative methods could serve to provide other types of knowledge. I sought to use the former in highlighting the more personal experience, which I found more natural to utilize in the field of Svanholm. This choice also pertains to the ethical reflections, in which I am of the belief that the more personal approach in the qualitative methods could make way for a more fruitful cooperation between me as a researcher and my informants, due to my more personal presence. It is also presenting my knowledge with personal utterings from my informants, rather than sheer numbers in a statistical format. Brinkmann and Kvale express a similar attitude in this regard: “When the object is concrete human experience, then qualitative methods are the most adequate means of knowledge production.” (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005: 161).

One of the main ethical challenges in my fieldwork became the question of my own role, and how it evolved. I had to find a delicate balance between being a fieldworker, whilst acknowledging that I was also, to an ever-increasing degree, in Svanholm on a more personal level, becoming a living entity and influencing the field, in which I was doing fieldwork. This double-role of being a researcher from a university as well as being a volunteer in the workforce of Svanholm had to be balanced, and I had to try to make the distinction between these two roles, whilst accepting that the lines between the two presences could at times feel blurry, which I also discussed with several Svanholmers. But nevertheless, it has throughout the fieldwork been a reflection of mine, and simply being aware of the duality of my presence in Svanholm has helped paving the way for an ethically sound fieldwork.

Conducting fieldwork and interviewing people living in Svanholm is indeed a very contemporary type of research, but acquiring knowledge on the past is also a notable way of understanding a place, the mindsets of the people within it as well as its values. I find this to be very true, when it comes to the case of Svanholm. In the ensuing chapter, I will therefore dive into and illuminate the curious past of this long-lived Danish commune.

## The history of Svanholm

In understanding present day Svanholm, I find it very useful to introduce the historical background of this unique place, looking into some of the ways the community was established, physically as well as ideologically. In order to do this, I have conducted archival research in some of



*(The road to Svanholm, own photo, September 2017)*

the material that members of Svanholm have provided me with: three scripts made respectively for the 15<sup>th</sup> (Holm 1993), 30<sup>th</sup> (Plesner 2008) and 40<sup>th</sup> (Ethelberg 2018) anniversary of Svanholm, as well as a smaller pamphlet (Holm 1985) about the beginning years of the commune. Furthermore, the chapter is also written on the basis of literature describing the life in the Svanholm estate prior to the establishment of the Svanholm commune (Thilo 1983). I have translated from Danish to English the quotes from these sources.

When initially learning about the ecovillage of Svanholm, what struck me was the fact that it has existed for around forty years. In choosing which ecovillage to contact for my initial internship, I thought that the sheer fact of Svanholm's four decades of existence had to prove some kind of validation of its success as a community of this kind. But how did the story of this community begin?

On May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1978 at noon, the Svanholm commune was officially born. This was the day when a group of people were given the keys to the Svanholm estate by the former owner (Plesner 2008: 24). Up until this day, this group of pioneers had held countless meetings to reach this pivotal day of moving in and beginning a new life in the historic estate of Svanholm. About a year prior to that day, an advert in a Danish newspaper had been issued, outlining the idea:

“We are some people working on creating a grand-agricultural-, production- and much more commune as close to Copenhagen as possible...We wish to have connection with

people of all ages and with all educations, who want to participate in creating a better way of life.” (Plesner 2008: 8).

This small announcement had created a lot of interest, and around 500 curious people contacted the two couples, who had formulated the advert and who were thus the initiators of the Svanholm commune. Although the project did not end with 500 inhabitants, there were grand thoughts for the place, as one of my interviewees recalls: “It had to be a big place with many opportunities. That was the main thing.” (Interview 4: 5 mins.). More than hundred individuals moved into Svanholm, and such a relatively high number of people formed their ideological basis, as stated by the ‘Starting Group’ in their initial visions of Svanholm: “It must be big enough to not depend on single persons – and it must be built on solidarity, so that everybody gets equal opportunities to develop their skills.” (Plesner 2008: 9). Already at this stage, the initiators of Svanholm were formulating strong values such as community, solidarity and equality – and such values were much needed, according to one of the early Svanholm members, who in 1978 expressed: “For the last ten years I have learned about all the illnesses about the ruling world order. Now I want to act to make the world better.” (Plesner 2008: 11).

So which world did these people want to make better? The 1960’s and 1970’s were in many regards an extreme time in history, both in good and bad. But in focusing on the more negative aspects, it was a time in which the world was experiencing both a threatening nuclear war and an oil crisis that would have its consequences both for people and the environment around them. Svanholm was influenced by this historical and political context:

“...it was also clear that the future was threatened by the overexploitation of the environment. All in all, there was a good reason to join others in creating a place, in which you could put your energy in a safe community, where resources were taken well care of.” (Plesner 2008: 22).

Taking good care of the surrounding land was therefore an important ideological factor, but taking good care of each other was also something that could contrast how especially this part of the world was being shaped: “The zeitgeist that the commune movement arose from, was largely a denunciation of the ruling materialism in the Western world.” (Plesner 2008: 20). Not only was it denouncing an increasing

materialism, but also stated a criticism towards the ideology that was feeding it: capitalism. An opposition to this was also formulated in Svanholm's initial stage, concerning the idea of self-sufficiency: "In this way you would have to say goodbye to many modern appliances, but what did that matter? Because on the contrary, you would get a much richer life in the community, where you could live and work." (Ethelberg 2018: 5). The idea about choosing the community over the material possessions was further explained with a motto, emphasising the opposition to the growing materialistic tendency of the time: "The bourgeois norm 'you are what you have' has no place in the community we wish to realize, on the contrary, we have our own norm: 'we are what we do'." (Ethelberg 2018: 12).

Establishing the commune of Svanholm was in many regards quite a revolutionary idea. This is especially true, when taken into consideration the life that had previously filled the buildings of the estate. Making a commune with emphasis on social equality was not only a novelty and a grand alternative to other more standard Western ways of living, but as well a far cry from the feudal and herein deeply hierarchical structure that had reigned in the estate of Svanholm up until the beginning of the commune in 1978. Accounts of the deep divides between the farmers and the landlords of Svanholm, even up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had been put into words in the book *Folk på Svanholm* (Thilo 1983) by Lone Thilo, who had interviewed previous workers on the estate. They could tell stories about the everyday hardships of the common farmer, who lived in dilapidated small homesteads in the local area, whilst working long days in the fields of Svanholm for a very limited payment. At the other end of the hierarchy, the life of the landlord was more influenced by elements such as leisure hunting, lavish dinners and fancy automobiles (Thilo 1983: 8 + 11 + 32).

It must have sounded absolutely absurd in the ears of the previous landlords that this place would become a flat-structured, predominantly longhaired and equality-minded commune with shared economy and common dinners. And indeed, it took some time for the surrounding region to get used to this new use of the historic land estate: An account of a car-crash on the road next to the fields of Svanholm was once told to me by one of the founding members of the community. A car had suddenly been driving in the wrong side of the road, because the driver had been too focused on the topless female members of the Svanholm commune, who were weeding in the fields adjacent to the road.

This incident was apparently also in the local newspaper, and it resulted in the decision between the Svanholm members to abandon the toplessness in the publicly viewable fields. Despite the humoresque part of the story (no one were severely hurt in the car-crash due to slow speed), the story provides an excellent window into some of the adjustments that Svanholm had to make in order to fit better into the surrounding area, in which the estate lies. Furthermore, it also goes to show the oddity that the commune was to people from the region, who were not by any means used to such libertarian ways of doing physical labour.

But the story was only one of many to come. In my time living in the Svanholm estate, I experienced several times how young men from close by towns on scooters drove to Svanholm in order to take a peek into the life of the commune, before speeding away, probably still puzzled about what was going on and how the ‘alternative’ people of the Svanholm commune looked and acted like. Even accounts of a Svanholm barn being burned down some years prior to my time in Svanholm, gave the notion that at least some people from the surrounding region seemed not at all pleased with the commune’s different way of living. Equally symbolic, the official city sign of Svanholm was stolen, while I lived in the estate, as to symbolically demonstrate that some people did not quite accept the existence of the commune. This is naturally only a speculation, but in my view could still indicate some scepticism towards a different way of living. The abovementioned stories show that the Svanholm commune has had to solve both internal affairs and challenges, as well as finding its place in the surrounding region, seeking the acceptance of the people in the neighbouring towns.

Looking more towards the internal affairs, it was from the beginning an important factor to formulate some of the foundational principles of how life in Svanholm was intended to be guided by. But as it happens, ideology can often be different from the apparent reality: “When we were actually on the grounds of Svanholm, all theoretical discussions did not matter...we had the collective experience in a theoretical sense, but we did not know the reality that we suddenly stood in the middle of.” (Holm 1985: 3). And what the founding members stood in the middle of, was a new way of life in the countryside with ambitions of establishing and running an organic farming practice, whilst living the communal life on the basis of a shared economy – aspects and concepts that will be examined and explored later on in this paper.

But these concepts inherently had additional wishes from individual community members. As one Svanholmer described it: “We each have our dreams of finding a new identity, living in the countryside...live a healthier and more engaged life...and create some beautiful settings for our children to grow up in, in community with others.” (Holm 1985: 3). It is thus important to understand that there were already from the onset of the commune, a vast range of ideas that had to be shared among a large group of people, first in theory and afterwards in practice. And the latter would leave little space for the former in the first years of the commune: “...it can be difficult to find the ideals. They have really been pulled down into the ‘real, practical realizable everyday life’, which has become so central to us.” (Holm 1985: 3).

The everyday life showed quickly how initial ideals could be heavily challenged. One of these examples took place in the fields: Here, the ideal would be that the non-farming community members could come and assist in the fields, when heavy jobs such as harvests and alike should take place. With the challenge of being under the weather, not much time for informing the rest of the community about the task could be given by the farming community members, and non-farming Svanholmers had already made other plans, which they were not necessarily ready to cancel. This example gives a good indication of the importance of trying to balance how much work should be carried out jointly and how much should be fully carried out in smaller groups.

And indeed, many smaller groups have been established in the Svanholm commune ever since: some of them intentionally for shorter periods and some being more long-lasting. In the path towards present day Svanholm, each of them has had to adjust to changing times, needs and demands and they all constitute the working fabric of Svanholm. So, how is the fabric looking in the present day? To give some introductory answering indications to this, the reader will be presented to some curious facts about Svanholm in the following.

#### Facts about Svanholm

- Around 150 inhabitants – 100 adults and 50 children
- About 2/3 work outside Svanholm and the last 1/3 on the estate grounds
- Svanholm covers 420 hectares land, of which 120 is forest
- First historical account of the Svanholm estate is from 1357
- There have since been 58 owners of the estate

- The commune purchased the estate for 30 million Danish kroner in 1978
- As a standard, there is one room per person
- There are around 120 cows, 200 sheep, 200 chicken, 25 goats & 12 pigs
- Additionally, as pets, you can find horses, dogs, cats and rabbits
- The estate lies in Denmark, about one hour northwest of Copenhagen

These presented facts give a quick numerical peak into the community as it looks around twenty years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The numbers also illustrate the size of the ecovillage and that it indeed is an entire village: a little but complex society with many inner workings and entities – and with a 40-year history behind it. Through the chapter on the history of the commune, I have sought to illuminate this historical background to the nowadays Svanholm, in order to give the reader an insight into how sustainability has been understood in Svanholm already from day one of the community's existence, both on a philosophical and ideological level, as well as in the everyday practical sense. Similarly, in different aspects of sustainability, whether it be the social, political, environmental or economic. The chapter has also touched upon some of the challenges that the community has faced, both internally and externally.

In the following chapters, I wish to give a deeper insight into the different aspects of sustainability in Svanholm, but as opposed to the previous historical chapter, this time set in the current day Svanholm. I have in this regard chosen to divide the sustainability concept into three main areas: the technical & environmental, the economic & political, and the social. Although these different areas are intertwined in multiple ways, I use this division in the hopes that it will be more manageable and convenient for the reader, as well as trying to somewhat emulate the different subgroups of the Svanholm community.

## **Sustainability in Svanholm**

There are many projects in the Svanholm grounds, and they all try to ameliorate both the physical appearance of the place, as well as enriching the social environment. These different elements are all part of life in Svanholm, and they certainly influence one another in a multitude of ways. But they provide, directly and indirectly, an insight into the values and understandings of sustainability in Svanholm.

## Technical & Environmental Sustainability

In the majority of my time in Svanholm, I was a volunteer in the so-called Building Group, which is the working group in Svanholm that manages, improves and repairs all the buildings on the premises, as well as taking care of all the common green areas. This working group has served as an excellent window into the technicalities that lie behind running a village like Svanholm with all its inhabitants. It is an ongoing process of restoring, rebuilding and managing all the buildings on site – a total of about 20.000 m<sup>2</sup>. But the work does not stop at this point. Every day is an opportunity to refine Svanholm in an ever more sustainable direction, which is quite clear around the daily meetings in the Building Group, in which matters of sustainability are discussed and debated. This is the engine room of Svanholm, in which workers with different expertise come together and try to agree upon which actions to take, whether it be in the minutest practical details of which kind of screw to choose, or in abstruse conversations about the role of Svanholm in a bigger societal and environmental context. So which actions come out of these discussions? In the following are some examples of the technical and environmental solutions present in Svanholm.

### Transportation

When moving in as a new member of Svanholm, it is possible to bring one's own car for private use. But in this ecovillage, there is also an alternative option: Svanholm has a fleet of about twenty shared cars, of around which three are electric – so far: the future goal is to have only electric cars. When a member needs to use one of the cars, it is simply done by booking the selected car, either on the phone or on a computer. The timeframe for usage is chosen, the car key is collected and the car is ready to go. Minor reparations and maintenance are taken care of by the Building Group by a car-mechanically educated worker. The shared cars are all ranked on a list, ranging from least to most polluting, giving the Svanholm members an easy choice of selecting the less polluting vehicle when available.

But if members want to pollute even less and still transport themselves, there is the alternative of booking one of Svanholm's shared electric bikes. These bikes are an excellent choice for the many commuters of Svanholm, who can bike the thirteen

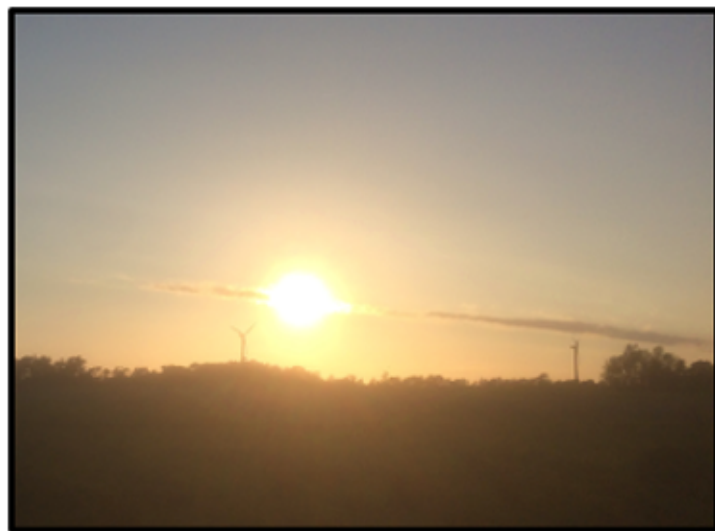


kilometres to the larger town of Frederikssund, from which they can board a train with the bike and thereby go to work in Copenhagen. The members of Svanholm have, since their first e-bike purchases in 2014, been driving more than 250.000 kilometres. This impressive figure has also meant a decrease in the number of shared cars, thus lowering the CO2 footprint since purchasing the e-bikes. These carriage improvements have high value for the members of the community, due to the rural position of Svanholm, thus ensuring that commuting for work in the bigger cities is a possibility. Beyond the commuting opportunities, it is noteworthy that the 1/3 of the adults working on the Svanholm grounds, can go from home to work either by a small walk or bike ride. Both the shared cars and the shared e-bikes obviously need power to run and the source of this power is also an area, on which Svanholm has been focusing.

#### Electricity, Heating & Water

The path to securing electricity through renewable sources can be quite a long endeavour, but it is a field in which Svanholm has sought different interesting solutions, working with possibilities within the locale, as well ensuring that the ideas brought to the table are financially feasible. In the first decade of the commune, many ideas within renewable electricity sources were discussed, and in 1989 two

windmills, each with 200 kilowatts, were placed in the outskirts of the Svanholm estate – each on top of a hill with a good grip of the almost eternal Danish western wind coming from one of two fjords that surround the peninsula, in which Svanholm is placed. These two larger windmills were



*(Renewable Energy, own photo, May 2018)*

with their location also close to the neighbours of the commune, and a co-owning deal was planned with a few of these. The interest from the surrounding neighbours dwindled and instead the Danish national power company (by the time called NESAs)

came to be the co-owner of the two windmills. Many years later into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Svanholm gained full ownership of both windmills, and they still stand today, providing Svanholm with a significant and, if the wind is strong, an all-encompassing amount of the needed energy, although the mills are getting closer to retiring.

But it is not always windy in Denmark, which has naturally also been noticed in Svanholm. Therefore, solar cells have been installed as the newer supplement to getting closer towards the goal of solely using green energy. Here, the many old farming buildings on the estate have had the advantage of providing the commune with plenty of roofed square meters, for which to place the solar panels. The contribution from these cells is also noticeable, although this solution also has its limitations in short and dark winter times, of which the country of Denmark has plenty.

And in these dark Danish winter times, warmth is needed and good renewable heating sources are in high demand. In this area, the commune of Svanholm can benefit from being almost completely surrounded by forest, mostly planted in a fairly distant feudal past. Selected trees from these woods are felled and cut out into small chips that can be used in Svanholm's own woodchip-facility, in which they are hereby turned into much-needed heat for the winter. This resource has its clear advantage in being tremendously local, whilst there is a possibility to have it running fairly sustainably, when new trees can be planted, upholding a circular movement. The heat from the woodchip-facility can be used to heat water, and the same process can occur through the solar water heaters installed on the roof, similarly to the electricity-providing solar cells.

But a quenching glass of water on a hot summer's day is equally important for a thriving community, and with Svanholm's own water treatment facility including a well, besides the general good quality of groundwater in the Danish soil, a solid foundation is made for securing high quality drinking water for the inhabitants of Svanholm. The water-treatment facilities can be mostly operated by the both plumbing and electricity-skilled Building Group, thus ensuring a fast way to fix any problems that might occur with the different installations on site. But the commune cannot live on water alone...

### Food, Recycling & CO2 Emissions

One of the recurring themes, when talking about Svanholm, is the food. Around the

abovementioned forest, the Svanholm grounds are consisting of fields, all securing a steady food supply for the Svanholmers. Whether it be vegetables, fruits or meat – these organic foods all find their way to both costumers outside of the commune, as well as into the stomachs of the commune members.

Here, the produce goes through the main kitchen, before being served in the



*(The common kitchen, own photo, April 2019)*

adjacent dining hall, poetically described by one member: “To come together for the common dinner is fantastic...when we are together, we are in the heart of Svanholm, which the big kitchen is.” (Interview 8: 39 minutes). This heart is on a daily basis run by the Kitchen Group, but every member has both cooking and dishwashing chores, so everyone is in fact running the common kitchen.

In the outskirts of the main kitchen, you find the pantry, where community members can pick up the food they need, whether it be a snack, some fruit or ingredients for a meal with the nuclear family. This abundance could seem like a place of conflict and greed, but not according to one Svanholmer: “I actually throw out less food here, than I did in the city. I also respect the food more, because it is also a way of respecting the others in Svanholm. I do not want to take too much, because I can just fetch some more tomorrow.” (Interview 7: 45 minutes). Having this said, there are restrictions on certain items, such as fruit: “We have a fruit policy that is six pieces of fruit a week per person...and some people also have difficulties with that.” (Interview 8: 34 minutes). This is not because fruit is particularly popular in Svanholm, but it mostly pertains to the imported subtropical or tropical fruits, such as oranges, kiwis and alike, which the community do not want to buy too many of, due to their higher CO<sub>2</sub> footprint of coming from afar.

Not only does such a higher CO<sub>2</sub> footprint come from the long journey, but another factor is also in play: “Things are organized differently here...the example that you can go to the main kitchen and fetch small portions, instead of having to buy gigantic portions that are wrapped in plastic.” (Interview 7: 45 minutes). The element of members being free from wrapping is an advantage, but as every other system,

there are disadvantages, depending on the eye of the beholder: “You also see a lot of Svanholmers who do not show up for common dinner, because the food was not what they wanted.” (Interview 8: 12 minutes). This is a part of the ever-recurring debated theme of individuality versus community, but the size of Svanholm makes it quite possible to choose on a daily basis, if one wants to eat either in solitude, with the nuclear family, or with a group of hundred hungry fellow community members.

Despite less wrapping per person for the food in Svanholm, the community is still a part of a larger Western society, where acquiring things can seem easier than dispatching them, so the general notion of recycling is also a hot topic in the community. To face this, a few initiatives have been undertaken: Firstly, a free shop for clothes makes it possible for the Svanholmers to hand in the clothes they do not want to keep, hereby giving the opportunity for other people in the community to renew their wardrobe. Such a system makes good sense in terms of recycling and with the size of the community, there are frequent options for free shopping.

This free shop concept, similar to the free food fetching in the main kitchen’s pantry, is considered an important factor in the Svanholm life, as one member explains: “I really enjoy that you can walk around here for several days without having to take your credit card out of the pocket – that is a liberation” (Interview 3: 17 minutes).



*(Recycling, own photo, April 2020)*

Similar to the clothing free shop, another free shop was created, so that other things such as toys for children, books, kitchenware and alike could circulate instead of merely being thrown in the garbage container. The challenge in these free shops is a matter of keeping them neat and decluttered, in order to keep up the interest in using

them. The recycling of things is just one aspect of the multifaceted area of sustainability in Svanholm, but the different aspects all add up, which was noticed by a Finnish consulting and engineering firm in 2009. The company, at the time called Pöyry, tried to measure the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from a Danish average and three different ecovillages respectively, including Svanholm (Hansen 2009: 4-9). The study looked at how many tons of CO<sub>2</sub> an average Danish citizen emits, versus one person living in an ecovillage. The study included both heating, transportation, electricity, goods consumption and water usage and it explains that Svanholmers are merely emitting a third of the Danish average per year (Ibid.). Such a noticeable difference can naturally be criticised and challenged, but it points out some of the areas that characterize solutions provided in Svanholm, whether it be shared cars, short-distance transportation of food or own sources of renewable energy. But as one Svanholmer points out, there is still room for improvement: “How can we transform the agriculture, so that we do not use as many fossil fuels? Right now, we are still dependent on our tractors and tools.” (Interview 4: 77 minutes). This issue is also discussed in Svanholm.

It is important to note that the Pöyry report is now more than a decade old, and it would indeed be very interesting to see, how the results would turn out in a current-day investigation. But the report does provide Svanholmers and other ecovillagers with some knowledge to explain, how it can be in some measurable way more sustainable to live in an ecovillage, at least when it comes to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Having that said, the phenomenon of sustainability does not only have to deal with energy, recycling and windmills. Other factors play a part as well, when discussing sustainability in Svanholm, which I will present in the following two chapters.

### **Economic & Political Sustainability**

If there is not enough money to invest in new renewable sources of energy or modes of transportation, such plans come to a halt. This obvious fact is just one out of countless examples on how to prioritize the financial means in a communal manner. At the scale of Svanholm, it requires many meetings in settling how the budget for the coming year is going to appear – for many, a long and demanding process. As one Svanholmer describes it concisely: “There are always more wishes than there is money.” (Interview 4: 81 minutes). In general, many discussions are carried out,

when it comes to economic matters. To shed light on this area, I therefore present Svanholm's economic model in the following.

### Shared Economy in Svanholm

When telling about Svanholm, there is an area that many outside listeners will often inquire about: the shared economy. And as one Svanholmer notes: "Our shared economy is almost the precondition for how everything is here." (Interview 2: 10 minutes). This is one of the areas in which Svanholm particularly stands out from the general society, because not many places run on the same economic principles as in Svanholm. In one of my interviews, I asked if Svanholm could be viewed as an ecovillage, to which was answered: "It is organized maybe more as a family because of the shared economy." (Interview 1: 24 minutes).

So how does this family-felt shared economy work? As a member of the community, you pay all of your gross salary to the commune and you then get back between 10% and 17,5% of that amount, depending on the size of your salary, and these remaining percentages can pay for expenses such as holidays, wine, coffee, medicine and clothes. Some would argue that this is less of a good deal, if you have a high salary. This would at least be the argument, if you see things solely from an individualistic point of view. But from Svanholm's point of view, if you really take seriously the notion of 'sharing is caring', then you would probably be quite happy to know that you are exceedingly contributing to the common pool, which will benefit everyone in the community.

And what about the around 80% that goes into the common pool? This main part funnels out into many areas of Svanholm life, paying first and foremost for food and housing. It also pays for taxes, insurances, electricity, heating, water, cleaning- and hygiene products and similar items. But beyond this, the common pool also pays for many of the services that make the whole place function the way it does. It would certainly be worth mentioning the different working groups in this regard, whose salaries are paid hereby. Similarly, the common pool also pays for Svanholm's organic vegetable production as well as for the aforementioned fleet of cars and bikes that can be used by the community members.

When talking to people from outside Svanholm about the shared economy, you will usually meet a lot of scepticism at first, because of the initial mentioning of the 80% going into the common pool. But as soon as you start talking about the



services, provisions and facilities that the community members get from this shared economy, the sceptic voices usually turn to a more curious position. The story is similar to the one about the Danish tax-system: When informing about a system, in which you pay a fairly high amount of tax, but where people actually also do get benefits from it, whether it be free education, free healthcare or good biking lanes for the citizens. Svanholm takes this Danish story to a more extreme level in its shared economy.

In order to keep this economy well-organised, Svanholm has its own economy group, who make sure that the incomes and expenses are kept track of and organised properly. This is the case for the overall economy, but it also has an influence on the individual Svanholmer, as one of my interviewees proudly states: “I have not filled out a tax return in 40 years.” (Interview 4: 49 minutes). This is a good example of how the different working groups in Svanholm can create more time and hereby make life easier for the individual community member. There is almost a sense of individual freedom, which another Svanholmer also notes:

“It has its limitations that you are financially dependent of each other here, but there is a contradiction between freedom from and freedom to, where in the city we had a high degree of freedom from obligations and no one really expected anything from us, but on the contrary, we did not have the freedom to make meaningful projects and to build our own life.” (Interview 6: 10 minutes).

### Politics in Svanholm

In order to build such a meaningful and common life in Svanholm, discussions have to be held. This is a fact that the Svanholmers are very well aware of, especially in the early years of the commune: “We held meetings almost every evening...and we had to decide that these meetings could only go on for a certain amount of time, because otherwise it would be the people staying up, who would make the decisions.” (Interview 4: 13 minutes). Several thousand decisions have been taken during the 40 years of the commune’s existence, and these are merely the officially registered from the common meetings. Beyond this number, many small-scale agreements have naturally taken place around the evening campfire or the tables in the dining hall, all to sustain the existence of the Svanholm commune.

But the monthly common meeting is the supreme authority in Svanholm. I was once asked by a friend, who the boss in Svanholm is. To this, I could reply that there is no single person, who reigns supreme. The fact that the common meeting is the main stage for making decisions, naturally implies that whoever takes part in these meetings can have a greater influence than the people who decide not to participate. Although it is highly advised that all members join the



*(Common Meeting, own photo, May 2018)*

monthly common meeting, it also seems to be accepted that this cannot always be the case and that some Svanholmers make their influence on Svanholm life in other manners than the strictly political.

In the common meeting, a particular type of democracy is practised: consensus democracy. This type of democracy basically means that the idea of the majority vote is cast aside. Instead, agreement is made from discussing the matter in question until common ground is reached. The natural critique of this type of decision-making is that it takes too long time, because it is not simply a matter of votes. The element of time has also been noticed by the Svanholmers, and therefore a time limit is set, in order to put an end to the discussions for the particular meeting. There is also a schedule made for the meeting, ensuring that the topics for the day are all discussed.

The consensus democracy might not be the quickest in reaching agreement, but there are other advantages, according to one of my informants: “I really like the consensus-based democracy...I do not know whether it is the most democratic system, but it is more lively and more creative, because ideas can form in the discussion.” (Interview 7: 76 minutes). Should there be a case, in which one single person is against an idea that the rest agree upon, the opponent is asked to come with a new and more compromising solution for the following meeting, and the parts will



then try to find common ground, which according to one Svanholmer seems possible: “You have to be able to trust each other, and you have to be willing to make compromises around your own opinions...I think people here are good at that.” (Interview 1: 52 minutes).

In this way of decision-making, there will, as in other political systems, be an element of rhetorical skillfulness, but there is a possibility for every member of the commune to be heard and have their opinion treated respectfully. In my fieldwork diary, I also experienced this political equality in the Svanholm commune:

*“It is all about creating cultures that provide a breeding ground for fruitful results. As with plants, where many factors play a part in the welfare of the plant, it is about nurturing these many elements, which coherently create healthy and wholesome people. I have seen many beautiful places, but I know that many of them are founded on unequal societies, in which others had to suffer for these places to arise. It is therefore liberating to find this commune that is not founded on injustice, but where equality has been intact from the beginning.”*

*(Diary, 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018)*

Svanholm is a place with different kinds of people, and although there might be political commonalities, there are indeed differences in the political spectrum: “...if Svanholm has any ism, then it is the ism to have no isms.” (Holm 1993: 15). Or as another Svanholmer puts it: “It has never been a need to affiliate with a certain ideology...there is a more or less an agreed rhythm, but it is not caused by a common political or religious/spiritual starting point.” (Johannessen 1999: 19). These curious ways of presenting the political side of Svanholm serve as good examples of the diversity within the commune. And even if a member is not showing up to every meeting held, there might still be a political agenda present, as one of my interviewees cunningly expresses: “I have not signed up for any political parties, but I feel that I am actually doing a political piece of work by living here.” (Interview 4: 49 minutes).

## **Social Sustainability**

In the following chapter, I will elucidate the importance of the social life in Svanholm. This will be carried out with a focus on the festive celebrations and the important symbolic meanings herein, as well as in providing the reader with some of

the social challenges that a miniature society as Svanholm can be faced with, internally and externally.

### Celebrations

Despite many serious political discussions and possibly tiresome budget meetings, there are also other ways of continuously fabricating the intricate web of Svanholm life, when it comes to sustaining the existence of this ecovillage. One more joyous aspect of life in Svanholm can be seen scattered throughout the Svanholm calendar: the festive celebrations. Besides the spontaneous parties that arise on any given weekend,

the official celebrations provide the community members with something that might be difficult to reach in the modern world: “The parties are precious to us, because it often happens at these gatherings that we experience the warm feeling of true community, which



*(Birthday, own photo, May 2018)*

can only be found in glimpses in the everyday life – a more lyrical experience of belonging.” (Holm 1985: 30). This romantic statement is taken seriously in Svanholm, and it is also noticed by one of my informants: “Sometimes at certain festivities or ceremonies, I feel we share the same heartbeat. This makes me naturally high and in this I can feel truly happy.” (Interview 4: 76 minutes).

In my fieldwork, I took part in many festive moments. One of these was the annual winter solstice celebration, amidst the dark Danish winter. This day began with a common walk through some of the Svanholm forests, in one of which a fire was made and a speech held from one of the senior community members. Around the fire stood people in all ages, listening to the wise words that spoke about cohesion and community. Following from this, self-made torches were handed out and ignited in the fire. Now the walk back to estate began. What could be seen, was a caravan of around 100 people, all with torches lightning up the early December night.

It is not every day that one gets to take a walk with that number of people, and the symbolism of unity was indeed felt by the fieldworker. One of my informants explained this communal feeling poetically: “You think yourself to be bigger, than you actually are.” (Interview 7: 61 minutes). After returning to the estate, all the



*(Winter solstice, photo from Svanholm, December 2017)*

torches were put into an even greater bonfire, thus lightning up the estate building and the adjacent gardens. Songs were sung, warming drinks were handed out and an evening feast with included chain dance ensued. All these actions underlined the community feeling in Svanholm, and everyone had a part to play: “The

abilities of the individual develop from being individual and personal to constituents in a common pool, enabling us to all get a sense of an opportunity to act, power of action and cohesion.” (Holm 1985: 33). Another Svanholmer describes the cohesion thusly: “Community is when you take a helicopter’s perspective on things and see them from outside.” (Interview 2: 17 minutes). These statements point towards the successful parts of the social life in Svanholm.

### Social Challenges

But as in every other society, there are always challenges in reaching such senses of community. One of the difficulties in the social arena is the ability to include every single member in the ‘fællesskab’, which is the almost impossibly translatable Danish word for community. There will usually be members, who at times feel more in the periphery of the social arena. They might go through difficult times on a more personal level, or they might not feel socially in sync with the commune. It is then the task of the community to work out how to bring these individuals back into the warmth, which to one Svanholmer seems mandatory: “We have to go into dialogue about finding solutions to people’s problems, if it concerns the community...we

cannot close our eyes towards each other...we are forced to feel compassion...” (Interview 1: 21 minutes).

As with many other aspects of communal life in Svanholm, a group has been formed with a handful of Svanholmers, focusing on the social welfare of the community members. In other words, there is a collective help towards the individual. Taking part in such groups sustains the social life: “You participate in different groups...to make the organism live.” (Interview 4: 27 minutes). Another informant even states that: “If you do not involve yourself in the commune, then it must be a very strange place to live.” (Interview 8: 24 minutes). This social organization can also be seen on a more practical level, when people are moving from one housing to another: A note is put up, and suddenly you have a crew of twenty people helping to carry the furniture, moving boxes and alike. This is usually also the case, when new people move into Svanholm.

And moving into Svanholm points to another social challenge: the limitations of who can become a community member. In order to reach this, there are certain requirements that has to be met: on an economic side, it cannot be possible to move in, if one is heavily indebted. From a working aspect, there will be an obligation of having a full-time job. There is also the element of how Svanholm is being seen from the outside world: “Many people mistakenly perceive us as a kind of institution, instead of what we really are: a home for 150 people, who need as much privacy as everyone else. This misconception can lead to Svanholm being seen as the ideal place for people with heavy problems...” (Johannessen 1999: 12).

The limitation of who can become a member might also be explained by the level of resourcefulness that life in Svanholm presupposes, as explained by one of my informants: “You have many responsibilities when you live here...but I could not imagine what freedom should be without responsibilities.” (Interview 2: 34 minutes). The idea of individuals being responsible to the community also constitutes the social sustainability in Svanholm, as another community member clarifies: “Ideally, you must manage the resources in a way where you do not take more than you give – that is what we are working towards. It has to be sustainable – both on an environmental and human level.” (Johannessen 1999: 19).

A powerful example of the strength of the community was felt by one of my informants: “When you are in trouble, the network is also very strong...when I was

very ill, the commune was behind me. They meditated for many days for me, which I was very moved by.” (Interview 4: 47 minutes). The case shows the care that lies internally between the members of the community, but what about the external care? During my fieldwork, I came to the understanding that this was another social matter being discussed in Svanholm. As one informant describes: “I think that we have good settings for a good life and we should actually use this energy to create something that reaches out beyond ourselves.” (Interview 3: 63 minutes). Another informant agrees: “It is a fear that it becomes too much of a bubble, instead of a place that reaches out to the world, because everything becomes more valuable when you share it with others.” (Interview 7: 33 minutes).

So how can Svanholm reach out to the external world? The first very noticeable reply to this can be found in the continuous flow of volunteers coming to Svanholm from around the world. This was, besides being a fieldworker, also my role in Svanholm. The volunteers can be a window towards the outside world. One of my informants is not doubting the value of this: “I can hardly imagine Svanholm without the volunteers...I think they bring many good things to the place.” (Interview 8: 29 minutes). These volunteers can also bring the awareness about Svanholm out to many countries, inspiring others wanting to live in similar ways. During my time as a volunteer, I met many volunteers who were dreaming of creating similar places.

In addition to this, there is also a certain confidence that Svanholm actually can inspire: “Just in the way we have organized, we are an example that it is possible within the frames of our society to organize one’s life differently and communally affect some of the things that matters for the future of the planet.” (Johannessen 1999: 20). In the coming discussion, I will explore how Svanholm with its values and thoughts about sustainability can be seen in connection to the outside world. I will also shed light on the scepticism that Svanholm and other ecovillages can be met with, as well as bridging the realities in Svanholm to the philosophy in human ecology. In order to zoom out both geographically and temporally, hereby seeing Svanholm in a greater perspective, I would initially like to present to the reader some very powerful words, coming from across the Atlantic Ocean almost 50 years back in time...

## Discussion – A Desired Future

“It is clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper, deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession...In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we have discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We have learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives, which have no confidence or purpose...This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.” (Website 3).

These words were expressed on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1979 – one year after the birth of the Svanholm commune – by the American president at the time, Jimmy Carter. These sentences were a part of his speech to the American People, entitled “A Crisis of Confidence” (Website 3). Jimmy Carter gave this speech in the midst of an oil-crisis that shocked the world in the late 1970’s. This particular oil-crisis is also known as the second oil-crisis, due to its predecessor in 1973. During his presidency from 1977-1981, Carter spoke to an American population as well as a Western world about elements in a way of life that were, in Carter’s eyes, neither desirable nor sustainable. This presidential speech could probably have been written by scholars from postdevelopment theory, degrowth theory or indeed deep ecology – or perhaps even from community members of Svanholm. The speech excerpt presents some of the areas, in which Svanholm and other ecovillages have sought to think differently.

In present day Svanholm, these numerous aspects of sustainability are still being discussed. The continued discussions are both dealing with learnings from the past, as well as trying to look into the future with various goals in mind. This was especially the case, when I attended a workshop in Svanholm with visions for the future on the agenda. And in attempting to visualize both the past and the desired future, a graph was handed out to me and other attending community members. The graph showed the manifold strands of sustainable living that Svanholm is working with. There are elements in both technical/environmental, social, political and financial areas, and the graph has also been a source of inspiration for the tripartite of sustainability in this thesis. In the centre of the graph, the main vision was presented: “Svanholm wants to

be a solid, dynamic and inspiring community, which thrive within the frames of nature.” In the ending words of the vision, the deep ecology philosophy seems compelling to attach, when it comes to thriving within the frames of nature. This central Svanholm vision also talks about being an inspiring community. But is such inspiration possible, both from Svanholm or indeed other ecovillages? Such a question is a part of a critique that I have often heard in my time in Svanholm. This could come from both family members, friends, as well as fellow academics. The American sociologist, Erik Olin Wright has a comment to this critique:

“Activists on the left, especially those on the radical left, often regard these kinds of locally oriented, community-based initiatives as not being very political, because they do not always involve direct confrontation with political power. This is a narrow view of politics. Interstitial strategies to create real utopias involve showing that another world is possible by building it in the spaces available, and then pushing against the state and public policy to expand those spaces.” (Wright 2012: 22).

To Wright, there is indeed a possibility of being a source of inspiration, despite not being directly on the political battle front. This is also noticed by the American architect and systems theorist, Buckminster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” (Website 4). This quite unwavering and perhaps slightly unvarnished statement seems to support and underline Wright’s argument. And to use the poetic terms by the environmentalist, Paul Robbins, in his book on political ecology, then Svanholm can probably be seen as a seed instead of being the hatchet in a political sense (Robbins 2012: 98). But according to one Svanholmer, maybe it is time to choose a more forward tactic, when it comes to being inspirational to others:

“The commune has never really had an ambition to annoy the rest of society with all kinds of models, but I actually think we should change this. It gives a whole different energy, if you do not only think your ideas are good, but actually think they are better...that you can say: you could actually benefit from copying some of the things we have here.” (Interview 5: 4 minutes).

There is herein a clear confidence in being able to inspire others with the ideas created in a place like Svanholm. In a different paper, it would indeed be interesting

to see, if other ecovillages share a similar confidence. Comparing several ecovillages and their ideas around sustainability was also my first idea for this thesis, until it became clear that Svanholm contained a cornucopia of elements to academically plunge into.

Another part of the, to my ears, often heard critique of ecovillages, comes in the issue of scale. Is it possible for population-wise droplets – as ecovillages undoubtedly are – to change society on a larger scale? This is a valid question and perhaps it is still unanswered. But to aforementioned ecovillager, Liz Walker from the American ecovillage of Ithaca, there is reason to believe the plausibility of such a change coming from ecovillages: “I can imagine that a family will live in an ‘eco-home’ that is nested within an ‘eco-village’, that, in turn, is nested within an ‘eco-city’, and so on up the scale to the bioregion, nation, and world.” (Walker 2005: xv). Such idealism might be easy in words, but of course more complicated in practice. Despite this, the idealism in itself might be an important ingredient in the recipe of change, according to Kothari et al.:

“Indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society and other actors of change need to continue dreaming, practicing, and promoting these alternatives, for one day there will be an overwhelming demand for them, and it will be tragic if we would have meanwhile abandoned them because we thought they were an impossibility.” (Kothari et al. 2014: 373).

Besides the idealistic perspective of keeping dreams of a different future alive, there is also a relevant point in the practical aspect. Just like natural science, it is a matter of test and trial, which is also observed by a Svanholmer: “It is difficult to make the general society understand that it takes many experiments to find feasible roads to a sustainable future.” (Holm 1993: 55). In the Svanholm laboratory, many experiments are certainly tried out, several with a focus on being as self-sufficient and resource-wise as local as possible, whilst being very communal. To many people in the general society, this might seem quite alternative. But to one Svanholmer, living in such a way is not so very strange: “This is not a revolution in itself necessarily, this is just a way of living. And I do not find it very radical actually. I find it more radical buying a big apartment in Copenhagen. I find that to be stranger.” (Interview 7: 37 minutes).



And perhaps the size of the typical ecovillage could be the right dimension for a more sustainable future, according to Walker:

“The scale of the household is often too small and that of the city too large to realize many of the opportunities for sustainable living. However, at the scale of an ecovillage, the strength of one person or family meets the strength of others and, working together, can create something that was not possible before.” (Walker 2005: xv).

The author of this quote is, as previously explained, an ecovillager and it might be easier to be hopeful, confident and optimistic from such a position, when you live in an ecovillage setting, where concrete solutions to a more sustainable future is put into practice. During my fieldwork, I have met many opinions on how to view the future, be it pessimistic or optimistic. But, according to Walker, perhaps the aspect of being able to fully live out some of your ideals in everyday life can be a part an optimistic attitude towards the future, as well as defining a role for ecovillages:

“I see us as incubators of a new culture, one that values cooperation in the most profound sense: cooperation between diverse peoples and cooperation with nature. We are part of a vast wave of change, made up of billions of people who want to be free from war, environmental destruction, and economic slavery. Along with other growing movements, we are taking the brave step of trying to live out our ideals.” (Walker 2005: 220).

Taking such brave steps is not an easy task, and it is a journey that is far from over. This is also the case in Svanholm, despite its almost half-century journey, as one of my interviewees explains: “Even though this place has existed for a long time and has thus consolidated itself in many ways, then it is still a moving place...it is a never-ending project.” (Interview 3: 33 minutes). And trying to maintain a place like Svanholm is, to this day, an ongoing stride: “We are still in the process of defining a project that can sustain...” (Interview 3: 35 minutes). In this way continues the everyday voyage towards being a harmonic place as described in the introductory lines in Carson’s *Silent Spring* for this Danish ecovillage – thus continues the journey of Sustaining Svanholm.

## Conclusions

Seen from the outside, Svanholm may look like a small dot on map, but through my time living in this Danish commune, it turned out to be quite a complex place. I wished to understand its values and visions in the multifaceted realm of sustainability, to grasp how the community members would understand this phenomenon. Such an exploration would become both philosophical and practical – and it would take me on a personal journey through this ecovillage that lasted more than two years.

The journey brought me to many of the innumerable nooks and crannies of this historic estate and its surrounding lands, as well as into the mindsets of the Svanholmers, both through historic resources from the past and in conversations with current community members. From these descriptions and dialogues, I have recognised the immense intricacy of Svanholm and how the history of the commune has shaped its current values and future visions for a sustainable and prosperous life.

In this thesis, I have sought to include as much as this gained knowledge, whilst staying within the required scope of the assignment. This is, also in this case, a tricky task, when so much can be said about Svanholm and so many perspectives could have been chosen. This is also true on the more theoretical side of things, where I have selected postdevelopment theory, degrowth theory and deep ecology as theoretical lenses, for which to see Svanholm and the phenomenon of ecovillages through.

Although I have learned that different areas within sustainability certainly interweave and affect one another, I have – for the sake of clarity to the reader – decided to divide Svanholm’s understanding and practice of sustainability in a trifold manner, looking into both technical & environmental, economic & political and social facets, hopefully providing the reader with a wholesome understanding of Svanholm through its many subdivisions. Svanholm is a place of many ideas, hopes and visions. In my ending discussion, I have sought to illuminate some of these, whilst also seeing them in a larger perspective, in dealing with valid critical questions towards ecovillages.

I have hereby highlighted both some of the possibilities as well as the challenges that Svanholm and other ecovillages face. It seems there are plenty of sustainability challenges in our time, but in true romantic and hopeful fashion, I

believe that a better path towards the future can be taken, when having “...an understanding for the necessity of diversity and the uniqueness of the planet’s grandeur, and that human beings must take a place as a part of a greater whole.” (Holm 1993: 54). In this manner spoke once a Svanholmer and thus concludes this human ecology thesis.



*(Sky over Svanholm, own photo, September 2020)*

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## Appendix – Interview Guide

Here are my questions for various inhabitants of Svanholm. The eight interviews, all anonymized in this thesis, were conducted in Danish in 2017 and 2018, and I here bring the questions both in Danish and English:

1. Hvad er dit navn og alder?

- *What is your name and age?*

2. Hvor lang tid har du boet på Svanholm?

- *For how long have you lived in Svanholm?*

3. Hvad lavede du før du flyttede til Svanholm?

- *What did you do before you moved to Svanholm?*

4. Hvordan flyttede du herud?

- *How did you move out here?*

5. Hvad synes du om at bo på Svanholm?

- *What do you think about living in Svanholm?*

6. Hvis du skulle nævne én ting, hvad er så det bedste ved at bo på Svanholm?

- *If you should mention one thing, what is the best about living in Svanholm?*

7. Arbejder du på eller uden for Svanholm?

- *Do you work in Svanholm or outside Svanholm?*

8. Hvad arbejder du med?

- *What do you work with?*

9. Hvad er bedre ved at bo på Svanholm end uden for Svanholm?

- *What is better by living in Svanholm than by living outside Svanholm?*

10. Hvad er bedre ved at bo uden for Svanholm end på Svanholm?



- *What is better living outside Svanholm than by living in Svanholm?*
11. Hvad synes du Svanholm mangler / Hvad kan blive forbedret på Svanholm?  
- *What do you think Svanholm lacks / What can be improved in Svanholm?*
12. Kan du forklare i korte træk Svanholm's fælles-økonomi?  
- *Can you explain in short terms the shared economy of Svanholm?*
13. Synes du, at der er nok fokus på det sociale? Hvis ikke, hvilke forbedringer kunne skabes?  
- *Do you think there is enough focus on the social aspect? If not, which improvements could be made?*
14. Hvilke fordele og ulemper ser du ved at bo i et storkollektiv som Svanholm?  
- *Which benefits and disadvantages do you see in living in a grand commune such as Svanholm?*
15. Hvilke værdier er vigtige for dig på Svanholm?  
- *Which values are important to you in Svanholm?*
16. Hvad synes du er vigtigt at bibeholde på Svanholm?  
- *What do you think is important to retain in Svanholm?*
17. Hvad er fællesskab for dig?  
- *What is community to you?*
18. Hvad synes du der skal til for at have et godt fællesskab?  
- *What do you think is needed to have a good community?*
19. Synes du der er et godt fællesskab på Svanholm?  
- *Do you think there is a good community in Svanholm?*
20. Hvad synes du om, at Svanholm har volontører?  
- *What do you think about the fact that Svanholm has volunteers?*

21. Synes du, at der skulle være mere forbindelse mellem Svanholmere og volontører, eller mindre?

- *Do you think there should be a closer connection between the Svanholmers and the volunteers?*

22. Hvad synes du om, at volontørerne kommer fra forskellige lande?

- *What do you think about the fact that the volunteers come from different countries?*

23. Ville du ønske, at flere Svanholmere arbejdede på Svanholm?

- *Would you wish that more Svanholmers worked within Svanholm?*

24. Hvad er frihed for dig?

- *What is freedom to you?*

25. Synes du, at der er meget frihed ved at bo på Svanholm?

- *Do you think there is a lot of freedom by living in Svanholm?*

26. Kan Svanholm ses som en kritik af det øvrige samfund?

- *Can Svanholm be seen as a critique of the surrounding society?*

27. Er et sted som Svanholm et bedre sted for verden end det øvrige samfund? Hvis ja, hvordan?

- *Is a place like Svanholm a better place for the world than the surrounding society? If yes, how so?*

28. Hvordan tror du Svanholm kan inspirere? / Bør det overhovedet inspirere?

- *How do you think Svanholm can inspire? / Should it even inspire?*

29. Hvad tror du bliver anderledes for fremtiden på Svanholm?

- *What do you think will be different for the future in Svanholm?*

30. Hvad er dine håb for Svanholm's fremtid?

- *What are your hopes for the future of Svanholm?*

31. Hvad er det gode liv for dig?

- *What is the good life to you?*

32. Hvad kan Svanholm i dén forbindelse?

- *What is Svanholm able to do in that connection?*

33. Er der andet du gerne vil fortælle eller sige om Svanholm til verden derude?

- *Is there anything else you would like to tell or say about Svanholm to the world out there?*