

So What's Permaculture?

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Is it possible to create more abundance in our lives, develop an intimate relationship with the natural world and, at the same time, address our ecological crisis? Does "permaculture" offer a key?

Permaculture is a practical set of ecological design principles and methods for human settlements which can be applied to urban, suburban and watershed scale. Permaculture principles provide a way of thinking that enables people to establish highly productive environments that provide for food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs. These principals are rooted in careful observations of natural patterns and can be applied to all climates and a wide variety of cultures from indigenous to technological.

Bill Mollison from Tasmania and David Holmgren from Australia developed the concept of permaculture in the 1970's. As there was no term at the time for sustainable culture they coined the term "permaculture" to articulate the notion of "permanent agriculture". It evolved into the notion of "permanent culture" as culture and agriculture reflect each other. In other words, how do we as a human species sustain ourselves, provide for our needs and the needs of the environment for an indefinite period of time? Permaculture was first taught as an applied design system by Mollison in 1981. Permaculturists design agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the stability, diversity, and resilience of natural ecosystems.

The permaculture designer gradually discerns optimal methods for integrating water catchment, human shelter and energy systems with tree crops, edible and useful perennials, self-seeding annuals, domestic and wild animals and aquaculture.

The excess or waste products from plants, animals and human activities are used as nutrients to benefit other elements in the system. Plantings are arranged in patterns that can catch water, filter toxins, absorb nutrients and sunlight and block the wind. Particular associations of trees, perennial vines, shrubs and ground covers known to nourish and protect one another, are clustered together. Ponds and other elements are constructed in patterns which maximize their edges to take advantages of the increased biological activity at the intersection of two ecosystems.

The implementation of a design requires proper sequencing and flexibility so that changes can be made as observation and experience bring new understanding. Creating a permaculture environment is a gradual and long-range process. Permaculturists also use "quick-start" techniques like covering weedy or compacted areas with a "sheet compost" - laying on newspapers, cardboard and straw, watering thoroughly, then making little planting holes in the mulch, inserting soil and seedlings and letting the worms, bugs, fungus, micro-organisms and roots do the rest.

Permaculture adopts techniques and principles from disciplines and traditions, old and new, such as indigenous land use and food systems, natural building materials like earth, straw, stone and bamboo as well as renewable energy systems.

The education system within the permaculture community is a two week intensive design course. These courses are offered globally. The curriculum transcends cultural, religious, political and economic boundaries. No two designs or trainings are quite the same. Since 1981 thousands of people have attended permaculture design courses, workshops and seminars, and form a loose global network. Their work fosters a growing understanding of nature's patterns and generates models of sustainable living which aims to achieve maximum productivity with minimal labor and other inputs.

Permaculture Ethics

The ethical basis of permaculture rests upon care for the earth – provision for all life systems to continue and multiply, including access by humans, domestic animals and wildlife to resources necessary for their existence, not the accumulation of wealth, power, or land beyond their needs. “Give away surplus” is a permaculture maxim. Observing the general rule of nature – that cooperative species and associations of self-supporting species make healthy communities, permaculture practitioners value cooperation and recognition of each person's unique contributions rather than standardization and competition.

The Promise of Permaculture

The concept of permaculture grew from an awareness of ecological crisis. Permaculture generates a vision of people breaking free of the dying system and using the land around their homes intensively to provide for more and more of their basic needs. Requiring less labor over time frees one for more creative and socially responsible work. The more productive the areas adjacent to people's dwellings become, the more feasible it is to preserve the remaining natural forests and other wild lands from destruction. Permaculture activists are working to lay foundations for the gradual emergence of self-reliant cooperative clusters – communities of villages.