

Living Lovingly on the Earth

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“Living Lovingly on the Earth” was originally published in The International Permaculture Species Yearbook, 1982 (TIPSY #2). After two decades of studying and teaching permaculture. I lightly edited it. More recently, I have added two more principles to the list and rewrote some parts. The initial distillation of principles in this article required two years of work and discussion by my permaculture students at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution (prison) at Shirley. The writing is mine, but the thinking took place among a few dozen men who were incarcerated, mainly for good reason. It is their contribution as much as my own. The mostly small changes since made result from 25 years of permaculture teaching and input from hundreds of permaculture students. –DH

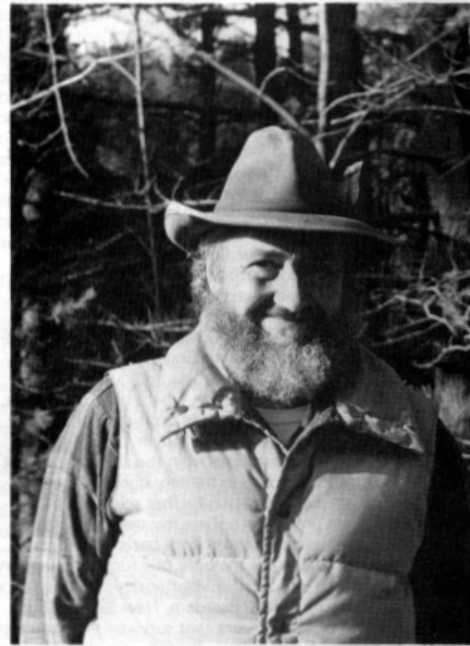


Photo by Cassandra Hemenway

For about 10 years before encountering permaculture, I struggled with a way to express a practical philosophy, or perhaps art is a better term, for living according to the principles of Nature. During this period, the need to formulate and share such a philosophy became pressing. Several impending catastrophes - including rapidly spreading desertification of continents, wholesale modification of the global climate, a runaway greenhouse effect, and nuclear war - threatened our Earth. Even without a marked cataclysmic event, we threatened destruction of as many as a fifth of the remaining species of our planet by the turn of the century, then 19 years away, with the extinction rate, the carbon dioxide buildup, and various other calamitous prospects increasing to the steep portion of an exponential growth curve.¹

The starting point for taking responsibility, to live in a way that heals and nurtures our environment, must be love, love of the Earth. Without embracing this natural love, we cannot attain the wisdom and understanding needed to heal the Earth, no matter how informed and clever and scientific we are able to be.

It follows that if we love and respect the arrangements of land and weather and

plants and animals that make up the Earth, then we wish to live within the bounds and patterns of these forces and beings. This has been done successfully by a variety of Neolithic peoples, such as the Amerindians of the American North East. Such peoples accepted and participated in the abundance offered by Nature. They did not attempt, as Western Society has, to “multiply and subdue the Earth.”

In my understanding, “permaculture” is a word to stand for the process of bringing our lives back into participation with the processes of Earth. Permaculture is a philosophy and ethical construct for the design of our lives and living spaces.

For a variety of reasons, returning to a Neolithic Lifestyle, however desirable, is impossible at this time. No ecosystem on Earth in which we can reasonably participate has been left intact. Native peoples from the tundra to the tropical rain forests now find the ecological bases for their ancestral ways of Life in ruins. If we are to return to a natural way of Life on Earth, we must first heal Nature, heal the Earth herself. Nothing less will justify our continued existence as one species of this planet.

FOUR DISCIPLINES

To heal the Earth, we must first heal our relationship with the Earth. This means self-healing, for it is we, not the rest of creation on this planet, who are out of balance.

I suggest four steps in this self-healing process:

(1) Observe. Become aware of experience, attuned. Observe the natural world and how it works. Look for repeating patterns. Also be aware of your inner “voices” and impulses. You are also a part of Nature.

(2) Trust yourself. Try out your impulses. Do what feels beautiful to you. I believe that our aesthetic sense is an ability much more powerful than our analytical capabilities in helping us make balanced choices. Beauty may be nothing more than the balance between pattern and randomness that typifies a healthy ecosystem. Trust your observations. Experts are fine as resources, but avoid them as authorities. You are the only expert on your experience. It is the only basis by which you can interact with the rest of the natural world.

(3) Respect and honor every being and situation as a unique part of creation. Every person, place and thing is a unique gift from the Universe. Recipes and formulas ignore this uniqueness and your power to respond to it in an appropriately unique way. Seek guidelines, not rules. You belong to one of the most adaptable species on Earth. So adapt instead of dominating.

(4) See everything as part of a whole. Problems that occur together often have common solutions. Ecologies are efficient and durable when all parts support capture, transformation and storage of energy by the whole. Each whole is part of a larger whole, to the point where there are galaxies of galaxies of galaxies of galaxies. Probably the principle continues beyond that level, but at that point human perception, even aided with instruments and computers, is exhausted.

TEN PRINCIPLES

While I have been working with these practices to heal my own relationship with the Earth, I have found that their application has made me aware of ten observations. I do not purport to have discovered any of these observations or natural principles. But, as best as I can tell from my personal experience, this appears to be an irreducible minimum of principles that we can emulate to begin to learn to design the reconstruction of working ecosystems.

Economy and Elegance

1. **Do only what is necessary.** “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” This involves humility, in realizing that our understanding is limited, and respect for the natural way by which Nature makes things happen. Don’t try to improve on Nature. This is what Fukuoka² means when he says his is a “do nothing” philosophy and why he always questions the reason for every task. Imagine North America today if our ancestors had honored this one principle. Conservation is the first principle of design. Restraint is the paramount virtue of the designer.

2. **Never do anything for only one reason.** “Stack functions,” is the way Bill Mollison expresses it. In Nature, all design is elegant. My hand is clearly designed for grasping. But it also serves as a heat radiator for my body, a weapon (fist), a signal device, a writing implement (finger in sand), a bodily support surface (as in pushups), a sensory organ, a carrier of affection (e.g., caresses), and even typing this essay, however that would be characterized. If we perceive several functions for an object or decision, then many more will be present. If we perceive only one function, it usually boils down to ego: fear or greed. Either or both of these are commonly counter-productive guides to our actions.

Balance

3. **Be redundant.** “Repeat functions,” Bill would say. “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket” is how my grandmother put it. Look at any relatively whole nutrient cycle, energy transformation pattern, or watershed. There is always a variety of pathways by

which an ecosystem can proceed about its business. In Nature, this is done so that no two organisms occupy the same niche in an ecosystem, yet if any one species is removed, everything that it has done for the whole (usually) will be accomplished by other organisms. Through this principle, for example, we see that growing our food in monocultures is foolish and self-destructive.

4. **Design, and act, on an appropriate scale.** Or, as Granny said, "Don't bite off more than you can chew." So permaculture starts at the doorstep and works out... to keep on a scale commensurate with our understanding, experience and abilities. While we design for the long haul, at any given moment, we are only responsible for undertaking the next step in our design implementation, and that step is always right before us. The tragedies of all great literature teach us that heroes are losers. You will no limit how high you can climb one step at a time if you just keep moving in the right direction. In other words, the staging or unfolding of our design implementation must be considered cautiously, with restraint, consistent with the first principle.

Resilience

5. **Work with edges.** That is where the action is. The principle is: Energy transacts across a gradient. Straight lines have far less edge than waves. You know this intuitively. People gravitate to the edges, like the beach, the forest edge, the side of the path, or the living room wall (against which they put their furniture). Nature amplifies edges, as in your lungs or kidneys, when it wants to amplify energy transfer, and reduces surface, as in a dewdrop or a turtle shell, when it wants to limit interactions, transfers and/or expenditure of resources. There appears to be no limit to which knowledge and awareness of edge effects can improve a design. Study edges in Nature to improve your understanding and ability to use this principle.

6. **Encourage diversity.** By 'diversity', I here refer to diversity of connections between things, and not just an assembly of different plants and animals and structures. A garden with an assortment of different plants randomly arranged will not produce

nearly as much as one in where the plants are arranged in co-productive communities.

Consequence

7. **No, condition action or inaction is without consequence.** Nothing is irrelevant. Everything is connected to everything else. Here our observation and attunement enable us to consider details and features that we would otherwise ignore. See the ordinary in a fresh light. Assume nothing. All details of the clients and the design site bear consideration. Children may affect the site more than adults. Learn the meaning of little details such as leaf coloration, weed distribution, and so forth. See resources in everything.

8. **Energy follows the pattern.** If you design a permaculture organization as a non-profit corporation, thoughts, resources and other organizational energies will follow the patterns of a corporation. If you focus water to a specific area of the site, you amplify the chances that it will become the head of an erosion gully. Access paths and roads can carve a place in fragments or they can unify the site, reinforcing natural features.

Reciprocity

9. **Everything works both ways.** (Well, almost everything.) If the bank gives you 30 years to pay for your home, you give the system (owned by the bank) 30 years of your life in indentured servitude. If energy can come in a window, it can fly out a window. If it takes a lot of heat and time to warm a mass, it will give off heat for a long time. Death of the individual is necessary for Life to adapt to changes on Earth and thereby survive. What goes up must come down. Got it?

10. **Love is the harmony between giving and receiving.** This is the universal law of gifts. To survive and be well and joyous, we must transform and pass along all gifts that come to us. This is how species in an ecosystem co-function. I accept the gift of oxygen from the trees and other plants and return the gift of carbon dioxide that they need for photosynthesis. We violate this principle when we accept food from the Earth and do not return our urine and feces

as fertilizer, but instead use them to contaminate water via a flush toilet. To return a gift without transforming it according to your Nature is to reject it. It is an affront to the love of the Universe, therefore, to waste food or water or our personal power and abilities.

FULL CIRCLE-RESPONSIBILITY

I have now come full circle, for I intend, indeed, to talk in circles. For by this process of examining Nature, I have discovered (or rather rediscovered for the n-billionth time in human history) that to love the Earth, which is necessary for my being to fulfill its Nature and continue its kind, is a special kind of responsibility. It is the responsibility to respectfully and reverently accept all gifts offered to me, according to my need, and to use them such that they are transformed by my nature or Tao into other gifts returned to other parts of creation, in the right place at the right time. Any other manner of transformation is perversion.

At the same time, I find myself also writing in another circle, for an understanding of the love principle brings us back to my first personal discipline, awareness. A genuine reverence for the gifts offered by Nature

encourages us to sharpen our awareness of abundance. It is by being aware of abundance and accepting the gifts that are offered that we avoid continuance of the plunder that has deforested our planet, drained and contaminated its waters, fouled its air and thrown its climates into disarray. In less flowery terms, we make best use of available resources.

Again, as we go through the natural design principles with this awareness, we now prepare our understanding sufficiently to restore the essentials of natural design to the point where Nature can heal herself in a time scale meaningful to human beings.

A system that thinks in terms of creating scarcity and destroying genuine abundance, of "cornering the market," holding monopolies, manipulating "supply and demand," is not merely an enemy of people. It is an enemy of Life itself and the antithesis of the love that binds the living Universe together.

To me, the best way to respond to such a system is to withdraw my energy from it insofar as possible (one step at a time). This publication, my work, and the work of many thousands of people worldwide, is devoted to healing the Earth and rejoicing in her abundance and love.

¹ See *Volume 1, The Global 2000 Report to the President, A Report by the Council on Environmental Quality and the Department of State* and *The Survival of Civilization* by John D. Hamaker (reviewed in TIPSYS 84).

² *The One Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka, Rodale Press.