



Permaculture Pocket Knives

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Knife Prohibition

Laws governing the carrying of “weapons” have been progressively strengthened in response to a perception of increasing risks of violence and terrorism in many countries, including Australia. In Victoria, reports of knife attacks in our streets and public places have resulted in pocket knives being designated “prohibited weapons”. There are now substantial on-the-spot penalties for carrying a pocket knife in public “without a genuine reason”.

As someone who has carried a pocket knife most of my life, I naturally find these restrictions excessive. My motivation to write about this issue was triggered by my own initial inability to simply articulate what my “genuine reason” was for carrying a pocket knife in public, when I was challenged by a colleague at the Sustainable Living Festival in the heart of Melbourne some years ago. For someone who is never short for words, this was a surprising experience.

Knives as Tools

Tools are an extension of our bodies’ capacities and are most useful when they can be used for many different tasks that emerge spontaneously during daily life. Although the craftsperson’s saying about “using the correct tool for the job” has merit, the boy scout motto about “being prepared” is more important in a jack-of-all-trades permaculture lifestyle, where one is dealing with changing opportunities, resources and impediments, including the weather.

I grew up using sharp tools, including knives from a very young age, even though my parents were not particularly “practical” compared to the norm of post-war Australian suburbia. But my parents did recognise my interest and skill in making things and encouraged me to the extent that they bought me an Estwing hammer for my tenth birthday. That same Estwing hammer hangs from my nail belt these fine autumn days as I work towards finishing a cottage on our property for my 89 year old mother. While my aging Estwing is an occasional part of my apparel, my Leatherman multi-tool, that includes two knife blades, is on my belt every day. My son Oliver gave me this Leatherman as an upgrade to my aging Swiss Army knife (that was also a multi tool).

Unlike my enduring Estwing hammer, pocket knives and multi-tools have come and gone over the years. My first memory of a regularly carried knife, was not from my childhood but in the early years of my passionate and enduring commitment to a self-reliant and ethical way of living. It was a two bladed Rogers Bunny Knife, a classic simple pocket knife that symbolised my then, newly discovered, interest in ecological hunting.



Permaculture History

That was during those pivotal years in the early 1970's when I was beginning to work on the manuscript that became *Permaculture One*, published to much acclaim in 1978. My landlord, mentor and co-author was, of course, Bill Mollison, polymath and bushman steeped in the self-reliant living of Tasmania. I was a young undergraduate university student when I moved into Bill Mollison's household and social circle. I immersed myself in a world where people hunted to control pests, and to put meat on the table, tanned skins and spun wool, built their own houses, repaired vehicles and machines, designed and constructed ocean going fishing boats. If you didn't do it yourself you personally knew someone you could get to do it at 'mates rates'. This culture of self-reliance was still remarkable persistent in Tasmania despite the ravages of post second world war affluence. It went well beyond my own exposure to suburban self-reliance, that was limited to the vegie garden, chooks, fruit trees, the firewood stack and tool shed, knitting and home preserving.

I was, of course, part of the baby boom generation, coming out of suburban Australian affluence that created the countercultural wave of "back to the land" self-reliance in the 1970's. Arguably permaculture as "a design system for self-reliant living and ecological land use" is one of the most enduring and significant outcomes of the 1970's counterculture. Today permaculture is almost a household word in Australia and around the world there are hundreds of thousands of people whose lives have been changed by completing a Permaculture Design Course, studying and putting their learning into practice. Permaculture projects, organisations and networks exist on all continents and in most countries. Books by Bill Mollison, myself, and a growing number of other permaculture teachers and designers, have been published and translated into many languages. Convergences, international, national and bioregional, generally held on a biennial basis, are a hybrid between a conference of professionals and a gathering of the tribe. Permaculture is now a global network of like-minded people from many different cultural backgrounds and beliefs, all committed to reforming the way we use land, and organising our lives according to nature's patterns. While the expressions of permaculture are incredibly varied, they all reflect universal principles that have been the focus of my teaching and writing.

So what has all this got to do with my "genuine reasons" for wearing a pocket knife? This historical background is essential to understanding that I wear my pocket knife or multi-tool each day for reasons that are definitely multiple, fluid, integrated, essentially habitual, and finally, cultural. Multiple because in permaculture every important element serves many functions; fluid because permaculture fosters innovative adaptation to constant change; integrated because in permaculture, as in nature, everything is connected; habitual because permaculture informs and shapes daily living; and cultural because the goal of permaculture is to create, over several generations, a sustainable culture adapted to the realities of the energy descent future.

Self reliance at Home

At home at Melliodora, I am always observing and making decisions on the run, doing a sequence of brief tasks and changing mid stream from what I had previously planned. Multi-tasking is the norm in a self-reliant way of life, so different from the specialisation and repetitive focus that characterises work in the conventional economy.

When performing a long sequence of small tasks in a diverse and integrated permaculture system, I need many different tools. If you get the right tools for the job you need a pouch to carry them,



thus reducing the risk that you leave them somewhere under a tree, on top of a fence post, or in the long grass. By always carrying a multi-tool in a convenient pouch on my belt, I greatly reduce the need for a trip back to the workshop, shed, or house, to find an appropriate tool. Wearing a dedicated pouch also reduces the risk of losing tools when my focus moves onto the next task, or something interesting or important has grabbed my attention.

While a multi-tool increases productivity, and reduces risks of accidents caused by trying to do things by hand without a tool, a pocket knife with a sharp pointed and strong blade is the bare minimum tool to be carrying. The pointed S30V steel blade of my Leatherman multi-tool is a fine blade good enough for grafting in the orchard (but I more commonly use it to cut fruit prior to harvesting to check ripeness), cutting flax leaves to tie up plants, shaving the surface of weathered wood to check its identity, or to clean my fingernails in the garden before coming inside to work at the computer, or eat lunch. In the absence of a multi-tool you can use a knife blade to pry open a lid, tighten a loose screw, cut your fingernails, skin an animal, and prepare lunch (after washing the blade!).

So how does this home-based lifestyle translate into a “genuine reason” to wear a pocket knife in public, rather than private space?

Permaculture in Public

One of the common criticisms of permaculture activism made by political activists is that permaculture self-reliance has little impact on the dominant system because it only applies at the domestic scale and context. But the self-reliant permaculture way of life is not confined to what we do at home. Wearing a knife in public is one small expression of how permaculture applies to everything we do. Permaculture activists extend their self-reliant behaviours into the public domain not just for private convenience but as a contribution to changing society for the better by being the change we want to see.

When I am in the public domain, I definitely have fewer reasons to be using tools but my access to tools is greatly reduced, especially when walking, riding a bicycle, or using public transport. In these situations a multi-tool, or at the very least, a pocket knife is the minimum tool to be carrying.

When away from home, my most common use of a knife is for preparing food. I almost always take lunch rather than buy it. The reasons are multi-faceted. When away from home we choose not to buy from multinational fast food outlets, avoid abattoir-killed meat, try to eat organically grown food with minimal processing and packaging, that is local and in season. It is hard to meet all these criteria with purchased food. Lunch from home is also much cheaper, tastes better, and is better for our health but it is a lot more than nutrition.

Because lunch is the most public of meals for most people, what we choose to eat for lunch is part of the public discourse. Preparing and eating lunch in public is part of my expression of permaculture as a subculture that defines itself in contrast to the industrial food system. It allows me to express who I am in the public domain, in the way all minority and dissident subcultures have done throughout history; to defend their values from being subverted by the dominant paradigm. Food is now recognised as central in the environmental crisis, and a crucial issue in the power of multi-national corporations over our lives, this makes it self evident to permaculture practitioners that what we eat in public is part of permaculture. For more than thirty years



permaculture activism has focused on how we produce, prepare and consume food as the most important activity on the planet.

Frequently I do not take a prepared lunch but instead make it from bread, vegetables, fruit, and other ingredients. A sharp knife is the essential single tool for me, and my family, for lunch preparation. Sometimes my partner Su will carry her pocket knife but she relies on me to always have mine. We often take home-made juice in bottles with crown seals that also require a tool to open.

While food ingredients from home are the most common reason to use a knife foraging of wild food is another. When taking the opportunity to collect wild mushrooms, greens, and fruits, a knife is handy if not essential. The reasons for foraging, like everything else in permaculture, are multiple. Foraging can contribute substantially to reducing costs (and environmental impact) of eating, it connects us with our ancestral nature as hunter-gatherers, and articulates the principles involved in ethical use of the “commons” (e.g. does anyone have prior rights, how much should we take, how can we help to maintain the abundance? etc).

As well as foraging on the commons, gleaning unwanted or wasted food from private land is an ancient tradition that has been reinvigorated as part of permaculture. When we harvest fallen fruit and wasted food we often need a knife to cut off bad bits or pick nut pieces out of broken shells.

‘Dumpster diving’ or ‘skipping’ (collecting wasted food from the industrial food system) is another activity common in permaculture networks that also requires tools, or at least a knife. I am not personally attracted to this activity but I support those who do, and have often eaten food (mostly certified organic) foraged by others from the skips of the industrial food system. This activity partially neutralises the unethical and wasteful nature of the system. Of course saying you need to carry a knife so you can engage in ‘skipping’ (generally regarded as illegal) is not going to be an acceptable “genuine reason” as Joel Salatin, the celebrity US farmer, says in the title of one of his best selling books “Everything I Want To Do Is Illegal”.

Travelling around Australia and the world, teaching and public speaking about permaculture, I have to be self-reliant in other ways. Setting up laptops and projectors for presentations often requires a knife (e.g. to cut gaffer tape, or to fix cables to floors). Unlike the professional tech support person who has their tools of trade with them, the permaculture presenter often works in venues where there is no tech support; a DIY situation that reflects the practicalities as well as the principles of permaculture. On more than one occasion I have used a knife blade to straighten bent pins to facilitate a connection between electrical equipment.

Some of my most frustrating experiences in presenting have been in larger institutional venues where regulations and demarcation rules prevent you from being self-reliant. In the absence of the authorised person, your presentation can fail due to bureaucratic processes that leave everyone disempowered. On more than one occasion I have ignored rules and made minor physical modification of systems to allow a presentation to proceed. Having my Leatherman on hand has been essential. When setting up displays, especially at outdoor venues dealing with wind and weather, my Leatherman, some blue-tack, cord and gaffer tape, have solved unexpected problems on many occasions.

As a computer technician, my son, Oliver’s use of his Leatherman can extend to impromptu repairs to computers and other equipment that I have neither the knowledge nor the eyesight to do.



The point about most of these examples is that it is hard to plan in advance what tools might be needed. Needs arise and change. A knife, if not a multi-tool, is the minimum for me to feel competent to tackle situations as they arise.

I think I have said enough to establish the claim that I, and others committed to permaculture have “genuine reasons” to carry knives in public, that are as least as valid as religious minorities carrying knives as part of traditional dress. Permaculture is a subculture of empowered self-reliance. While carrying a pocket knife is by no means a universal habit of permaculturists it is certainly characteristic of men who in a post modern world of “useless men”, seek to re-establish some of the traditional male role as providers, not by being the big man in the economic jungle, but by modest expressions of “the helping hand”.

Knives as Weapons

But might not a knife be useful for personal defence, or even that darker escalation into using the threat of violence to get what we need to survive? There are no easy answers to these difficult questions but as a regular wearer of pocket knives and the owner (over three decades) of a gun for hunting, I can honestly say that I see these items as tools for many purposes, but that personal defence is not one of them.

Firstly, carrying a weapon to ward off violence can more commonly become a magnet for escalation of threats of violence. Those that threaten violence with or without weapons often perceive that they have nothing to lose and so are prepared to take extreme risks.

Secondly, I believe the “gift of the gab”, the ability to respond appropriately, and to adapt to the situation are much less dangerous “weapons” in difficult situations.

The problem with the increasing perception that sees “knives” as weapons and seeks to use them in defence or aggression, is that this perception is self-fulfilling. Similarly, the desire to control knives, and even guns, starts from the premise that their primary, and finally, only use, is violence directed at other persons.

In rural Australia, as recently as thirty years ago, guns, and knives, were seen as dangerous tools rather than weapons. But after generations of movies and television saturated with violence, assisted by weapons, the collective psychology of country folk has been overwhelmed by this dysfunctional view that has its origins in cities, remote from rural realities. The disconnect between media and reality is extreme and yet is accepted as part of a new reality. The fact that I grew up, and later raised children, without this psychological poison from television, is of marginal use in arguing the case to be able to carry knives or guns, when the reaction of others to the sight of a knife, let alone a gun, inevitable focuses on their potential for violence. This perception is primarily expressed as fear that others in the public domain will use guns against them. My attribution of blame to movies and media for the strong perception about guns may seem overstated when there is plenty of evidence that familial relationships remain the strongest force in shaping our psychology. This may be true for our private selves, but I believe that movies and media have replaced civic institutions and unmediated interaction between citizens as the reference point by which children gradually move from the home universe to a wider public one.



The power of this influence is so great because it begins at home with television, long before children ever independently cross the threshold into the public domain. The increasing perception of danger has led to children being driven to school, and other activities, reducing children's opportunities to experience realities, including dangers of unregulated interaction with nature, their peers and the adult world. Increasing levels of commodification of recreation and purchase of pleasures, reinforces the same television version of reality they have been fed since infancy. The near total saturation of institutional and public spaces with screens, and now ever-present mobile devices, complete the lock-in to a mediated universe in which guns and other tools are, by default, weapons of violence. What is so amazing is how limited has been the rise in actual violence with guns and other dangerous tools.

A Tasmanian Gun Story

The nature of this psycho-social poison from televised violence was highlighted for me by an experience in Tasmania in the late 1970's that I have retold many times. I had arranged to buy the .22 calibre rifle that I still own as a "licensed weapon" from Janet Mollison (Bill Mollison's oldest daughter who was my own age). At the time, Janet lived in a flat above the Salvo's Op shop in Elizabeth St, North Hobart. I had arranged to pick up the rifle on a Saturday night. The transaction was simple with no paper work being required for ownership of rim-fire rifles in those times. Elizabeth St, North Hobart was not usually busy on a Saturday night, but this was no ordinary Saturday night.

The nuclear powered aircraft carrier USS Enterprise was in port and Hobart was crawling with thousands of sailors on R&R. I found Janet and her housemate entertaining two African-American sailors from Detroit. After chatting for half an hour with the girls and their visitors Janet and I exchange the rifle for cash and I said my goodbye. The sailors expressed shock that I was planning to walk out onto the street carrying the rifle. "But you guys come from the land of guns" was my reply. In turn they explained, that if they did that in Detroit, the cops would have them up against the wall. The perception that someone carrying a gun must have evil intent was well established in US cities by the 1970's. The fact that I was prepared to carry a gun (in a safe and non threatening way) in a main street of Hobart is evidence that Australia or at least Tasmania was very different from Detroit at that time.

Paradise Lost?

Tragically Tasmania, especially after the Port Arthur massacre, is no different from America. While the evidence that violence with guns has increased is ambiguous, most people believe that it certainly has. More than that, the decades of movies and media have poisoned the psycho-social space so completely that "innocent" carrying of guns is impossible, almost by definition. I accept that I should not carry a rifle in public, not just because of the risk of harassment or worse from the authorities, but because it is likely to generate fear, upset and counterproductive reactions from members of the community. We are all responsible for our actions and reactions, but in this case, I have to accept that I become responsible for the reactions of others. Each new generation's collective mind is poisoned with the view that violence committed with weapons is the normal way to deal with conflict and stress, and that paternalistic authority is our only antidote to this poison. While I have substantial differences to many of the views expressed by the gun lobby in this country and more so to the US gun lobby, I believe the attempts to control violence with weapons by controlling the hardware is, at best addressing the symptoms rather than the problem.



I realise that many permaculture activists, especially in cities, might not understand my position on guns, especially because I have only addressed it obliquely to explaining my reasons for carrying a pocket knife. But even if we accept the idea that citizens should not be allowed to carry guns in public, extending the “weapons” prohibition to pocket knives is a bizarre expansion of authoritarian power over the daily life of people committed to self-reliant living.

It could be that the psycho-social space is already so poisoned in relation to knives that the case is lost. At the very least, I hope this essay might help other permaculturists, who habitually wear a pocket knife or multi-tool, better articulate their “genuine reasons” for doing so. The subculture of self-reliant living that permaculture fosters is now a multi-generation reality in Australia. We can proudly proclaim it as an ecologically and socially beneficial design system for living and landuse. My larger hope is that we can work to slowly reclaim the public space from implied violence and fear that inhibits our capacity for personal and community resilience in the energy descent future.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Holmgren".

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