

In the final plenary of APC10, David Holmgren, co-originator of the permaculture concept, draws on lessons from over three decades of permaculture thinking and activism to distill pointers for using ethics and design principles to surf the energy descent future (without being dumped by king waves). In keeping with the theme of creatively adapting to the energy descent future, David will be giving his presentation via Skype from his home, Melliodora in central Victoria.

An upbeat presentation that encapsulates how the next generation of permaculture activists can confidently and creatively face the cascading crises that are unfolding all around the world.

Aphorisms for Permaculture Activists:

Understanding the lineage, preparing for the future.

Introduction

As the final plenary speaker of this 10th Australian convergence I want to review how a deeper understanding of permaculture ethics and design principles can help activists surf the waves of the energy descent future.

I believe it is inevitable that the future will involve stress and pain, loss and grief on a grand scale and that this experience may not be restricted to poor countries and people. In countries with greatest and most sustained wealth, such as Australia, this experience of loss may not be due to any real scarcity of resources. Instead it will flow from a sense of loss of previous entitlements that have accrued from Australia being one of the richest countries in the world (per person) for over 150 years.

Down to earth skills and capacities, co-operative spirit and humility will all be needed. But I fervently believe that permaculture activists also need “over the horizon” systems thinking to help their families, communities, and descendants survive and thrive on the downslope from Hubbert’s Peak and climate change.

The unfolding global climate/energy/financial crises will create lots of barren conceptual ground that inform and shape practical responses on the real ground. If energy descent becomes entrenched for decades let alone centuries, then most of the culture we call “modernity” will end in the dustbin of history. New thinking tools, theories and beliefs will shape progressively relocalised cultures of place.

The challenge for the future is to deepen our understanding and articulation of what constitutes permaculture thinking at the same time that we need to refine and extend down to earth practical responses to real local needs.

Permaculture Ethics and Design Principles

As a set of thinking tools with three decades of evolution and application, permaculture ethics and design principles, have the potential to help shape that future, even if some cherished permaculture strategies and techniques are discarded along the way.

Constant testing in the field is part of the process for deepening our understanding and use of ethics and design principles. The field in question is permaculture activism itself.

The Climax model for ecological (and social) growth and succession

In the 1970's most of us assumed adoption of permaculture would follow the classic climax model of ecological succession. This is a good example of how conceptual understandings of nature inform our expectations of society.

The Pulsing model of ecological growth and succession

Instead we have seen a pattern of adoption that can be better understood using a more recent update to ecological succession theory that I have been working with for the last 25 years. This pulsing model suggests change comes in waves that advance and recede over time even if there is a general trend in a particular direction.

Over the last decade (including at APC9 in Sydney I have spoken of 3 waves of modern environmental (and permaculture) activism. *See article What is Sustainability 2003 (downloadable from HDS website.*

Update with 4 waves;

3rd wave stillborn by S11,

4th wave triggered by global energy, food and financial crisis 2006-2008.

Economic recovery in Australia is aberration as we teeter on edge of double dip or permanent contraction.

Hard to get traction with PC, Transition Towns in Aus until crisis bites deeper

Lesson: use mainstream economic boom as period to consolidate existing projects, skills and capacities (maintain what we have) and innovate (use the fat of the system to subsidise creativity at the fringes)

Use economic downturns as sign to be ready for new opportunities to apply what we have learnt and to grow and replicate (take advantage of the open ears and hearts to spread the word and the action)

At APC8 I emphasised the importance of understanding permaculture history; not just the milestone of events; but the roots, pioneers, fellow travellers and evolution.

Need for shared history.

Permaculture ethics and principles as most significant example

Evolution of Permaculture Principles

Articulation of ethics and principles to address the big issues of our time is a constant challenge for permaculture activists and teachers.

A shared understanding of the origin and evolution of permaculture ethics and principles could provide a stronger foundation for articulating the relevance of permaculture to every aspect of sustainability.

Principles implicit in PC1

Mollison's teaching of principles evolved in the 80's.

Reny Slay (Intro to PC 1990) distilled Mollison's teachings to 11 design principles

My explicit teaching of Permaculture Ethics and Design Principles on PDC's began in 1990 using the Mollison lineage as a foundation from which to graft my own interpretations.

PP&PBS gelled this lineage and reinvigorated discussion of principles by permies around the world.

The principles teaching kit (first edition), permaculture calendar (David Arnold) diary (Michael Margolis) and website permacultureprinciples.com (Richard Telford) have spread the concepts through and beyond the permaculture networks

My own experience in PDCs and Advanced Principles courses in Australia and around the world over the last 8 years has been distilled in the recently released DVD edition of the Teachers kit.

A shared understanding of the origin and evolution of permaculture ethics and principles will provide a stronger foundation for articulating the relevance of permaculture to every aspect of sustainability.

Interpreting Permaculture Ethics

In the 1970's we distilled permaculture ethics from those common to traditional "cultures of place" as well as those found in intentional communities over the last 100 years.

The following interpretation reflect both original and evolving insights about these ethics. Hopefully they can be seen as contributing to a progressive deepening of our shared understanding of these core beliefs rather than the first or last word on the subject.

Care of the Earth

The condition of the soil under our feet, and our stewardship, is the best measure of how we are managing.

Care of People

The true wellbeing of ourselves, our kin and community is the best indicator of how we are going.

Fair Share

Celebrate nature's abundance,

Accept her limits and

Distribute the surplus.

get you head around both, at the same time.

Applying Design Principles to Activism:

Using design principles to frame and choose aphorisms for the next generation of practitioners, teachers and activists

Design Principles are very powerful thinking tools that we can use well beyond the garden and the farm. We can test our understanding of them, by applying them to familiar subjects where we have substantial experience and gut feelings about what's appropriate and what's not. If we can make the match when we are on solid ground, then we have a better chance of using these thinking tools in novel situations when the ground shifts. In the process we learn how to better articulate the principles in ways that make common sense.

Observe and Interact

Network for inspiration and information but don't get mesmerised by distant greener pastures.

Read the social landscape to understand the constantly changing context for our actions.

Talk to others doing similar and related stuff; no matter what the label or the looks.

Find out who has done this before; where it worked and where it didn't.

Failure is a gift; so long as we learn.

We have a lineage and a history; make it a story to tell.

Catch and Store Energy

Plant seeds that can thrive, reproduce, and provide a welcome inheritance for future generations.

Build skills that will be exchangeable in an energy descent world.

Acquire quality tools of trade, that will one day be heirlooms.

Don't be too concerned with accumulating stuff, titles or money (it all deteriorates with time or disappears in a puff of smoke).

Your mind, body and soul are stores of real wealth; draw on them when nurturing the next generation.

Obtain a Yield

Competition is part of the process by which nature maintains health and vigour; accept that competition between ideas and actions is healthy in pioneering systems.

Look for the freebees that others can't see.

Cut a deal with those who have the stuff, titles or money; it cheaper to use than to own .

Do It Yourself; kick starting the household economy today.

Be a jack of all trades (that is, diversity), but a master of one (that is, obtain a yield)

Be numerate when it counts but don't be penny wise and pound foolish.

Don't fear success.

Apply Self Regulation & Accept Feedback

Be a responsible producer rather than a dependent consumer.

Produce something with utility and soul; kick start the gift economy.

Be your own boss; don't rely on parents, peers or the state to keep you on the straight and narrow.

Over reach and burnout occur when there is no off switch.

Acknowledge and work within your limits; don't bite off more than you can chew.

Let babies and kids take real risks in discovery and growth.

Everything has a shadow; remain sensitive to the downsides of even the best ideas and action.

Be prepared to change course, based on the evidence and ethics.

Use and value Renewable Resources and Services

Get down and dirty; learn to live from what's abundant and reproducing.

Use and value Skills & Sweat in preference to Gear & Fuel.

Take Life as part of living; with thanks.

Shit happens; accept that no one is in control.

Appreciate fossil life (fuels) as a gift from Gaia; use it wisely.

Produce No Waste

Respect and maintain what we already have, rather than dumping it for the next shiny toy.

Be frugal and efficient in everything, from personal movement to cutting things into smaller pieces .

Noise is an unused output, think before you speak.

Deal with conflicts, before they blow up.

Health maintenance avoids wasting life.

Use it, rather than, lose it.

Design from Patterns To Details

Stand back and take in the big picture before diving in.

Understand all the forces at work, not just the obvious actors.

Use the cycle of the seasons and the stages of life as templates for action.

Once the pattern is clear; go with the flow, stay flexible and open to what might be the missing parts of the puzzle.

Recognise the partial truth in both the conspiracy and the cock-up theories of history.

Integrate Rather Than Segregate

Look for the broken or missing connections that give win-win outcomes.

Accept that we can't do everything; find partners, collaborators and colleagues.

Accept the need for ambiguous compromises and trade offs when the synergies aren't perfect.

Politics is the art of the possible.

When times get tough, remember strength in numbers.

Use Small and Slow Solutions

Redefine success as contentment rather than desire.

Replicate rather than grow as a default strategy for responding to success.

Make the smallest change necessary; consider doing nothing.

Get grounded; the future is local.

Find the asymmetric balance between the common and the novel; appreciate the modesty of the common while we taste the fruits of novelty.

Use and Value Diversity

Nature never does anything uselessly; learn the utility.

Always consider an insurance policy and a backup plan.

Locate savings in different places and currencies.

Look for the multiple benefits in any action.

There is more than one way to skin a cat; don't be dogmatic about the best way.

Use Edges and Value the Marginal

In the soil and life, the interface is everything, learn how to work with more and more.

It might take a big majority to change a big system, but it only takes a minority to do well at the edge, to start a runaway change.

Acceptance of the marginal species, persons and places is prudent; one day you might need them.

Avoid being a moth around the bright lights.

We live at the edge between worlds; make the most of it while it lasts.

Creatively Use and Respond To Change

Play god in small ways, making the necessary changes for a greater good.

Trigger small events we can't control; be ready for surprises.

Take advantage of crisis (personal or societal) to get acceptance of change.

When shit happens, we want someone to blame; it doesn't help.

Nature looks quiet for periods but changes fast when in full flight; look for the signs on the sleeping maiden's face.

Keep an eye on the horizon for king waves; get out of the water fast.

King Canute couldn't stop the waves; but he could have tried surfing.