



PERMACULTURE COURSE 1 of 2020

An Introduction to Permaculture: What is it?

The value and use of principles

The idea behind permaculture principles is that generalised principles can be derived from the study of both the natural world and pre-industrial sustainable societies, and that these will be universally applicable to fast-track the post-industrial development of sustainable use of land and resources.

Permaculture principles are brief statements or slogans which can be remembered as a checklist when considering the inevitably complex options for design and evolution of ecological support systems. These principles are seen as universal, although the methods which express them will vary greatly according to place and situation. By still developing extension, these principles are also applicable to our personal, economic, social and political reorganisation, as illustrated in the Permaculture Flower, and the application of these principles is still developing.

These can be divided into ethics and design principles.

Permaculture ethics were distilled from “research of community ethics as adopted by older religious and cooperative groups

Design principles

The scientific foundation for permaculture design principles lies generally within the modern science of ecology, and more particularly within the branch of ecology called systems ecology. Other intellectual disciplines, most particularly landscape geography and ethnobiology, have contributed concepts that have been adapted to design principles.

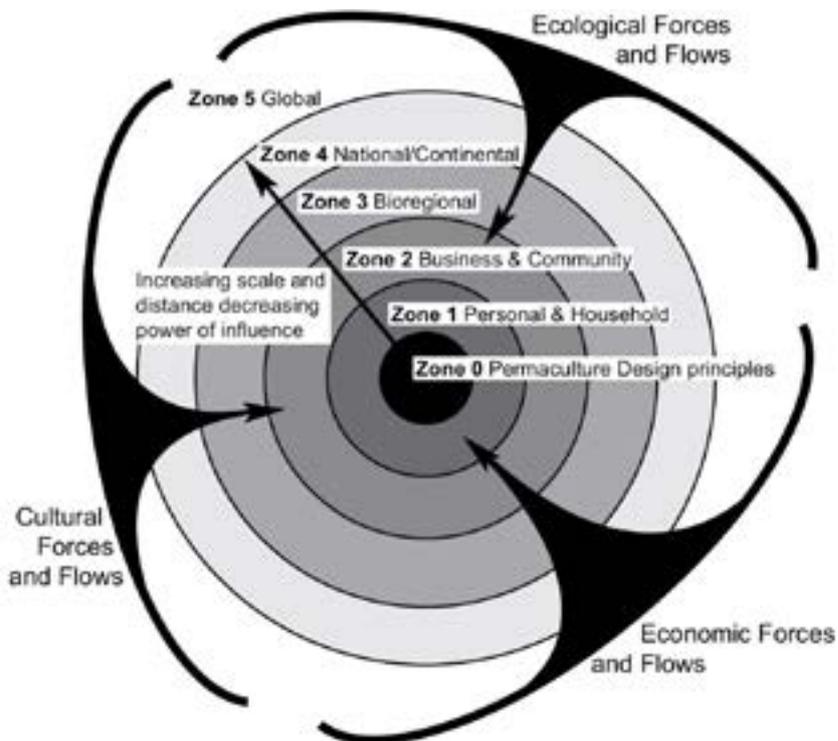
Fundamentally, permaculture design principles arise from a way of perceiving the world which is often described as ‘systems thinking’ and ‘design thinking’

Design principles in practice

Although the idea of a simple set of ethics and design principles has been central to permaculture teaching, any review of texts, teaching and websites about permaculture shows a diversity of approaches, and even confusion about the ethics and design principles and their application. Permaculture-inspired projects and processes frequently illustrate a difficulty in using principles except in an illustrative and literal way.

It could be argued that permaculture has contributed to the spread of some innovative de-

sign solutions that illustrate permaculture principles, but that it has been less effective in spreading the systems and design thinking which underlies those solutions.

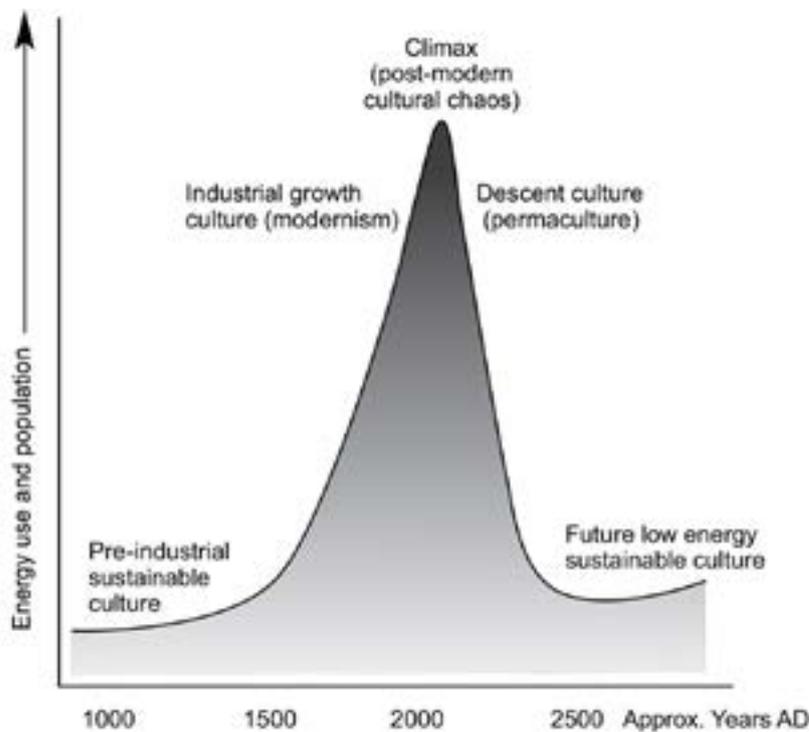


zones of influence and direct power start with the personal and extend to the global. In the same way that permaculture site design has empowered people to make sense of their site and improve their design decisions, this meta-analysis may be useful in empowering people to better understand their world and to act both for themselves and for the future.

SUSTAINABLE CULTURE

Characteristic	Industrial culture	Sustainable culture
Energy base	Non-renewable	Renewable
Material flows	Linear	Cyclical
Natural assets	Consumption	Storage
Organization	Centralised	Distributed Network
Scale	Large	Small
Movement	Fast	Slow
Feedback	Positive	Negative
Focus	Centre	Edge
Activity	Episodic change	Rythmic stability
Thinking	Reductionist	Wholistic
Gender	Masculine	Feminine

The limitation of this concept of sustainable culture is that it suggests some stable state that we might arrive at sometime soon (by applying permaculture principles). A future in which much smaller human populations are in balance with their renewable resource base may be hundreds of years ahead, but this is no longer than the lifespan of an old tree, a well-built and well-maintained building, or some universities. Paradoxically, it is easier to characterise that low-energy sustainable culture than to explain how we get there.



This process is best visualised using the graphs of dynamic change that have been recorded and predicted for self-organising systems across many scales, from populations of microbes to economies and galaxies. Figure 4 shows such a graph of civilisational growth and predicted decline. Industrial culture and permaculture are stable only in their direction of energy use. The current cultural and economic dynamic of globalisation is one of chaotic climax and transition from growth in population and energy use to decline.

Permaculture is a whole-hearted adaptation to the ecological realities of decline, which are as natural and creative as those of growth. The proverb “what goes up, must come down” reminds us that, in our hearts, we know this to be true. The real issue of our age is how we make a graceful and ethical descent.

In articulating Permaculture as the Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability, I am suggesting that we need to get over our naive and simplistic notions of sustainability as a likely reality for ourselves or even our grandchildren and instead accept that our task is use our familiarity with continuous change to adapt to energy descent.

From the mountain peak

When we picture the energy climax as a spectacular but dangerous mountain peak that we (humanity) have succeeded in climbing, the idea of descent to safety is a sensible and attractive proposition. The climb involved heroic effort, great sacrifice, but also exhilaration and new views and possibilities at every step. There are several false peaks, but when we see the whole world laid out around us we know we are at the top. Some argue that there are higher peaks in the mists, but the weather is threatening.

The view from the top reconnects us with the wonder and majesty of the world and how it all fits together, but we cannot dally for long. We must take advantage of the view to chart our way down while we have favourable weather and daylight. The descent will be more hazardous than the climb, and we may have to camp on a series of plateaus to rest and sit out storms. Having been on the mountain so long, we can barely remember the home in a far-off valley that we fled as it was progressively destroyed by forces we did not understand. But we know that each step brings us closer to a sheltered valley where we can make a new home.



Care of the Earth

“rebuild nature’s capital”

ETHICS

Ethics are derived from humanistics values.

The Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis⁷ has provided a brilliant example of whole-system science that makes it clear that the earth is a self-organised system. The evidence of 4000 million years of evolutionary history is that, if we get to a point of seriously affecting the fundamental life-support systems of the planet, we will be ‘neutralised’ by one or more co-evolutionary mechanisms (such as climate change or disease). The Gaia hypothesis has also spawned a countercultural revival of the almost universal view of the earth among indigenous and peasant peoples, as our living, all-powerful mother. Care of the Earth in this global context is not only due to ethical restraint and respect but also to fear of motherly rejection and annihilation.

Living soil

In the most grounded sense, Care of the Earth can be taken to mean caring for living soil as the source of (terrestrial⁸) life and for which we have the greatest responsibility. In this sense, Care of the Earth builds on both the scientific and ethical traditions of the larger and older organic (biological) agriculture movements. There are good scientific and historical reasons for regarding the state of our soils as the best measure of the future health and well-being of society

Stewardship

The stewardship concept demands that we constantly ask the question: “Will the resource be in better shape after my stewardship?” One cannot go far in this process without challenging the ethical validity of the ownership of land and natural resources that lies at the heart of our legal system – difficult.

Biodiversity

Care of the Earth can also encompass the notion of caring for all the diverse life-forms that

inhabit the earth. This care is not dependent on the current usefulness to us of those life-forms, but accepts them all as valid parts of the living earth with intrinsic value.

Living things

In meeting our needs, the killing of other life (individuals) is inevitable, even if we follow a vegan diet.

Most indigenous peoples see individual killing as a natural and integrated part of life, but regard any attempt to exterminate a whole population or life-form as unethical

- we accept all life-forms or species as intrinsically valuable, no matter how inconvenient they are to us (or to other life-forms that we value)
- we reduce our total environmental impact^{t15} as the best way to care for all living things, with no need to understand, have control over, or be responsible for the myriad of impacts of every individual action
- when we harm and kill other living things, we always do so in a conscious and respectful way; not to use what we kill is the greatest disrespect.



Care for People

“care of self, kin and community”

The second ethic, Care for People, can also be interpreted at many levels. It firstly makes permaculture an unashamedly human-centred environmental philosophy which places human needs and aspirations as our central concern because we have power and intelligence to affect our own situation

Care for self

Care for People starts with the self, but it expands in widening circles to include our families, neighbours, local and wider communities.

The greatest ethical concern is naturally focused close to the centre because that is where we have the greatest power and influence. To be able to contribute to a wider good, one

must be healthy and secure.

“look after yourself first” is not an invitation to greed but a challenge to grow up through self-reliance and personal responsibility.

Non-material well-being

One of the best ways to apply this ethic is to focus on non-material values and benefits. When we enjoy a sunset rather than watching a movie, when we look after our health by walking rather than consuming medicine, when we spend time playing with a child rather than buying them a toy, we are taking care of ourselves and others without producing or consuming material resources.

There is increasing recognition that rising consumption is not improving well-being in rich countries



Fair Share

“set limits to consumption and reproduction, and redistribute surplus”

The apparently contradictory messages of abundance and limits encourage us to repeatedly ponder the meaning and expression of these two aspects of nature as a paradox which should continuously reshape our ethical response to life’s opportunities and problems.

Abundance and limits of nature

A sense of abundance emerges when we experience the gifts of nature/god and human endeavour.

The experience of abundance encourages us to distribute surplus beyond our circle of responsibility (to the earth and people) in the faith that our needs are provided for. Fair Share requires us to consider what is enough, and sometimes to make hard decisions. When we accept our own mortality and limited power, the setting of our own personal limits becomes a reasonable bargain with the world. We maintain our autonomy and self-control by exercising self-restraint, and so reduce the likelihood that some external force or power will force us to change

In thinking about what is enough, we have to look at the needs and wants that drive material gain, and also at the capacity of earth and people to provide those needs and wants

<https://www.footprintcalculator.org>

Marslows law –

The issue of population growth is a vexed one with many different perspectives. The world is probably already overpopulated for the long-term good of humanity and other species. Learning to see all children, rather than just our own offspring, as our heirs is one of the great challenges for male culture around the world.

Redistribution of surplus

Redistribution of surplus requires us to share surplus resources to help the earth and people beyond our immediate circle of power and responsibility

What we choose to support with our surplus time, resources and wealth is an increasingly important life issue for many of the world's relatively affluent citizens. In the social domain, all cultures show a wide range of ways in which surplus is distributed for the benefit of others, present or future. In traditional pre-industrial and modern societies, the distribution of surplus is often codified in legal and religious institutions such as the tax system or the church.

Today the traditional institutions of church and state are losing their authority while corporations and other powerful economic institutions have gained enormous power with little if any ethical constraint. In this context, people are finding a wide variety of ways to help others, including overseas aid and development projects, social service clubs, philanthropic trusts, voluntary and community work

In most indigenous and peasant societies, caring for the land beyond the needs of family or descendants was embedded in nature-spirit traditions which required gifts, work or other expressions of devotion to maintain all of the living world. At a more practical level in many agricultural societies, the planting of long-lived and valuable trees and forests has been a traditional way of redistributing surplus time and resources for the benefit of future generations and the land itself.

Within the more recent tradition of the organic movement, land management to repair and improve long-term soil fertility, especially by increasing its humus content, has been regarded as a form of stewardship in which one leaves the land in better shape than it was when one received it

Permaculture as Tools to Assist in Ethical Decisions

In attempting to lead an ethical life we need conceptual tools that will allow us to find what is appropriate, is practical for the situation and context, and yet will have some enduring value in chaotically changing times. Permaculture, and especially permaculture design principles, are conceptual tools which many people are finding useful in this journey.