



PERMACULTURE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

interview with david holmgren

David Holmgren and Bill Mollison are the founders of permaculture. When I heard that Permaculture Magazine was closing down, I thought: it would be nice to interview David Holmgren and look with him at the past and future of permaculture. I wrote a request for an interview and to my surprise he said yes.

author Rutger Spoelstra

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In the beginning we make some small talk, as is usually the case at the start of an interview. Then something remarkable happens: even though I am the interviewer, he asks me questions.

He asks who I am, what I do and where I live. He asks about our magazine and what kind of readers we have, so that he can take that into account during the interview. That really feels like a permaculture attitude: first observe and analyze and only then respond. I immediately notice that permaculture runs deep in his blood sit.

Carrots

To open, I ask about the history of permaculture. He has said that countless times and I have heard and read several variations of it, but his answer still surprises me. Permaculture is sometimes presented as something new, but – David emphasizes – it is deeply rooted in the past. Permaculture does not come from nowhere, it builds on previous developments. He describes permaculture as a branch of the organic farming tree and he praises his predecessors. Some of the roots he mentions are:

- the work of J. Russell Smith and in particular his book: Tree Crops A Permanent Agriculture;
- the development of biodynamic agriculture Rudolf Steiner;
- the work of PA Yeomans, especially the development of the keyline system;
- the development of natural agriculture in Japan, which developed independently of the Western world;
- and of course the report of the Club of Rome: The limits to growth.

But what permaculture has learned the most from is from indigenous peoples and their traditional practices. Not just in Australia, but all over the world.

The origins of permaculture

David was born in 1955. He describes himself as a 'second generation activist'. His parents protested against issues such as the Vietnam War and racism. David was raised with the idea that you have to think for yourself, not blindly believe what authorities and experts tell you. And also that you have to stand up for what you believe and – if necessary – resist peer pressure.

After graduating from high school, David travels through Australia by hitchhiking for a year. In Tasmania he came across the Environmental Design study, which intrigued him. He decides to follow this study. The study is a radical experiment; there is no fixed curriculum, no fixed timetable and students have a major influence on the choice of teachers. There, at an Environmental Design seminar, he meets Bill Mollison. Bill is much older – born in 1928 – and is currently a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Tasmania. Bill and David start talking and share a fascination with the relationship between humans and natural systems. Their discussions lead to David writing a thesis about this for his studies. The manuscript is about the interface between agriculture and landscape architecture

ture and ecology, using nature as an example.

David was not Bill's student, there was no formal relationship. He said he's never even been to Bill's psychology lecture. However, Bill was an advisor, a mentor; Bill and David worked closely together. They even shared a house and a garden for a while, where they tried out their ideas. They also regularly traveled together for inspiration and collected plants together.

After two years of working on the thesis, David graduates. Bill ensures that the work does not disappear into a drawer but goes out into the world. Together they developed it further into the book *Permaculture One*: a perennial agricultural system for human settlements. The book is the kickstart of permaculture.

David mentions a number of characteristics that make permaculture distinctive. Permaculture is practical and holistic. It does not focus on what you are against, but on what you are for: not fighting against the world you do not want, but building the world you do want. He even calls it a protest against the protest generation. And permaculture is for everyone: people of all cultures, faiths and political preferences are welcome.

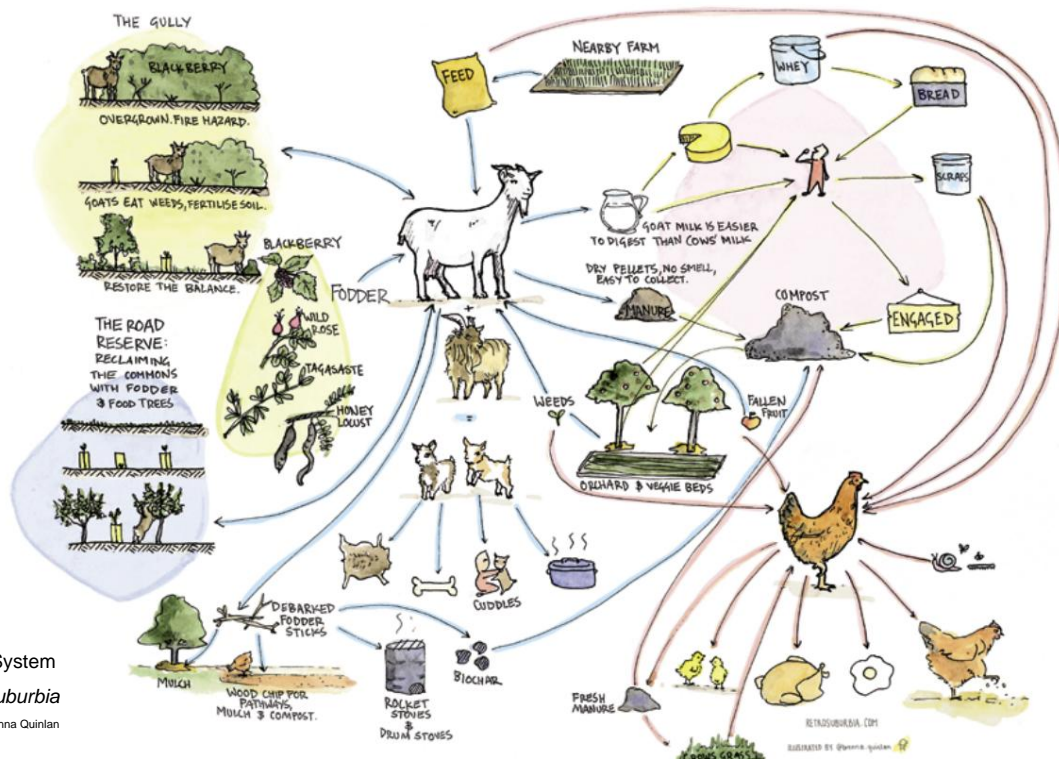
The development of permaculture

After *Permaculture One*, Bill and David go their separate ways.

David is still young and will gain experience and put his ideas into practice



ỹ Melliodora from the air



The Melliodora Goat System
 Drawing from the book *RetroSuburbia*
 Illustration: Brenna Quinlan

put into practice. In addition, he wants to work with his hands, develop practical skills. His first major project is his mother's estate, who had moved to the countryside later in life.

Not long after, David meets his partner Su Dennett. He starts Holmgren Design and works as a consultant. In 1985 they bought a piece of land: Melliodora. It is one hectare in size and is named after the tree *Eucalyptus melliodora* that grows on the property. It is a real testing ground. They build their own passive fume and create vegetable gardens, orchards and ponds, among other things. The project is well documented, something that is rare in permaculture. A book has been published about it and several documentaries have been made about it. They still live and work there, they continue to observe and respond and the site continues to develop.

Bill Mollison is now going in a completely different direction: he is going to bring permaculture into the world. He founded the first permaculture institute in 1979. Two years later he taught the first Permaculture Design Course (pdc). This is a crash course in ecology and design of at least 72 hours, in which participants are completely immersed in the world of permaculture. He also writes the book *Permaculture – A Designer's Manual*. It is his masterpiece, an impressive book in which he explains the basic ideas of permaculture and shows how you can apply permaculture on different soil types and in all kinds of climates.

Thanks to Bill's enthusiasm and charisma, more and more people are putting permaculture into practice. In this way, a community of like-minded people outside the academic world is slowly emerging: the permaculture movement. "We came up with the permaculture concept together, but Bill Mollison is the father of the permaculture movement," says David. David was not actively involved in this, he had a role to play

distance, more like an observer. He was initially skeptical about the permaculture movement, his ideas were more anarchic. Yet David and the permaculture movement embraced each other years later. That was after Holmgren's book *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* came out. In that 2002 book he brings together 25 years of thinking, doing and teaching. Over the years, interest in permaculture comes and goes. Many new people led to new developments, deepening and broadening. Permaculture matured slowly. New movements from permaculture also emerged, such as the Global Ecovillage Network and the transition movement.

Design process

Our conversation slowly moves from the past to the future. I ask David what points of attention there are for the permaculture movement in the coming years. The first thing he mentions is better understanding and controlling the design process. Now it is still a black box, a mystery. Understanding the design process was worked on by David's friend and colleague Dan Palmer at the Making Permaculture Stronger website.

There, Dan Palmer looked at permaculture with a critical eye, with the aim of making it stronger. That website contains a large number of interviews and discussions with permaculturists about the design process. Sadly, Dan Palmer is no longer alive. Hopefully his quest will be continued by other permaculturists.

To connect

"What is the most important challenge for permaculture in the future?" I ask him. He doesn't have to think for a second: "Making new connections." Over the course of the conversation, four groups to connect with are discussed: those in power, ordinary people, the unconnected, and indigenous people.



An important connection to strengthen is with the center of power – what he calls the inside: politics, business, academia. Nowadays there is a lot of attention there for permaculture themes such as biodiversity, climate and depletion of raw materials. Unfortunately, the solutions they pursue are almost always high-tech and globalist. It would be great if we could get them excited about local, low-tech solutions to build a more resilient system. The question for the permaculture community is whether we want that, more connection with power? This is also related to the question of where we position ourselves.

We are on the edge of society or are we mainstream?

Another connection to strengthen is with ordinary people, the middle.

It is best to focus on solving practical issues. This could be by showing how people calculate the costs of

their livelihood

decrease, be able to gain more autonomy, be less dependent on the system and therefore have greater freedom.

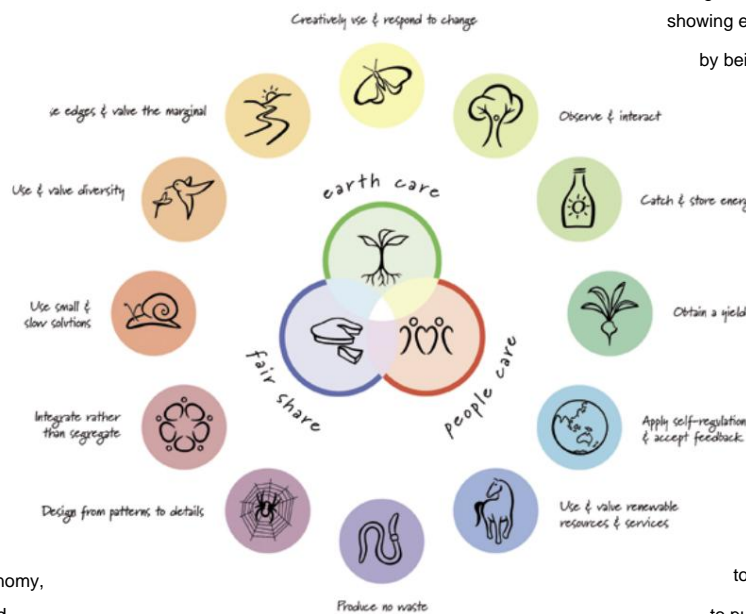
The best way to do this is by

to find common ground and not by preaching. You do not have to agree with each other ideologically, but you focus on the matters on which you do agree. David's book *RetroSuburbia* is about this, it is local and practical. The book is primarily aimed at people in the Australian suburbs. "RetroSuburbia is focused on practical low-tech solutions that reduce our dependence on globalized production." The book was put online for free during corona times, because David and Su thought it was important that this information was freely accessible to everyone in such a difficult time.

Also important is the connection with people on the margins of society: people who cannot keep up, live in poverty, are ill or addicted, refugees, homeless, people who in some way do not want or cannot fit into society. He calls it "Connecting with the unconnected." It is a group that is growing fast and the most important thing for this group is survival. We can help with this by focusing on matters related to acute care: food, drinking water, housing, health and energy. We can also give people from this group a place in our permaculture projects and thus provide meaning in their lives. Use edges and appreciate the margin is one of David Holmgren's permaculture principles. Edges are important in permaculture. Instead of as a limitation, you can also see the edge as a dynamic and productive part of the system, there is a lot of potential here.

But the most important connection – the most important of all – according to David, is with the indigenous peoples. "Go back to the indigenous people and learn from them." In the Netherlands and Belgium there is no longer an indigenous population - like in Australia - but there is still a lot of ancient knowledge and wisdom from which we as a permaculture community can learn a lot.

David's focus on connecting is the most important lesson for me from the interview. I hope we get there to work together, through inspiring examples and by being inspiring examples.



Permaculture Ethics & Design Principles by David Holmgren

Source: permacultureprinciples.com

Finally

David speaks calmly and weighs his words carefully. He has thought a lot about the issues he talks about and he also has a lot of practical experience.

What also strikes me is that writing is essential to him.

Writing helps him to understand things, to express and structure to put in his mind.

He often refers to articles and books he has written. I therefore used those texts as a supplement

ling at the interview.

He ends our conversation with the beautiful words: "Let's fx things!"

I have tried to translate it, but because the word fx has so many different meanings in English – to solve, to restore, to put in order, to arrange, to repair, to refurbish – I want to leave the final word untranslated and end with the English words of David Holmgren:

"Let's fx things!"

more info:

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