



13 ATTITUDES



THE LABORATORY OF INSURRECTIONARY IMAGINATION



# THINK LIKE A FOREST ACT LIKE A MEADOW

Like lovers carve their names on trees, the earliest books were engraved on beech bark, hence the origins of the word “book” - “boc” meaning “beech tree”.

Under the canopy of an ancient Athenian olive grove, home to Plato’s academy, Phaedrus asked Socrates why he never ventured beyond the city walls into the countryside. “I’m a lover of learning” Socrates answered “trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town will.” The grove was later chopped down to make siege machines.

The soundtrack of western “civilisation” is the noise of the book of nature being slammed shut and the rumble of war machines approaching. We are told that Nature is mute, it has nothing to teach us, except that it is a battlefield of all against all. But as the war against our climate and ecosystems tips the physiology of the planet into chaos, the myth that Nature is just “red in tooth and claw”, is unravelling.





The more we study the living world the more we come to realise that the tendency is actually to associate, build relationships, and cooperate. From trees that work with fungi to share sugars and information between themselves to bees pollinating flowers, nature abounds with reciprocity. The fittest are in fact those that relate the best. Perhaps it's no surprise that a culture that rewards greed and domination would rather we forget the true lessons of the natural world.



# PERMACULTURE

Permaculture is an ecological design system whose central tenet is that by observing the way ecosystems such as a forest or meadow work, we can learn to build human habitats that are energy efficient, resilient, waste free and productive. Described by some as “the art of creating beneficial relationships” and by others as “the science of connections”, Permaculture merges traditional wisdom with contemporary ecological research. The idea of mimicking the patterns of natural systems can be applied to everything from planting edible landscapes to the way a performance is designed, from organising an act of creative resistance to putting on a wild party.

Neoliberal economist Milton Friedman, one of the architects of the collapse once said: “Only a crisis produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” Permaculture is one of the many postcapitalist ideas emerging from the margins: it’s a revolution disguised as gardening.

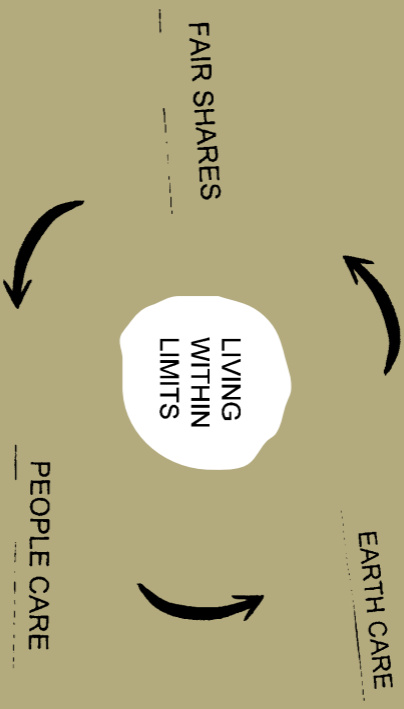




At the heart of Permaculture are four interdependent ethics that frame a set of attitudes and principles, each of which encapsulates the complex wisdom of ecosystem design. What you have in your hands is a set of 13 of these, it's a tool box of common sense, use it as wisely as a forest would.

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# ETHICS







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FAIR SHARES

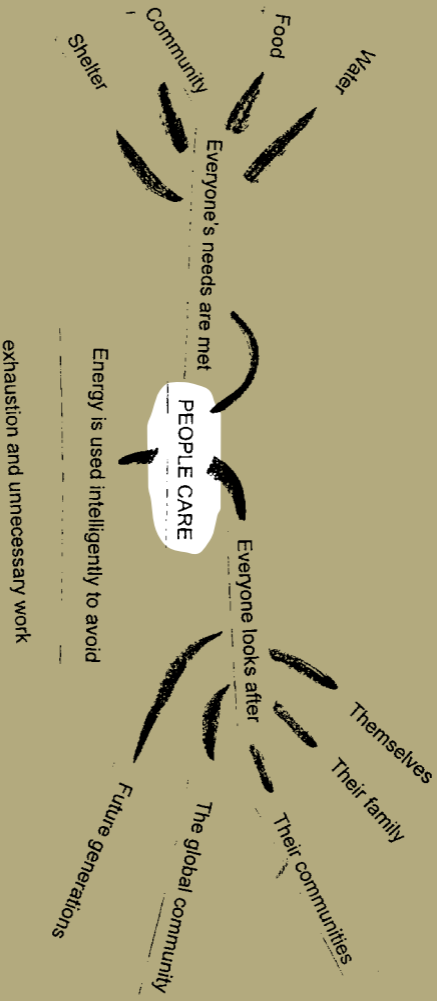
LIVING  
WITHIN  
LIMITS

EARTH CARE

PEOPLE CARE



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EARTH CARE

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FAIR SHARES

LIVING  
WITHIN  
LIMITS

PEOPLE CARE

The productivity of the land for human use is increased and thus less of it is needed

EARTH CARE

All remaining wilderness is protected

Sustainable maintenance of all types of land

Rehabilitation and regeneration is carried out with minimum intervention

Plants and animals refuges

Working with nature, not against it



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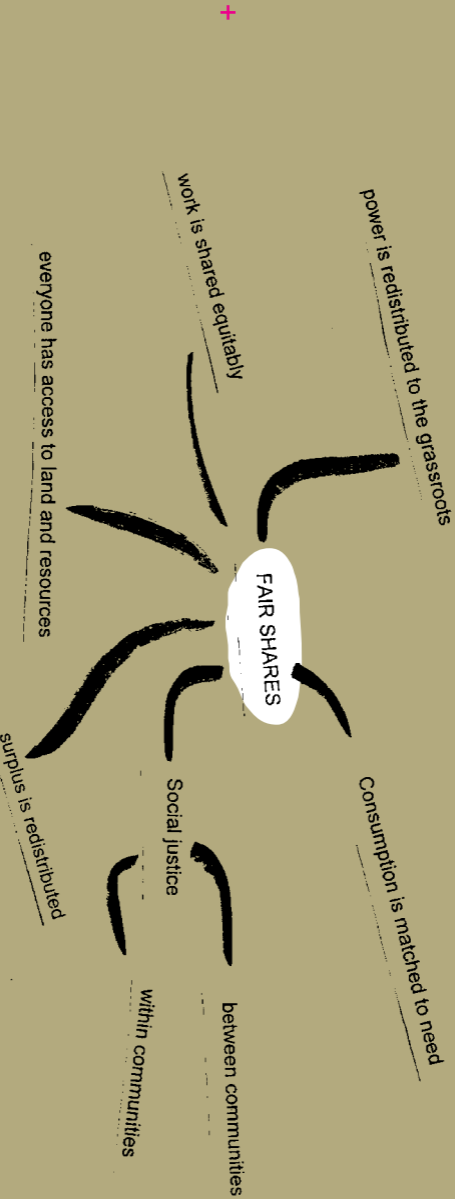
FAIR SHARES

LIVING  
WITHIN  
LIMITS

EARTH CARE

PEOPLE CARE





power is redistributed to the grassroots

work is shared equitably

everyone has access to land and resources

surplus is redistributed

Social Justice

Consumption is matched to need

between communities

within communities

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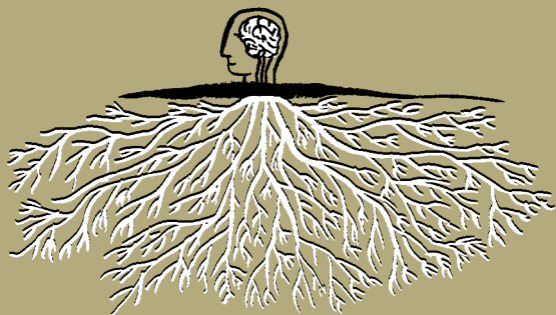


## OBSERVE, CONNECT AND INTERACT

Perhaps we are allowing the world to be wrecked not because we are evil or stupid, but simply because in our haste we no longer notice that we are part of it. In this society of speed, nature is the thing out there that flashes past our windshield; something alien and separate which needs saving, but that we don't have time to spend time with.

Some permaculture projects spend a year observing a site or system before acting on it. When we surrender to slowness our world begins to unfold, it unveils its extraordinary patterns; the more we know it, the more it becomes part of us. When an artist creates a form, the material dictates the outcome as much as her own creative input; it is a feedback between clay and hands, camera and subject, stone and chisel. The better she knows her material the more it yields to her creativity. The deepest root of art and permaculture is simply paying attention.







## UNDERSTAND AND APPLY NATURE'S PATTERNS

We will never fully fathom the depths of nature's wonders: how a salmon navigates thousands of kilometres across an ocean, how an acorn becomes an oak tree, how a flock of birds moves without leaders. But by understanding its patterns we discover wisdoms that have evolved over millennia and design solutions that our super computers could never find.

From snail shells to stellar galaxies, sunflowers to tornados, spider webs to the DNA in every cell of life, the spiral is a recurring pattern in nature. Water pulses and flows in spirals (watch it going down the plughole), yet our culture ignores its patterns, puts it into canals and waste pipes, encloses it behind levees and dams. Water always wants to meander, it hates straight lines. Ignoring this can have devastating consequences; if nature's patterns had been applied to the building of New Orleans there would have been no levees to break.

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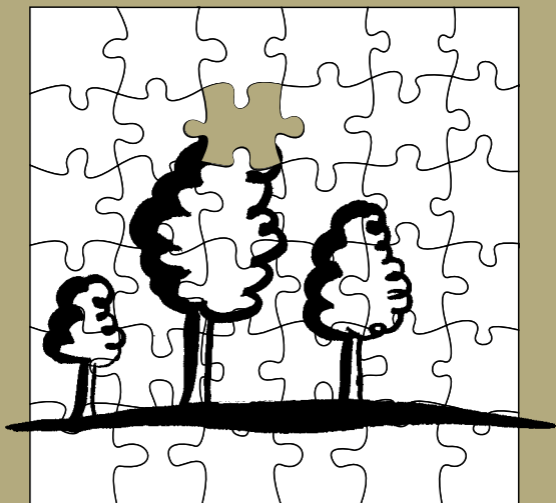




## THE PROBLEM IS THE SOLUTION

When faced with a problem we tend to freeze and focus on the obstacle, losing sight of any possible solutions. A simple trick is to shift our perspective and begin to see the source of a solution within the problem itself. Bill Mollison, permaculture's co-founder, famously said: "You don't have a slug problem, you have a duck deficiency." Increase the amount of ducks and they get free food in the form of slugs, you get free eggs and fertilizer, and no more slugs.

Instead of treating the 45 million car tyres discarded in the UK every year as waste, we could see them as free building materials. With 2000 tyres and less than £40,000 you can build an "earthship", an off grid passive solar home with its own sewage and water collection (no more bills) and simultaneously reduce the waste mountain. A problem is simply when something is out of balance; it's a feedback signal to remind us that change is due.





## DESIGN FROM THE WHOLE TO THE PARTICULAR, FROM PATTERN TO DETAIL

The proverb “can’t see the forest for the trees” sums up a capitalist culture that has dissected and blown everything to smithereens, studying the minutiae of life yet understanding so little about its patterns and interconnections. Quantum physics dramatically showed us that there are no discrete parts, just patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. Sometimes the closer we look the harder it is to understand the whole.

Before taking action on the detail we should take a step back and observe the bigger picture. It is only then that we observe how the specifics of a system connect and interact, what the shape of edges and overlaps are, and what the inherent cycles and patterns reveal. The human species is hardwired to spot patterns; we were born “network thinkers”. We must stop treating the world as a collection of isolated objects and individuals and start looking for the rich patterns and relationships that life is made of.





## LEAST CHANGE FOR GREATEST EFFECT

Permaculture aims to reduce all energy use, whether human muscle or fossil fuel. Why build new power stations to heat homes, when we could site houses to capture and store passive solar energy? Why organize a mass action against an oil company HQ when a small affinity group blocking a pipeline could affect their profits more? Instead of planting new orchards why not graft onto already existing wild trees? Instead of draining a pond to grow crops, we could plant willows to coppice and waterchestnuts to eat. It's all about finding the leverage point in a system and intervening there, where the least work accomplishes the most.

As the Dalai Lama said: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito."





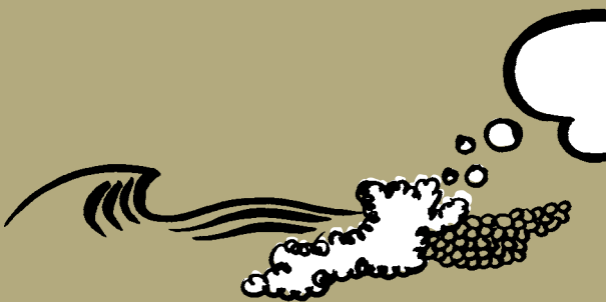


## SEEK, USE AND ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY

Browse the shelves of a supermarket and you will find at best four types of apples, mostly shipped thousands of miles. Yet the UK once produced more than 6000 different species, ones for every season and taste, many with such succulent names as Laxton's Fortune with a hint of aniseed, pineapple tasting Claygate Pearmain, the huge sweet Peasgood's Nonsuch and Colonel Vaughan for perfect autumn cider.

We tend to measure diversity by the amount of differences present in a system, yet what makes ecosystems so efficient and resilient is not the quantity of species but the number of beneficial relationships between them. One way permaculture uses diversity is through Polyculture: growing a community of plants together that benefit and support each other. Some plants protect others from pests, some fix nitrogen in the soil, others encourage things to taste better. With some forest gardens boasting more than 500 useful species, it's a far cry from the fragile monoculture of a wheat field.

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## USE EDGES AND VALUE THE MARGINAL

The point where a forest meets meadowland, or the sea slaps against the shore is the most dynamic parts of an ecosystem. It's in those slithers of space that a multitude of different species coexist, and the engine of evolution moves fastest.

Nearly everything we take for granted in society began as an experiment on the margins. From the idea of universal suffrage to the implementation of the weekend, from the science of climate change to the abolition of slavery, from workers' rights to organic agriculture, yesterday's marginal and impossible eventually becomes today's normal. There has never been a better time to desert the centre and multiply the edges, the greatest creativity and change has always taken place there, and it's from the edge that we can jump and fly.

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## EACH IMPORTANT FUNCTION SUPPORTED BY MANY ELEMENTS

A million people died during the Irish potato famine; blight wiped out the potato crop, only one variety was grown and it was the staple food for a third of the population. Ireland's other crops continued to be exported and British troops made sure the trade didn't stop: making money was more important than feeding the Irish. Similarly, the global economy is entirely dependent on cheap oil, as it becomes scarce and its price rises, a serious systemic crisis looms. In a healthy system however, nothing is indispensable, everything has several back ups.

We can see this working in horizontal protest movements surviving state repression, because they don't have executive committees to infiltrate or leaders to assassinate. We experience it during a recession, when those with multiple skills weather out redundancy better than the specialists.





## EACH ELEMENT HAS MANY FUNCTIONS

I'm writing this sitting on an old wooden church chair which has a pocket built into the back for holding prayer books (in my case it's become a pencil store). It's a simple illustration of "stacking functions". In permaculture we try to give every element of a design at least 3 functions. If a tree is planted it can also provide shade for outside dining, fruit for desert, leaf fall to fertilise the crops underneath it, roots for preventing erosion and raising the water table.

Multitasking reduces waste and work. When The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination toured the country leading up to the G8 protests, we made a program for the performance in the shape of a large heart with information and images printed on. The design allowed for multiple transformations by the audience during the show's "lessons in radical origami": first into a dunce hat, then a loudhailer and finally a cornet for holding the delicious free chips distributed during the interval.







## OBTAIN A YIELD

A businessman is walking along a beach. He comes upon a group of fishermen lying in the midday sun chatting. “Why aren’t you working?” he asks. “We’ve finished for the day” they reply joyfully. “We have enough fish for our friends and families”.

“But if you fished all day you could make so much more money” the business man scoffs.

“But what would that bring?” they ask.

“Well, then you could buy bigger boats and nets” sighs the businessman.

“And what would that give us?”

“More fish and more money to invest in things like sonar and employ others to do the work for you” continues the bemused businessman.

“And then what?” ask the fishermen.

“Well then you will never have to work again in your life and like me you will be able to lounge about in the sun without any cares in the world.”

The fishermen burst into laughter : “But that’s exactly what we’re doing!”

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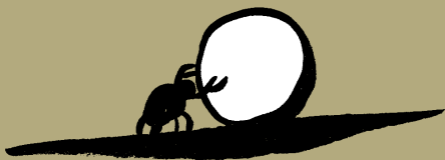




## PRODUCE NO WASTE

Shitting in clean water is one of “civilisation’s” many stupid ideas. In nature one system’s waste is another’s resource. Our shit creates rich compost and one of its roles is to return potassium to the soil, a nutrient key to plant growth. The fact that our shit is flushed into our rivers and seas has meant that levels of potassium in the soil are becoming critically scarce. With each flush we waste 10 litres of fresh water and require huge amounts of electricity to run sewage plants. As a result our waterways become suffocated with nutrients and our climate overburdened with more needlessly emitted CO<sub>2</sub>. What a waste!

A humble solution is the compost loo. Cheap and simple to build they are a step towards a zero waste culture. Shit falls into sawdust, there is no smell and no fouled drinking water. A year later it turns to “humanure”, which can be applied to fruit trees and bushes, not only reducing the need for fossil fuel based fertilizers, but reconnecting our bodies to the fertility cycle.

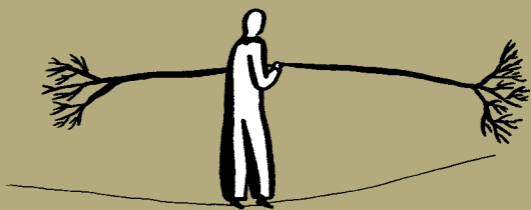




## START SMALL AND LEARN FROM CHANGE

In the winter of 1983, a handful of activists escape the city and brave the jungle aiming to “convince” the impoverished mayan peasants of south eastern Mexico that together they can start a revolution. The Chiapan Indians laugh, the activists stop in their tracks and listen. They continue listening for 11 years and their ideas of revolution change.

Then on New Year’s day 1994, as the North American Free Trade Agreement is due to come into force, several thousand masked rebels creep out of the rainforest, take over seven towns and declare war. Twenty four hours later they retreat back to the mountains where they build self managed autonomous municipalities and send out communiqués mixing poetry and propaganda. A new politics is born and the “antiglobalisation” movement blossoms. The Zapatistas as they call themselves don’t want to take over state power but “construct power” from below, they call for “one world made of many worlds”, a multitude of rebellions locally specific yet globally interconnected. Starting small isn’t just beautiful, it can be unimaginably successful when we learn from our mistakes and take one step at a time.





## APPLY SELF REGULATION AND ACCEPT FEEDBACK

Every living thing self regulates: when we get hot, we sweat and cool down, ecosystems such as meadows aren't mowed or covered in pesticides, they look after themselves. Even the planet works as a self regulating organism by keeping the atmosphere's temperature compatible to life through the complex chemical and physical interaction of plants, minerals, animals, fungi and micro organisms. This equilibrium only faltered when we violently intervened by burning fossil fuels. A healthy system requires minimum outside intervention and is constantly monitoring itself for imbalances, mistakes become signposts, feedback is fundamental.

In permaculture it is not a project but a system that one designs, and the implemented design is simply a moment of stillness in a system that is forever in motion. Observation never stops, the better the observation, the more responsive we are to the feedback and so know which changes will make a system more self managed and resilient. An efficient system needs less work or inputs from us, except observation, which brings us back to the very beginning - observe, connect, interact - after all it's just a question of paying attention.





## FURTHER STEPS

[www.permaculture.org.uk](http://www.permaculture.org.uk)

[www.permacultureactivist.net](http://www.permacultureactivist.net)

[www.permacultureprinciples.com](http://www.permacultureprinciples.com)

[www.climatecamp.org.uk](http://www.climatecamp.org.uk)

[www.earthactivisttraining.org](http://www.earthactivisttraining.org)

[www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org](http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org)

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[www.labofii.net](http://www.labofii.net)

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