

MAY '04

## Permaculture in practice

# Pig-out! Observation can be feast for senses

After such a wet spring, it's easy to dream we've died and gone to heaven. Acequias are flowing fast, reservoirs are filling faster, and the ground around us seems to be, of all things, greening up.

Let's not forget, though, that we are diminishing our aquifers more quickly than nature can replenish them. So the ethical bottom line remains clear: we must harvest and conserve water even while recognizing this moment of good fortune.

Next time it rains, be sure to get outside during or right after the storm. Take off your shoes. Wiggle your toes in the wet earth. Slip and fall on your butt. Slide down a slope. Roll around like a hog. Lavish your body with mud.

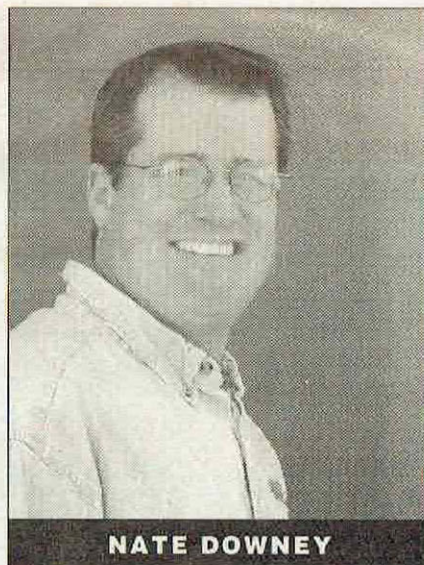
Better still, why not learn from the experience through intensive observation? Taste wet grass. Inhale the smell of fresh moss. Close your eyes and listen to the calm happiness permeating your rejuvenated neighborhood. Hug a big tree

for five minutes. Feel the breeze. Savor the sight of that awesome rainbow on the horizon. Observe, just for the sake of it.

Just as no one entered Plato's philosophy school without first studying geometry, no one can claim to have learned much about permaculture unless he or she has learned of the power of pure, prolonged, nonjudgmental and multi-sensational observation.

It's the kind of observation that's not fogged by anyone's needs, desires, or preconceived notions. It's being completely receptive to information from each of your senses, concentrating on one sense at a time, truly absorbing what is happening in the environment, and of course taking notes, pictures, inventories, sketches, and records.

Due to our busy lifestyles it's easy to impose preconceived notions on systems that are calling for design (or re-design). In permacultural terms, this



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kind of imposition can lead to a "Type One Error," a fatal, irrevocable mistake. Every situation faces a variety of external and internal forces that should affect the design of any system imposed on it. Only with nonjudgmental observation at the outset of the design process can we expect a successful design for any given system (whether for a landscape, a business, a bureaucracy, or any other situation).

And we mustn't stop the observation process at the traditional senses. We must, as Mollison says, in his Introduction to Permaculture, also "sense heat and cold, pressure, stress from efforts of walking or

prickly plants, and find compatible and incompatible sites" in the system.

Finally, if we observe long enough, we can recognize important patterns, such as where water flows during heavy rains, where fire has passed through the site, how certain plants tend to grow next to certain other features in the landscape, and how traffic patterns affect the system.

All the maps, charts, pictures, and other data provided from afar can never match the power of onsite observation. Once you realize this, you'll gain renewed respect for your inner hog and its basic need to wallow in cool, wet mud. Enjoy!

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