

# A *P*ermacultural Paradigm

Nate Downey

“Sustainability” and “permaculture” were both coined in 1972, probably the best year for new nomenclature since 1587—the year “naturalist” made its linguistic debut. Since both describe systems that survive indefinitely, *sustainability* and permaculture are synonymous. Of the two, the term sustainability is a better motivator of mainstream culture because it stimulates the imagination without requiring too much thought. In contrast, *permaculture* more effectively inspires activists looking to apply a practical philosophy. Perhaps the three, smile-forcing “e” sounds at the end of “sustainab-il-it-y” convey a friendlier tone than its clumsier cousin. Maybe “perma-culture” resonates for too many folks with an overabundance of curly hairstyles. More likely however, it’s the triple contraction of “permanent,” “culture” and “agriculture” that solicits too much concentration from the average Joe. Regardless of the reasons, it is helpful to recognize how each term should occupy a distinct beneficial place in our vernacular of change.

Despite all its baggage, permaculture is extremely important to the sustainability movement. As a detailed and comprehensive educational system that gives its students ethics to consider, principles to interpret, patterns to recognize, methods to master and techniques to try, permaculture provides clear goals amidst a plethora of opportunities to be creative. Also, as a growing international movement, permaculture claims successful demonstration sites all over the world. These models make reinventing the wheel of sustainability unnecessary. With “agriculture”



imbedded in its etymology, permaculture forces us to comprehend this truth: Food is the most basic ingredient in any sustainable society.

In order for our food systems to be sustainable, we need to produce a supermajority of our food locally. So the question becomes, if we are to prevent cultural collapse, how do we begin to reduce our dependence on imported food? Here’s a three-step plan:

*First, grow at least a miniscule portion of your own food and increase the amount you grow every year for the rest of your life. Start with something as small as a window box of salad mix. Then, sheet mulch the part of your property that you plan to plant the following year. Realize that diversity and synergy are key components of a sustainable food supply. Whenever possible, plant perennials because they need less maintenance and water than annual species. Always look to extend your growing season by using south facing walls, windows, cold frames, and*



greenhouses to generate a four-season harvest. In addition to helping the planet move toward sustainability, your food will be healthier, tastier, and available at a moment's notice. And if you have children, never forget that the hands-on learning that they gain from gardening is rarely rivaled by any other experience. *Second, visit your local farmers' market every week and try to consume fewer foods from far away.* We need to be religious about our attendance at farmers' markets during peak harvest times and throughout the year. We must master recipes for whatever is in season. Even in winter, the Santa Fe Farmers' Market often has a few booths with fresh greens, sprouts and mushrooms. Root crops and winter squash, as well as hydroponic tomatoes, are often available during cooler months. In addition, you'll find most of the frozen meat, canned food, and dried fruit you'll ever need at various markets throughout our bioregion. When choosing a grocery store, choose the most locally owned store available and try to pick homegrown products whenever

possible. When deciding on a restaurant, support the Local Farms to Restaurants Project. Call the Santa Fe Alliance at 989-5362 or visit [www.e-plaza.org](http://www.e-plaza.org) for details.

*Third, get together with like-minded souls, learn from each other, and always remember that big shifts happen slowly.* It's a wonderful thing to have friends who have experienced a permacultural paradigm shift. These folks have, in an almost spiritual sense, awakened with an "aha!" moment in which they suddenly see how possible it is to make substantial cultural changes using a philosophy based on natural principles. This kind of positive, communal energy is contagious and powerful, and it will ultimately be the reason why modern culture makes it back from the verge of self-destruction – if it ever does. However, after all the sheet mulching, composting, cold frames, sunken beds, raised beds, bean tips, herb spirals, fruit-tree guilds, chicken fencing, bunny slaughtering, canning, drying and freezing, at some

point many of these same people realize how technologically addicted we all have become and how far we really have to go to attain food sustainability. At this somewhat depressing moment, let's remember that perfectionism can get in the way of good work. Instead of being overly critical of our natural indulgences (and those of our friends and neighbors), we should go back and build on some previous success and not dwell on the long, harrowing distance to our goal of permanent human culture.

The great granddaddy of permaculture, Bill Mollison, illustrates how easy food sustainability can be—compared to the steps necessary to make most of our industrial food. First he shows a picture of an egg drawn in the middle of a flip-chart. Various branches of labeled arrows point toward the egg. On the largest branch, an iron ore factory, a coal mine and a steelworks point to a power plant. The power plant aims at a fungicide factory, an herbicide handler, a pesticide producer, a fertilizer franchise, a hormone laboratory, and an antibiotic drug dealer. All of these arrows hone in on modern mega-agriculture where grain is grown and shipped off first to the pellet manufacturer, then the egg factory, the warehouse, and finally to your friendly neighborhood grocery conglomerate.

Three more flurries of arrows pierce the page from various flanks. Wall Street bankers, Madison Avenue advertisers and Middle America marketeers approach from the east. Drilling rigs, crude oil refineries and truck transportation appear from the west. Finally, a small quill sneaks up from below. These arrows symbolize our personal trip to the ATM, the gas station, the supermarket and back home with eggs.

Finally, having drawn a picture not unlike the fourth ring of the ninth circle of hell, Mollison turns the page. There he has sketched a simple scene: A small chicken coop

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abuts a quaint yard surrounded by an edible hedge. A few chickens peck under the shade of a leguminous tree. Inside the coop, a fat fowl has laid an egg on a small bed of straw. And in a scene reminiscent of those famous fingers on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a human hand reaches effortlessly for the egg.

From our perch here at the peak of our international food-distribution system, it certainly appears that real sustainability will be difficult to achieve, but at least the goal is a much more simple system than the complex, wasteful and unsustainable system that delivers our food today. In an age of severe weather, global terrorism, rising gas prices and famine throughout much of the world, our industrial agricultural system makes less sense than it did a generation or two ago.

Whatever vernacular emerges now, let's hope it moves us away from the wasteful and polluting systems of industrial agriculture and toward the ethics and principles of permaculture. In this way, we can help save civilization from itself, and as an extra bonus, restore our country's positive image as an innovator worthy of friendship. \*

*Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture, an ecological landscaping company he started in 1992. He teaches regular permaculture workshops. His first book, Harvest the Rain, will be published in 2006 by Sunstone Press. Nate may be contacted at 424-4444 or visit [www.santafepermaculture.com](http://www.santafepermaculture.com).*



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