

Permaculture in Practice

Uncle Sam wants you to garden

The other day at the farmers' market, I met a national guardswoman. Specialist Kennedy was in the middle of a permaculture class at Camino de Paz School and Farm. As part of her training, Kennedy was helping out at the farm/school's booth.

So far, she'd been learning by feeding chickens, weeding spinach, spinning wool, and doing whatever else women in dry, mountainous, war-torn places do. According to an unclassified PowerPoint, her mission is "to conduct agricultural development operations in collaboration with all appropriate stakeholders to enhance food production, processing and security; foster sustainable and legal economic growth; and strengthen the connection of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the people of Paktya and Paktika Province."

Regular readers of this magazine may recall that I'm no fan of our commander in chief's decision to increase troop sizes

in Afghanistan, but I've gotta hand it to Obama. Sending Kennedy and her team could be the best use of military spending since the GI Bill, and teaching permaculture to soldiers could be the first-ever example of military intelligence.

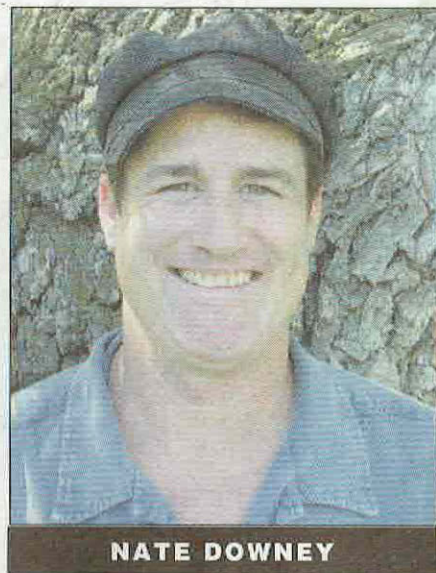
I'm not sure where I stand on these surreal, but worthy, questions, but I do see a big problem associated with the mission. It's focused on the wrong culture. We'd be better off teaching ourselves permaculture. Compared to the average Afghani, very few of us have a clue as to how to grow food and produce useful things - let alone energy. Meanwhile, the energy we do produce is destined to ruin us. Witness the Gulf of Mexico, carbon-based climate change, and the push for "clean" nuclear energy.

The good news is that teaching sustainability in the English-speaking world costs a lot less money than it does in communities where Pashto is the dominant language. Kennedy said she

and her agricultural colleagues will get four bodyguards each to keep the peace in their string of hamlets near the border with Pakistan. "Since I had to sign up for six years," Kennedy said, out of the blue, with little emotion, "I'll probably be doing a couple of tours."

The agricultural marketing specialist from Oklahoma told me she'd often be carrying 70 pounds of gear, including body armor, along with her pruners and hoe. Me? I like to wear rugged boots and tough knee-pads when gardening. This way I can comfortably crawl and spin around locating trowels, watering cans, soil amendments, and irrigation parts. Keeping track of all this and an M-16 sounds like a difficult challenge, but Kennedy seemed mentally ready.

As I shook her hand to say thank you, good luck, and good-bye, I didn't ask her age but guessed she was at least 20 years younger than I. Letting go, I didn't ask her weight, but I could have been 60 or 70



NATE DOWNEY

pounds heavier. Seventy pounds of gear, I thought... what if she gets an order to run? As I adjusted my bike helmet and turned toward the overflowing booth full of local food, deep down I wished Obama could give my new friend a few more bodyguards.

Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture, an ecological landscape-design, -consultation, and -installation firm. His book, Harvest the Rain, will be published by Sunstone Press this year.