



Robyn Rosenfeldt



# The permaculture story: from 'rugged individuals' to a million member movement

words by Ian Lillington, David Holmgren, Robyn Rosenfeldt and Robyn Francis

What is permaculture? Is it gardening, is it chooks and composting, or as one concerned Japanese mother put it 'angry people growing vegetables'? It must be something more. How did two plant lovers in Tasmania create something that grew so big?

It is nearly forty years since Bill Mollison and David Holmgren began piecing together the jigsaw puzzle that became the permaculture concept during the 1970s. Since then it has been practised by millions of people globally, and become a household name.

Permaculture (permanent agriculture) is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way. *Bill Mollison*

Permaculture inspires positive action. Without government control or centralised power systems, people just do it. Permaculture designs turn deserts into forests, weeds into food, and catch and store energy in passive solar homes.

Permaculture plays a leading role in the global transition to a world beyond mindless consumerism.

Permaculture is not the landscape, or even the skills of organic gardening, sustainable farming, energy efficient building or eco-village development as such, but [it is a system that] can be used to design, establish, manage and improve these and all other efforts made by individuals, households and communities towards a sustainable future. *David Holmgren*

Early permaculture research was influenced by the work of the American ecologist Howard Odum and the need to understand energy – where we get it from, how we use it, and what happens once we have used it. Seven billion people currently rely almost completely on fossil fuel energy, which is both polluting and unsustainable. The scientific basis of permaculture comes from both natural systems ecology (an ecological approach to agriculture) and thermodynamics.

Permaculture starts with ethics and principles that totally change the way we look at and interact with the world. David Holmgren uses the permaculture 'flower' (opposite) to show the three ethics that create a sustainable culture: earth care,



people care and fair share. Permaculture has focused on land and nature stewardship as the starting point for its ethical and design principles. Those principles are being applied increasingly to human, social and economic systems (often called 'invisible structures' in permaculture teaching).

The three core ethics are supported by principles which are tools to help make decisions and guide choices. Permaculture also offers practical planning techniques and methods to support the process of design. It is not so much a thing you do but an approach you use, which can be applied to your home, garden, property, business and community.

## How did permaculture come about?

It began with a question: how can we redesign agriculture using the design principles observable in nature? But that was part of a larger question about the redesign of society to address the concerns highlighted by *The limits to growth* report in 1972, [based on a computer model exploring the effect of exponential growth in a world of finite resources] and the 1973 'oil shock' when prices quadrupled.

During the mid-1970s, David, then a student and Bill, a lecturer, collaborated, experimented, discussed and researched together. Under Bill's guidance, David's graduate thesis became the main body of the book *'Permaculture one: a perennial agricultural system for human settlements'* (1978, Transworld Publishers Ltd). This book showed how ecology and agriculture could be combined, by conscious design, to create a landscape filled with sustainable food production systems.



Bill Mollison

Bill and David understood that solutions had to come from the radical fringe rather than the institutional centre of society. David explains:

My youthful enthusiasm of those years was driven by a determination to live in, and so create, the world we wanted, rather than simply resist symptoms of dysfunction. As a pioneering environmentalist from the late 60s Bill Mollison had come to the same conclusion.

By the mid 1980s, Bill Mollison was roaming the world on a shoestring budget, teaching Permaculture Design Courses (PDC) — a minimum of 72 hours of intensive study, in the classroom and outside — where instant food gardens were created from whatever materials came to hand and the big picture philosophy of permaculture was discussed late into the night.

This travel and teaching led to the publication of Mollison's 580-page book, *Permaculture – a designers' manual* (1988 Tagari Publications) with Reny Mia Slay and Andrew Jeeves. The Designers' manual advocates a strong ethical and social dimension to permaculture and remains the 'Bible' for serious permaculture study.

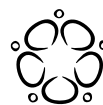
In 1981 he had the honour of being awarded the Right Livelihood Award (widely known as the 'Alternative Nobel Prize'). His willingness to go anywhere and share freely was an essential part of

permaculture's global uptake.

Meanwhile, David Holmgren and partner Su Dennett were developing their demonstration property 'Melliodora' in central Victoria and publishing a series of books on designing and creating permaculture buildings and landscapes. David's work is encapsulated his *Collected writings 1978 – 2000* and new look at permaculture principles in *Permaculture: principles & pathways*



David Holmgren





*beyond sustainability (PPPBS)* [2002 and under revision now for a second edition].

Thirty years later David has applied permaculture principles to every aspect of his life, and opens his home to visitors from around the globe to come and see permaculture at work.

## Permaculture Design Courses

PDCs have been taught in almost every country. 'Because I was an educator, I realised that if I didn't teach it, it wouldn't go anywhere', said Bill. The original seventy-two hour PDC aimed to train designers and teachers of permaculture, as Bill couldn't meet the demand. Bill encouraged graduates to become teachers themselves and set up their own institutes and demonstration sites. This multiplier effect was critical to permaculture's rapid expansion.

At the first International Permaculture Convergence in 1984 (Pappinbarra NSW), the ground rules regarding the PDC were formally established and agreed on by the 'college of graduates'.

Permaculture strategies from the PDC can be adapted to diverse climatic and cultural contexts, integrating local and traditional sustainable practices, and this has made it an invaluable tool,

especially in developing countries and with indigenous peoples around the world.

The PDC is unusual for two reasons. First, it is resilient: thousands of such courses have been run in dozens of countries over three decades without the support of an institutional or financial backer. Second, the qualification is respected worldwide, with hundreds of thousands of graduates, perhaps more than a million.

The longevity of the PDC is testimony to the dedication of permaculture teachers and networks of permaculture activists who ensure that those who are 'doing permaculture' are also the quality control mechanism for permaculture.

The typical permaculture student remains very diverse. There are the dedicated environmentalists wanting to step out of mainstream society, and go to live in the bush and build a mud brick house. But increasingly PDCs attract urbanites, including architects, planners, landscape designers, engineers, scientists, health professionals, agronomists and horticulturists who then use it in their practices.

There is a whole new generation of 'permies', young and old, who want to make a positive change by not only implementing permaculture into their own lives and careers, but also by becoming actively engaged in 'invisible structures' such as



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Transition Towns, local exchange trading systems (LETS), seed-savers, community food systems, farmers' markets and community gardens.

## Why permaculture?

Now, nearly four decades later, permaculture is more relevant than ever. As we face climate change, peak oil, economic instability and governments that seem to want to ignore all these problems, it is up to us to do what we can in our own lives. As Bill Mollison puts it:

Catch the water off your roof. Grow your own food. Make your own energy. It's insanely easy to do all that. It takes you less time to grow your food than to walk down to the supermarket to buy it.

In their own ways, Bill and David agree that permaculture is subversive. By changing your lifestyle, your practices and reducing your consumption you are creating the positive change that you wish to see in the world.

## Permaculture today

Permaculture today in 2014 is a global phenomenon. Inspired by the creative genius of the co-originators and endless hard work of its enthusiasts, permaculture has evolved from a marginal, grassroots back-to-the-land movement of the 1980s to a widely accepted way of putting sustainability into practice.

At this time of escalating crises of climate chaos, peak resources, bubble economics and political corruption, more people of all ages are drawn to the positive and empowering message of permaculture that shows how we can provide for the needs of kin and community while nurturing the earth.

Now is the time to make considered choices about how we live our lives — together we can make a change.

## Further reading

*Permaculture principles and pathways beyond sustainability* (David Holmgren 2002, Holmgren Design Services) includes an introductory chapter on what has made permaculture successful

*Permaculture: a designers' manual*. (Bill Mollison 1988 Tagari Publications)

*Travels in dreams: an autobiography* (Bill Mollison 1996, Tagari Publications)

*Permaculture pioneers: stories from the new frontier* (2011, edited by Kerry Dawborn and Caroline Smith, Holmgren Design Services), available from [www.holmgren.com.au](http://www.holmgren.com.au)

*Crash on demand: welcome to the brown tech future* – see [www.holmgren.com.au/crash-demand/](http://www.holmgren.com.au/crash-demand/)

*Essence of permaculture* – see [www.holmgren.com.au/downloads/Essence\\_of\\_Pc\\_EN.pdf](http://www.holmgren.com.au/downloads/Essence_of_Pc_EN.pdf)

*A short and incomplete history of permaculture* – see [www.pacific-edge.info/2007/07/a-short-and-incomplete-history-of-permaculture](http://www.pacific-edge.info/2007/07/a-short-and-incomplete-history-of-permaculture)



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