

When Permaculture Comes to Life

Joanna Crowson, Andrew Zions Abrams and **Jorge Gallardo** explore how to weave the thread of Deep Ecology into our permaculture practices

Imagine: you've used permaculture principles to create a design for a rainwater retention landscape, or a syntropic line, or some other project based on the triple ethic of Earth care, people care and future care. You're gathered together with your colleagues and you're about to start work. What are the first steps you take? Or perhaps you've just gone out into the garden with your basket and secateurs to harvest herbs to dry, or wild leaves for your lunchtime salad. How many of us stop to ask permission from the land before we set our tools to work? Or thank the plant before cutting the first sprigs?

Ropes connecting us to a larger web

In permaculture design, it is our relationships to natural elements that build resilience. When we interact with a plant, animal or any other element in a permaculture system, we are developing a relationship. Over time these

relationships become stronger, and as we observe how those elements change, we build intimacy. These connections can be described as ropes, and if we were to map the relationships between ourselves and the myriad elements in our system, as well as the relationships between those elements and others, we would discover an incredibly resilient web. In time this web becomes palpable, anchoring us as a part of the natural world, the landscape that surrounds us.

Permaculture is a design system that emerges from the living web of life that we are embedded in; at its best it is an expression of the relational intelligence of life itself. We permaculture practitioners can apply the design principles we've learned as a framework for structured interventions, but if we take a relational approach, we can tune in and become an expression of the living world around us. Bringing consciousness to our interactions with the community of life and our relationship to the land leads us into deeper connection. The tools of permaculture design

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Masks from Council of All Beings, giving the more-than-human world a voice

allow us to engage in nourishing the land at the same time as observing how the land nourishes us – and this goes far beyond the obvious level of physical resources. When we're present, we see what needs pruning, and we also remember, notice and celebrate the scar healing a month later. The cultivation of this sense of connected relationship to the web of life around us is 'deep ecology', the expansion of our sense of self beyond the ego, to develop the enlarged sense of self that Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who first outlined the approach, called the 'ecological self'.

In the overlapping intersection at the heart of the triple ethic, where Earth care, people care and future care combine, is deep ecology – the relationship of people to place and to the wider community of living beings around us, and to past, present and future time. It's an important thread in our work as we care for the land we call Catalina, and in the development of our community. It connects us to resilience in physical, emotional and spiritual needs and invites us to go beyond sustainability, and to take a regenerative approach to design, co-creating with nature, together imagining something richer, deeper, stronger. Here at Catalina, we know that when we neglect to include this work, we lose access to a deeper level of connection and richness in our experience. Here we offer suggestions for ways we can weave the values of deep ecology into our work as permaculture practitioners.

The tools of permaculture design allow us to engage in nourishing the land at the same time as observing how the land nourishes us

Recovering indigenous wisdom

There are simple practices that will bring us back into deeper connection, and these are not new. Indigenous peoples across the planet experience them as the baseline of their sense of belonging; they know that these practices matter. However, not only have we forgotten that we're not separate from the land, the waters, and everything else that exists; worse still, our society is actually in denial of this truth. The process of colonising our world and our minds in the name of modernity has involved the loss of many simple and powerful ways of relating to the web of life in which we are held. These 'exiled capabilities' can be recovered and used to support our implementation of permaculture's design tools, but don't be surprised if you come into conflict with the fixed ideas of your rational mind, or those of someone else's. Here it is a big help if you don't take yourself too seriously

Deep time: marvelling at the evolutionary gifts of our ancestors



– a playful approach helps us escape the limitations of our education in the modernity worldview.

Simple basic practices: greetings, asking for permission, gratitude and reciprocity

There are some very simple practices that are easy to adopt, that echo the basic good manners we are very familiar with as social beings. At first it may seem strange, but why not greet the world in the morning, saying hello to the trees outside the office in the same way as you greet the barista in the coffee cart, and taking a moment to notice and acknowledge the birdsong above you in the park and say ‘great job’?

Going back to the examples we started with, since we know deep ecology strengthens our relationship to the web of life and makes it palpable, we try to start the implementation of any design with the ritual of asking for permission before digging the first hole or moving earth, as well as before picking food. Even though we are totally convinced of the value of starting like this, and even though we know that setting the larger context takes our activities out of the personal framework of ‘work’, bringing deeper meaning, if anything we still don’t do it enough!

Cultivating a feeling of gratitude is a revolutionary action, since it contradicts the predominant message of consumer society – so much of the drive to consume is based on

the cultivation of a sense of lack, of wanting or needing more. Against this cruel background message of ‘you’re not enough’, gratitude is liberating and subversive. It is an attitude that doesn’t need to depend on your circumstances and is the primary basis of all spiritual and indigenous traditions. In fact, as an approach it can be enough to open your heart and radically transform how you experience life.

As for reciprocity, the desire to give back arises quite naturally from a feeling of gratitude, leading us to respond with love, care and attention. Imagine how your permaculture designs will resonate when they arise through you, in reciprocity, from your connection to the web of life, as an expression of life itself!

Observation, observation, observation

All permaculture practitioners are familiar with the instruction to observe and interact – observing before interacting. One helpful practice is to create a ‘sit spot’, a place that you go to for five minutes or so every day, to observe the changing face of nature and really attune to what is being expressed. It’s useful to take notes and look back on them every now and again. This can be a simple process of writing plant lists, finding out the names of those you don’t know, noticing which birds and insects are around and what the weather and soil are like. But it’s also beneficial to engage in a more extended process sometimes, especially when meeting a new place. Here are some ideas for an expanded observation session:

Intuitive – Note your first impressions and the sensations that arise.

Objective – Observe the types of plants present, notice the microclimate, topology, relationships.

Subjective – How do you feel here? What’s your personal response? Your creative response?

Imaginative – What was it like in the past? What would it be like if we humans stopped intervening?

Coming to our senses: conversations with nature

There is a great conversation happening all around us; the natural world is communicating, and the body, when awake in all its senses, has a wide range of vocabulary it can use to participate in this conversation. There are many ways to work with all our senses, widening and deepening perception and helping us recover our perceptual flexibility. As we strengthen our innate and intuitive capacity to see and hear, we heal our disconnection from nature and natural processes, rediscovering the ordinary sacredness of the everyday world that surrounds us. Rediscovering and honing these skills is the work of a lifetime and all Earth-based spiritual traditions explore how to expand perceptual connection to the living world. If you are interested in exploring this area, we highly recommend starting with Starhawk’s book *The Earth Path*, which brings together permaculture approaches with Earth wisdom, and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s collection of essays *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which combines botanical science with indigenous wisdom. For now, here is a simple meditation inspired in the Buddhist framing of interdependence.





Spacenet: our community hammock, a space dedicated to observation (inner and outer)

Breathing gifts

Focus on your in-breath. As you breathe in, imagine the trees that have exhaled the oxygen that is entering your body. Feel the nourishment of the breath. Spend a few moments feeling your gratitude.

Take your attention to your out-breath. As you breathe out, feel the gift of life that you are offering to the plants around you as you exhale carbon dioxide. May it nourish them. Spend a few moments offering this nourishment.

Breathing in and out, feel the flow of life moving through you, feel the gift of each breath connecting you to many other beings. Rest into that giving and receiving of breath. Let it nourish and support you.

A different relationship to time – present, past and future

Time seems to have become a scarce resource for everyone, and the same technology that we use to save us time and make things happen more easily and quickly, seems to exacerbate the problem as we try to do more and more with the time we have. At Catalina we try to make time for good communication, fighting the seemingly all-pervasive attitude that time spent on our sociocratic meetings and heart circles is time wasted that could be spent more productively. We know it's important to create spacious moments to discuss our plans and our feelings, and we also know that

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the problems that arise when we don't make time are the real waste of time. Similarly in our work with the land, connecting to the natural rhythms of nature requires a kind of patience, and the act of engaging in permaculture design locates us in a different timescale, one of less immediacy and with a focus on future care.

In terms of simple practices, connecting to the rhythms of nature promotes a very natural joy: we make time to watch the sunset and track its changing position on the horizon; we call each other outside to share the everyday miracle of the moon rising or setting; and we mark the passage of the year with celebrations of the equinoxes, solstices and fire festivals such as Beltane and Imbolc, as well as birthdays and local festivals. We close our events with ceremonies that connect to a deeper sense of time, remembering and invoking the wisdom of our ancestors, both human and evolutionary, sending forth our prayers and good wishes to future generations of all forms of life. This focusing of attention helps to focus our intention, which is key to our work to imagine and create a regenerative future for all.

Closing ceremony

This article started as a collaborative process online while one of us was on a trip away from Catalina, and the immediate sense of connection to the land we care for was missing. This meant that writing at times felt like imposing a structure onto life, and less about listening, sensing, tracing the patterns already present in the soil, the fungi, the community. In urban surroundings, there can be less opportunity to notice the weave of the web that holds us – but life is always there, so Joanna stepped outside with a cup of tea and stood on a little pocket of defiance against the tyranny of concrete, where caring city dwellers had designed a relational community of plants and covered it with mulch. And she took a moment to breathe and connect, asking how it was doing, and mentally cheering on the little plants, the unseen roots, the sprouting bulbs and the resting seeds. Whether or not this made a difference to the community of life is impossible to say, but it made a difference to the writing of this article. In the spirit of gratitude to that little liberated triangle of earth and the people who designed it and care for it, we would like to close this article by thanking YOU, the readers of PM, for all that you do. We like to close our gatherings and events by sharing Starhawk's 'Blessings on the Earth Healers' from her book that we've already mentioned, *The Earth Path*. Please read it knowing that the blessing is for you:

"We give thanks for all those who are moved, in their lives, to heal and protect the earth, in small ways and large. Blessings on the composters, the gardeners, the breeders of worms and mushrooms, the soil builders, those who cleanse the waters and purify the air, all those who clean up the messes others have made.

"Blessings on those who defend trees and who plant trees, who guard the forests and who renew the forests. Blessings on those who heal the grasslands and renew the streams, on those who prevent erosion, who restore the salmon and the fisheries, who guard the healing herbs and who know the lore of the wild plants.

"Blessings on those who heal the cities and bring them alive again with excitement and creativity and love. Gratitude and blessings to all who stand against greed, who risk themselves, to those who have bled and been wounded, and to those who have given their lives in service of the earth.

"May all the healers of the earth find their own healing. May they be fuelled by passionate love for the earth. May they know their fear but not be stopped by fear. May they feel their anger and yet not be ruled by rage. May they honour their grief but not be



Ceremonial fire for Imbolc

paralyzed by sorrow. May they transform fear, rage, and grief into compassion and the inspiration to act in service of what they love.

"May they find the help, the resources, the courage, the luck, the strength, the love, the health, the joy that they need to do the work. May they all be in the right place, at the right time, in the right way.

"May they bring alive a great awakening, open a listening ear to hear the earth's voice, transform imbalance to balance, hate and greed to love. Blessed be the healers of the earth."

Thank you from all of us at Catalina.

Bibliography

Kimmerer, R. W. (2020). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited.

Starhawk. (2013). *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature*. United States: HarperCollins.

Joanna Crowson discovered her passion for permaculture in 1993 when she and her family bought land and started creating Casa Gaia in Cádiz. She currently works as a translator, educator and writer, focusing on creating regenerative cultures through reconnecting to the earth.

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Jorge Gallardo, co-founder and coordinator of the cooperative Be.Time SCA, created in April 2017, works as a cultural mediator in a small town south of Cádiz, developing projects for the regeneration of species and landscapes and mobilising civil commitment in the protection of the commons.

More on deep ecology:

'A Learning Community as a Prototype for Working with Volunteers' PM122

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