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Weaving the Fabric of Collective Action

From community to policy:
How do climate solutions take root?

It's a sunny Saturday in January amid a winter of record rains. At Almenara, we are hosting a local volunteering day to plant a Miyawaki tiny forest. This is an experiment in densely planting a diverse mix of native perennials to accelerate biodiversity along one edge of our land which we eventually hope to replicate in nearby public spaces.

About twenty-five people have come together: neighbours, families, old friends and newcomers. The gathering offers us the chance to connect, learn and celebrate outdoors. Children are running about among the trees. Our arms are soon elbow-deep in mulch and rich soil. There is laughter, quiet concentration and the simple joy of doing something meaningful together.

Within a few hours, we've planted and seeded hundreds of young plants that will, over time, form a living bridge

in our biodiversity corridor, linking our hedges all the way from the ridge down to the valley floor. With the morning's work finished, we share a meal under the winter sun. Later, we walk up to the old drover's road above Catalina – common land that has been preserved for centuries – and spend the afternoon collecting litter along the trail. Everyone seems to understand without much explanation that this path belongs to all of us, and that only through care will it endure.

Nothing about the day feels political. And yet, in small ways, everything about it is. The event looks like an ordinary gathering in a rural permaculture project. And in many ways, that's exactly what it is. What's less obvious is that this small gathering is also connected to a much larger conversation – one that reaches as far as Brussels and European climate policy.

Why culture matters

The European Union funds research and innovation through a programme called Horizon – essentially a shared investment in figuring out how we adapt to an uncertain future. Among other areas of focus, Horizon projects increasingly support work at the intersection of culture and adaptation to climate change.

Since early 2025, we have been part of a Horizon project called EMCCINNO (Empowering Cultural and Creative Industries to Boost Systemic Innovation for Sustainable Climate Transition). EMCCINNO starts with a simple insight: climate change is not really an environmental problem; it's a cultural problem. We already understand the science of anthropogenic climate change. What we struggle with is building the

shared cultures of care and responsibility needed to respond to it.

We are part of a consortium of thirteen partners in five European countries (France, Germany, Portugal, Hungary and Spain), formed of five cultural and artistic social enterprises that are pilot sites (we are the only rural site), together with universities and research organisations. Each site is rooted in a different context, but all are exploring how culture and creativity can support long-term climate resilience.

Here in Vejer, our experiment is twofold: we are prototyping activities that strengthen local engagement around climate, land and collective responsibility, and at the same time, we are exploring economic and organisational models that can sustain this work over time while adapting to ecological uncertainty and change. This happens through collaboration. In a collaboration between Almenara Culturas Regenerativas (our association) and Be.Time – a local arts and ecology cooperative – alongside neighbourhood associations, schools and grassroots groups, we are exploring three intertwined strands: Tree Culture, Water Culture, and Culture of the Commons. These themes offer a shared language for connecting ecological practice, cultural life and collective stewardship.

Over the next two years, our prototype will continue to evolve, and the learning generated locally will contribute to conversations shaping cultural and climate policy at a European level.

A network of learning places

EMCCINNO brings together a diverse set of places – urban cultural centres, community arts organisations, heritage initiatives and our small rural site. Each operates in a different landscape with different histories and challenges, yet all are asking similar questions: How do cultural spaces help communities face ecological uncertainty? How do they build participation, change imaginaries and promote shared responsibility in times of crisis?

Rather than promoting a single model, the project treats these places as real-world learning sites. We share practices, reflect on what works and what doesn't, and look for patterns that might travel across contexts. The emphasis is not on scaling organisations, but on scaling learning – understanding how local cultures of care can support broader climate transitions in other locations.

On the ground, this means testing practical ways to shift cultural engagement. At Almenara, one of our main aims is to strengthen and diversify local involvement – in other words, to nurture a culture of active citizenship and shared stewardship of the commons.

JARA: a rhythm of shared practice

The Miyawaki planting day described above is one expression of this work through a community group we are building called JARA. Jara is the Spanish name for rock-rose (*Cistus*), a resilient native plant, but it also stands for La Janda Red de Acción Regenerativa (La Janda Regenerative Action Network). La Janda is our local district, named for the lagoon that once shaped this landscape.

JARA emerged slowly, almost as a natural response to our work. It began with a simple question: How do we create regular spaces where neighbours, volunteers and local organisations can learn, work and reflect together around land and climate? Not workshops in the formal sense, and not activism in the conventional sense, but something more ordinary and continuous – a rhythm of shared practice with space for building skills and taking action.

We are only a few months into our JARA programme, and it will obviously continue to evolve. For now, it takes the form of two gatherings each month – one weekday and one weekend – with participants coming together around a practical focus. We advertise these events in advance through our newsletter and on social media and ask people to confirm their participation to be able to plan appropriately.

We begin with an introduction to the day's activity, often using simple visual explanations or demonstrations to communicate the design and the 'why' behind the work. This also allows latecomers to arrive before we get started, an essential design element in rural Andalusia. After several hours of shared effort, we pause for a relaxed meal outdoors, then continue or shift to a second activity. Throughout the event, our ethic of 'people care' remains central: breaks, time for informal conversations, check-ins and closing circles create space for reflection alongside action.

While our first JARA days have taken place mostly within our land-based sanctuary called Catalina, our intention is that the format will extend into

public spaces and common land. The underlying idea is simple: shared places survive only when they are collectively cared for.

Social infrastructure for climate action

In this sense, JARA is less a programme and more a piece of social infrastructure – a space where ecological practice, cultural life and civic participation overlap. It creates small opportunities for people to experience agency: to see that caring for a path, planting a forest patch, or discussing a water issue together is already part of climate transition.

From the perspective of EMCCINNO (www.emccinno.eu), this kind of work often goes unnoticed but makes other changes possible. Policies, funding and technical solutions travel more easily through communities that already know how to gather, collaborate and care for shared places. JARA does not solve the problems of climate change, but it helps cultivate the conditions in which meaningful responses can grow.





Small, well-held spaces for shared practice can gradually build the confidence, relationships and sense of agency that broader transitions will depend on.



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Transferable learning so far

Viewed through a permaculture lens, the success of JARA is less about the individual activities we do, and more about creating the conditions that make participation possible. Several patterns are beginning to emerge which we believe are applicable to many contexts:

Many hands make light work

When tasks are well designed and varied, people experience collective effort as energising rather than exhausting.

Learning by doing

Learning happens through doing, without the weight of formal education. And skilful facilitation models ways of being together, caring for community and relating to the more-than-human world that can be transformative.

Variety sustains engagement

Mixing physical work with explanation of context, observation and conversation keeps sessions accessible to different

abilities and energy levels. Avoiding long stretches of repetitive labour helps people leave feeling nourished rather than depleted.

Family-friendly design expands participation

Children do not slow the work down – they enable people with caring responsibilities to take part and help normalise intergenerational learning.

Social time is not extra – it is infrastructure

Sharing meals, taking breaks and allowing time for informal connection are central to the experience. People may come for a few hours or stay the whole day, but the rhythm of gathering, eating and working together builds continuity.

Place itself does part of the work

Being outdoors in a natural setting is inherently regenerative. The environment

lowers barriers to participation and makes conversations about climate change feel grounded rather than abstract.

Continuity creates ownership

Regular gatherings allow participants to see the arc of their contribution over time. What begins as volunteering gradually becomes stewardship, as people recognise their role in shaping shared spaces.

Flexible commitment encourages consistency

Keeping our expectations light, while maintaining clear group size limits and basic coordination, reduces friction and allows more people to participate over time.

Commons-based activities resonate

Projects that visibly benefit the wider community generate stronger motivation and help shift identity from individual helper to collective stakeholder.



Taken together, these insights suggest that cultural change does not require dramatic interventions. Small, well-held spaces for shared practice can gradually build the confidence, relationships and sense of agency that broader transitions will depend on. We warmly encourage you to try something like this for yourself, adapted to your local needs.

Looking forward

At the end of the planting day, the new forest patch is almost invisible – small plants, mulched soil, creating a space where care is palpable. Nothing dramatic, and yet everyone who was there knows that something has begun, both in the landscape and between the people who gathered around it.

This is how much of the climate transition is unfolding: quietly, locally, through repeated acts of care that reshape how we relate to place and to one another. Projects like EMCCINNO

attempt to recognise and learn from these small shifts – not to standardise them, but to make them visible and shareable across contexts.

JARA is still young. It will change, expand, and sometimes stumble. But its direction is clear: to create simple, regular opportunities for people to practise stewardship together – of land, of commons, and of the social fabric that makes collective action possible.

If policy often works at the scale of targets and timelines, initiatives like JARA work at the scale of relationships and rhythms. Both are necessary. The hope is that, over time, they can begin to inform one another more directly.

In future articles, we will explore other strands of this work – continuing to ask that simple question: What do cultures need to evolve if meaningful responses to climate change are to take root?

More on culture:

'A Living Experiment in Community, Craft and Culture' PM127
'Redesigning Rural Futures' PM125



Andrew Zionts Abrams, Joanna Crowson and Jorge Gallardo collaborate at the intersection of arts, culture and the climate transition, drawing on their shared roots in permaculture and community work in southern Spain. Their projects at Almenara and the land at Catalina explore how ecological restoration, creative practice and local culture can come together to regenerate both landscape and community.

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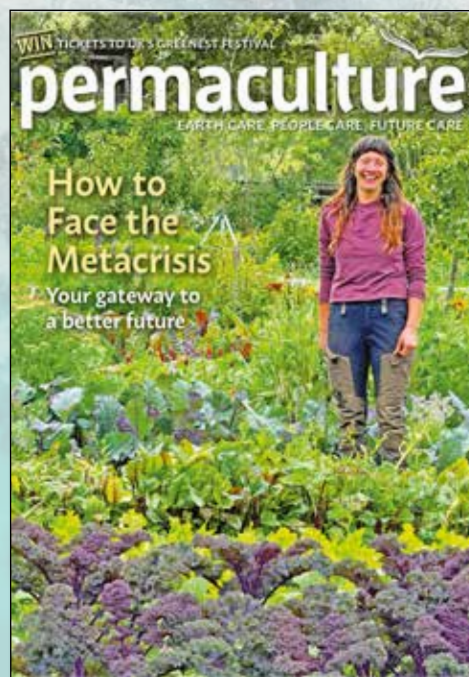
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