

## Why Bother With Permaculture? An essay by Ted Trainer

We are fast approaching a period of enormous and probably chaotic change. Industrial-affluent-consumer society is unsustainable and is rapidly running into serious difficulties

Permaculture is a crucial component of the solution to the global predicament. However I want to argue that Permaculture is far from sufficient, and indeed that it can be counter productive if it is not put in the right context. That is, unless we are careful, promoting Permaculture can actually help to reinforce our existing unsustainable society. We must do much more than just contribute to the spread of Permaculture. We must locate Permaculture within a wider campaign of radical social change.

Before I try to explain this I need to outline how I see the global predicament we are in. Whether or not you will agree with my conclusions about what needs to be done and where Permaculture fits in will depend greatly on whether you agree with my view of the situation we are in.

There is an overwhelmingly strong case that industrial-affluent-consumer society is grossly unsustainable. Australian per capita rates of resource use and environmental impact are far higher than can be kept up for long, or than could be had by all the world's people. We are in other words well beyond the limits to growth. Following are a few of the points that support this conclusion. (For detailed explanation see my *The Conserver Society* (Zed, 1995) or *Towards a Sustainable Society* (Envirobooks, 1995.)

- It takes about 4 to 5 ha of productive land to provide the lifestyle people in Sydney have (our "footprint"). If 11 billion people (the expected population of the world late next century) were to live in that fashion about 50 billion ha of productive land would be needed; but that is 8 times all the productive land on the planet.

- If all the world's present number of people each used energy at the Australian per capita rate then estimated potentially recoverable resources of coal, oil, gas, shale oil, tar sand oil, and uranium would be exhausted in under 40 years.

- The climate scientists are saying that if we are to prevent the greenhouse problem from getting any worse we must cut annual fossil fuel use by 60-80% of its present volume. If we cut by 60% and shared the remaining energy equally between the 11 billion people expected you would have to get by on only 1/18 of the present Australian per capita consumption.

- The environment problem is basically due to all the resources our affluent-consumer lifestyles are taking from the environment and then dumping into it as waste. It takes 20

tonnes of new materials to provide for one American every year. One species, humans, is taking 40% of the biological productivity of the planet's entire land area, mostly to provide well for only 1 billion people. If another 10 billion want to live as we in the rich countries do how much habitat will be left for the other possibly 30 million species? We cannot possibly expect to stop the extinction of species unless we drastically reverse this demand for biological resources and the consequent destruction of habitat. We cannot do that without huge reduction in production and consumption.

These sorts of figures leave little doubt that the way of life taken for granted in industrial-affluent-consumer society cannot possibly be kept up for long or extended to all people. We can have it only because the one-fifth who live in rich countries like Australia are grabbing four-fifths of world resource production to provide per capita use rates that are 15-20 times those averaged by the poorest half of the world's people.

The outlook becomes far worse when we add the implications of our manic obsession with economic growth . If Australia averaged 4% growth from now to 2050 and by then the expected 11 billion people had risen to the living standards we would then have, the total world economic output would be 220 times what it is today. The present levels of production and consumption are unsustainable, yet we are committed to an economy and a culture which is determined to increase living standards and the GNP, constantly and without limit. It should be obvious that no plausible assumptions about what miraculous breakthroughs technology will achieve will enable continuation of the living standards and the systems taken for granted today; the foregoing multiples are far too big for that.

This blind obsession with raising living standards and the GNP is the basic cause of all our major global problems, including resource depletion, environmental destruction and the deprivation of the Third World. For example the Third World has been developed into a form which enables its land, labour and capital to produce mostly for the benefit of the rich countries and their corporations. Most people in the Third World not only get little or nothing from the development that is taking place, their productive capacity is put into producing for export. Hence an increasingly critical literature argues that development is plunder and that growth deprives.

Globalisation is making all these problems worse. We are seeing a rapid restructuring of the world to give the transnational corporations and banks even greater freedom and access to resources, markets and cheap labour.

This basic limits to growth analysis shows our predicament to be extremely serious. We are far beyond sustainability. The problems cannot be solved without radical change.

The solution?

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If the limits analysis is valid then a sustainable society would have to involve much less affluent lifestyles, highly self-sufficient local economies, little trade, little heavy industry, cooperative and participatory systems and a steady-state economy. This means much more than merely getting rid of a capitalist economy. It means developing an economy in which there is no economic growth, the GNP per capita is a small fraction of what it is in Australia today, no interest is earned on savings (because if it is you have a growth economy), most economic activity takes place outside the cash economy and there are many free goods from the local commons, the "unemployment" rate might be 80% (because most work and production would not be for money), and in which much "tax" is paid via contributions of time to local working bees and committees. In addition a sustainable society requires fundamental changes in world view and values. Cooperation must become the dominant concern, not competition. A strong collective orientation must replace today's rampant individualism. Affluence and consumption must become distasteful; frugality and self-sufficiency must become major sources of life satisfaction. Giving must become a more important source of satisfaction than getting.

If the limits to growth analysis is valid then we have no choice about these changes. Whether we like it or not we must make these sorts of changes if we are to develop a sustainable society.

Many of us with some direct experience of alternative lifestyles and the Ecovillage movement know how easy it would be to build a sustainable and just and admirable society. Many who have lived simply and in cooperative communities know it is possible to design and run settlements in which people have a very high quality of life at a relaxed pace, in supportive communities, secure from unemployment, poverty and violence, on very low levels of per capita resource consumption. (This is not to assume that our society will make the transition. I am increasingly pessimistic about this.)

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The implications for Permaculture.

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Permaculture design principles are obviously crucial for sustainability. Viable settlements must be designed to provide most of their needs from the local landscape without external inputs of resources, and in ways that are ecologically sustainable. But given the nature and the magnitude of our limits to growth problem much more than

Permaculture is required. Fundamental economic, political and cultural change is essential and without these Permaculture will be of no significance even if it flourishes. Unfortunately much Permaculture literature and many courses tend to leave the impression that spreading knowledge about Permaculture techniques is sufficient to achieve a sustainable world and that there is no need to question affluent living standards or the present economy. In general far too little emphasis is put on the fact that a sustainable society cannot be achieved without radical a change in lifestyles, in the economy, in the geography of settlements and in world views and values.

The important point here is that Permaculture can very easily be part of the problem. It is part of the problem if it does not increase the realisation that affluent living standards and this economy are totally incompatible with sustainability and with global economic justice. Much Permaculture literature not only does not increase people's understanding of these crucial themes, much of it reinforces the impression that fundamental change is not necessary because all we have to do is adopt things like organic food, composting, recycling and community supported agriculture. Permaculture is part of the problem if it is essentially enabling people to do some ecologically correct things in their gardens, such as growing some organic vegies, and then feel that they are making a significant contribution to saving the planet.

Many people do such "light green" things without questioning affluent lifestyles within a growth economy and without seeing these as the basic causes of the global crisis. For too many Permaculture is little more than another toy to play with on their hobby farms.

Similar criticisms can be made of the Ecovillage movement. This is an extremely important development; we can now point to functioning examples of more sustainable settlements. But the movement is not putting anywhere near enough emphasis on the development of self-sufficient economies, living simply and cooperatively and on the need to get rid of an economic system based on market forces, growth and the profit motive. It tends to give the impression that it will be sufficient to build Ecovillages that will function within the present economy.

In other words Permaculture can easily be seen as another 'technical fix' that can save industrial affluent-consumer society. I think most people see things like solar energy, community supported agriculture, LETS, earth building, reed bed sewage and Permaculture as new ecologically friendly techniques that will enable us to solve resource and environment problems and therefore to go on living with high living standards, growth and free market economies, jet-away holidays etc. They see technical advance as capable of eliminating any need for fundamental change in lifestyles or in the economy. I think that we are giving the impression that Permaculture is another of the technologies that will help to save industrial-affluent-consumer society, when the most important message to be given now is that we have to largely scrap that society.

There is a seriously mistaken theory of change underlying much of the Permaculture movement. Many seem to assume that that the more people we get to take an interest in Permaculture and to practise it the closer we move to the establishment of a just and sustainable society. This is not so. If all we do is work at increasing the numbers who understand and like and practice Permaculture this will probably have no more revolutionary significance than if we increased the number of people who are interested in the RSPCA or golf. This will just reach the point where all those potentially interestable in Permaculture will have become interested, and will be out their reading the books and growing things, while still living in and benefiting from and not challenging affluent-consumer society and the growth economy.

Again, replacing that society is the crucial task, not getting more people to like and practice Permaculture. Merely teaching Permaculture techniques will not get them to see that affluent industrial consumer society is a terrible mistake, that capitalism must be scrapped, that a growth economy must be scrapped, that we must build small and highly self-sufficient economies based on cooperation and participation, and that very different lifestyles and values must be embraced. People can become very knowledgable and keen about Permaculture without understanding any of this.

Why do you want people to take up Permaculture? Just to enjoy the idea and the practice? Or to help us build a sustainable society. If your our answer is the latter, then we will not get this outcome just by increasing people's understanding of Permaculture techniques. We make sure that wherever possible we connect Permaculture with the global scene and the need for radical social change, so that people understand that Permaculture is necessary but only as part of the bigger picture. We can't claim to be centrally concerned with achieving sustainability if all we talk about is Permaculture. It is in fact only a one element in the list of conditions and factors required for a sustainable world order. But there can be no doubt that it is a crucially important element.

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### **Listserve Response from Matt!**

I'm glad you shared this article, Sean. I enjoyed the gloomy facts about the impossibility of the entire world's population living as affluent-consumers, :1, but I believe the fun and joy of living in Permaculture is equally important to share, in order to give a better "argument" for Permaculture.

I agree that massive cultural change will need to continue to occur (*it already is happening*, we're talking about it, no?). However, i don't think there will be an obvious point where things just magically switch to a new paradigm, and even if there is, momentum must build first to bring it there, to be able to handle the switch, which

brings me to my disagreement in the article.

Teaching and spreading Permaculture, on any level that people are ready to jump into, begins building this cultural capacity to accept the change. If some people just enjoy toying around with the ideas and the practice of Permaculture, GREAT - they'll probably tell their friends about it, one of which may integrate the principles more fully into their lifestyle, who then spreads it to her friends, and maybe by that time the first person is now ready to be excited about integrating Permaculture in a more holistic way...

And while bringing up the fear-inducing facts on the impossibility of world-wide affluent-consumer culture may help put a fire under some, I rather prefer to get people excited to start having fun creating a joyous-producer culture by sharing my own personal delight of getting to know all of the living beings around me (what they look like, what their name is, where they live, why they moved here, what they like and don't like, what their history is, how they feel about my interactions with them, why they do what they do), which includes my people neighbors, plant neighbors, animal neighbors, and bacteria, fungi & protozoa neighbors. There is a lifetime of cycles of wonder in those relationships alone, from playful curiosity about some question to the exciting fruition found in each revelation (which then leads to more and more questions and realizations, heh). But then there's also the pleasures of experience: of seeing the wild shapes and forms of the real life around me, that I am actively helping live, everyday; of smelling not only the flowers, but also the ripe compost, and sometimes even the scat of an unknown animal that visited my garden in an attempt to track this scent to see if that animal returns later; touching and grasping the fruit to figure out "are they quite ripe yet?" and then feeling the textures in my mouth when a pear off a tree you've nurtured *has* reached perfect ripeness; and then there's the most obvious: the tasting of freshly harvested leaves, fruits, and tubers, graciously donated by plants i've grown to know well, such that we help each other out. And then there's more: the fun and excitement of designing my own world with my friends and my family, and laughingly "working" together towards common goals, with breaks often for drink or food or play; the sometimes struggle but always beauty of honest communication, which has created deep meaningful bonds with folks that I will enjoy for the rest of my life; the safety and security of a supportive community that values and encourages me to follow my intuition towards living as true expression of my inner divine spark.

So really, I suppose in my opinion it's the *culture* of Permaculture that is in need of more discussion and expression.

I guess it's sorta summed up in a modified quotation from David Eisenberg, one of the folks responsible for getting natural building and more novel Permaculture building techniques into the building codes around the U.S. -

The way to inspire change in the dominant paradigm is to have more fun than they do and make sure they know it.

[my modification: switched 'inspire change in' with the original 'subvert']

Yar,  
Cheers,  
'matt!