

Lesson Two

What is permaculture?

In this lesson you will learn:

- One definition of permaculture
- The term permaculture has many definitions
- The origin of permaculture
- Who is practicing permaculture

"Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted & thoughtful observation rather than protracted & thoughtless labour; of looking at plants & animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single-product system."

Bill Mollison (from the permaculture.net website)

This definition of permaculture expresses a basic concept in permaculture - examining and following nature's patterns. Permaculture advocates designing human systems based on natural ecosystems. But, there are many other definitions of permaculture, just as there are many definitions of sustainable living.

The term permaculture is a contraction of the words "permanent," "agriculture," and "culture." Although the original focus of permaculture was sustainable food production, the philosophy of permaculture has expanded over time to encompass economic and social systems. It is a dynamic movement that is still evolving. For example, some practitioners are integrating spirituality and personal growth work into the framework of permaculture.

What is the origin of permaculture?

Permaculture was created in the 1970's by Bill Mollison, an Australian ecologist and University of Tasmania professor. He had spent many years out in nature as a wildlife biologist observing how natural systems work and became very distressed at the destruction that he saw going on around him. He decided that instead of being angry about what was happening and reacting against the destruction he wanted to work on creating a positive solution. And he thought the solution would be living based on the patterns he had observed in nature.

By observing nature, Mollison came up with several important insights. He observed that natural systems, such as forests and wetlands, are sustainable. They provide for their own energy needs and recycle their own wastes. He also observed that all the different parts of a natural ecosystem work together. Each component of the system performs important tasks. For example, bees help to pollinate, birds provide pest control, certain plants pull nitrogen out of the air and fix it into a form that other plants can use. So everything does

useful work. He applied these and other insights to design and create sustainable agricultural systems.

In the 1970's he and his student David Holmgren wrote and published some books explaining his ideas. In the 1980s he published his design manual and started teaching permaculture design courses to spread his ideas around the world. By the 1990s permaculture had started spreading throughout the US, although it's more well-known in other countries around the world. To this day, it's continuing to grow as a global grassroots movement and people primarily learn about it through permaculture design courses and workshops that generally happen outside of academia.

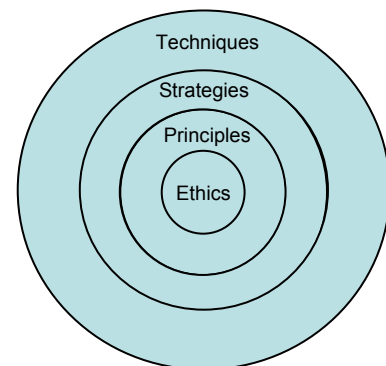
Who is practicing permaculture?

Besides permaculture practitioners who study and learn about permaculture and consciously use permaculture to live in a more sustainable way, there are many people who practice permaculture without realizing it – concerned environmentalists, organic gardeners, conservationists, land use planners, urban activists, recyclers, indigenous peoples and anyone working toward creating a sustainable human civilization. The reason for this is that the philosophy of permaculture draws on a lot of ideas and practices that have been around for a long time.

Have you heard the terms ecological design, sustainable design, applied ecology or green design? These are other terms that describe the basic philosophy of using nature as a model to foster sustainability. The difference between these approaches and permaculture is their scope and focus. Permaculture draws on these systems and incorporates them into a broader framework. Permaculture is a comprehensive system that can be applied to all aspects of one's life although food production remains an important focus. As mentioned earlier, it is a dynamic, living philosophy which is continuing to evolve.

How can you practice permaculture?

Because permaculture is a comprehensive, dynamic system it can be practiced in different ways and at different levels. To help you begin to use permaculture in your life, the rest of this course will present (1) the ethics - the philosophical core of permaculture, (2) some principles - guidelines for applying permaculture, (3) strategies - goals to help you focus as you apply permaculture, and (4) techniques - concrete ways that you can apply permaculture.



You, too, can become a permaculture practitioner!

Activities

1. Go to www.permaculture.net and read other definitions of permaculture.
2. Write down the definition that speaks to you.