

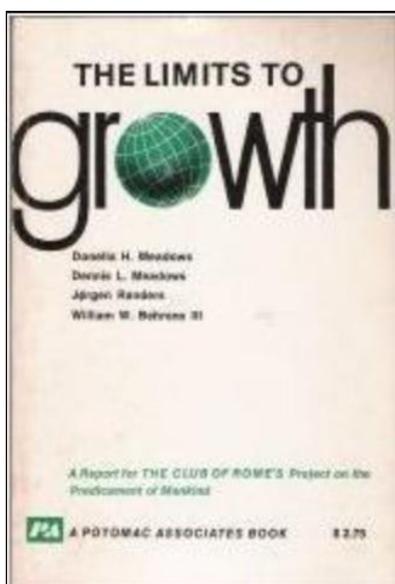
## The Birth of Permaculture

By Mireille Eid, HOPE researcher NSW

Permaculture is a world-wide movement that is defined as “the development or maintenance of an artificial ecosystem intended to be self-sustaining and to satisfy the living requirements of its inhabitants, especially by the use of renewable resources.” (Oxford English Dictionary, OED). The OED credits the entry to its Australian origin. First coined in 1978 by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, it is a method of land planning that can be applied at scales from the home garden, to city block, to village, to farm. It is an ethically-based whole-systems design approach that uses concepts, principles, and methods derived from ecosystems, indigenous technologies, and other time-tested practices to create caring and sustainable human settlements and institutions. Although rooted in horticulture and agriculture, permaculture design is interdisciplinary, touching on a wide range of subjects including regional planning, ecology, animal husbandry, appropriate technology, architecture, social justice, and international development.



Source: The Permaculture Institute



It all began with the 1972 report “Limits to Growth” (Meadows, 1972) by Massachusetts Institute of Technology husband-and-wife team Donella and Dennis Meadows. Their computer model tracked the world's economy and environment and essentially predicted that present rates of economic and population growth cannot be sustained beyond the year 2100. Australian researchers and biologists Mollison and Holmgren who read and analysed the report became concerned and vowed to take action. The potential demise of the global system of nature in which we all live drove them to embark on a sustainable concept to address the collapse of the industrial growth society with its catastrophic environmental consequences. Permaculture was born.

Or was it?

In his analysis of our times, Yin Paradies undertakes a lively and extensive critique of modernity and concludes that it is this entity that is indeed the ruin of our planet. (Paradies, 2020). He outlines how our economic model, which he lists broadly as consisting of debt, property, institutions and governments is the devastating structure where destructive colonial practices take place to the detriment of all living things on earth. He believes that these must be undone for any genuine attempt at saving the environment, decolonisation and reconciliation.



Tim Lee. Remote disadvantaged community thriving thanks to native bush food it's cultivating (ABC News)

As inclusive as his thinking is, Paradies' plea involves not a demand for land to be returned to Indigenous people but for all people to return to the land and to take part in healing the already damaged and neglected country. This holistic approach and call for the fusion of Indigenous ecological practices and cultural life along with the practices of frugality, permaculture and free-ranging, would therefore have a far greater impact on the future of the planet and its inhabitants. Melinda Hinkson puts it this way: “The basis for a viable future, one that pulls back from the edge of ecological collapse, will turn upon an ethically centred distributed agency.” (Hinkson, 2020)

Mollison himself was well connected with Tasmanian Aborigines and had researched and studied the history and genealogies of the descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines. As part of his scientific academic work at

the University of Tasmania he developed a unit called Environmental Psychology that incorporated his understanding of ancient land practices as well as the sustainable ecological model he then called Permaculture. He then taught it over three weeks in 1979 to 18 students from the community who then were granted the certificate now known as the Permaculture Design certificate (PDC). Today, there are over hundred thousand of qualified permaculture designers with the accredited PDC and thousands of teachers and practitioners in every corner of the world. “The impact of the permaculture design model has been so far-reaching, it’s hard to even get started” says Michel Thill (Thill, 2016).

Reflecting on Permaculture’s foundations and applications in developing countries, Rachel Sullivan puts it this way: “While permaculture has had a low profile in the West, it has been the key to self-sufficiency for many people in the developing world. Given that climate change and sustainable development are dominating world headlines, the concept is finally beginning to get mainstream recognition in Australia – the home of permaculture.” (Sullivan 2008).

Permaculture co-founder David Holmgren’s *Melliodora* in Hepburn Springs in Victoria is one of the best documented and well-known permaculture demonstration sites in the world. It has a passive solar house, mixed food gardens and orchards, dams and livestock, and creek revegetation in the nearby public land. The philosophical dimension of permaculture is paramount to Holmgren. The guided one-day tours of *Melliodora* and the series of fora emphasise the ethical underpinnings of permaculture. In this year’s forum series titled *Garden States 2021: Cultivating Ethnobotanical Plants, Knowledge, and Community*, the program will explore relationships between humankind and plants, including gardening, conservation and sustainability, culture, art, spirituality, philosophy, research and politics. Presentations by world renowned Indigenous speakers on ethnobotany for example, attests to the awakening about Indigenous knowledge of the land and its centrality to permaculture. (Holmgren Design)

In NSW, the rediscovered connection between ancient sustainable ecologies and permaculture can be seen in practices at The Permaculture Research Institute. Located on a Permaculture demonstration site in The Channon NSW, Australia, it is headed by Geoff and Nadia Lawton. Nadia Lawton was born in the Dead Sea Valley in Jordan where she learnt Indigenous land use from her father, an expert farmer and herbal healer. After completing her PDC in the Dead Sea Valley in 1999 she proceeded to work on the “Greening the Desert” project. She established the permaculture women’s groups and other school projects. Nadia is a registered permaculture teacher in the English and Arabic languages and has established with her husband Geoff Lawton, *Zaytuna Farm* which is the demonstration and educational permaculture model farm for The Permaculture Research Institute (Zaytuna Farm, 2020)

Geoff Lawton took his PDC in 1983 with Bill Mollison. He established the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia with *Zaytuna Farm* as his and Nadia’s family home. As an award-winning Permaculture Designer, Geoff’s main aim is to drive the establishment of self-replicating educational demonstration sites across the globe. (The Permaculture Research Institute, 2021).

*Zaytuna Farm* is a working permaculture education and demonstration farm. In addition to classroom time, students practice daily farm duties interacting and caring for farm systems which can include animals, crops, trees, nursery, aquatics, irrigation, renewable energy, waste and recycling. Other tasks include looking at design in the landscape, making compost, natural fertilisers, testing soil, basic surveying and completing design exercises.



Source: Zaytuna Farm

Food productions on the farm includes a large diversity of mixed vegetables and herbs including dairy products and all meats. The farm also has a large diversity of bamboo production for food and timber plus farm forestry and reforestation including river bank stability projects.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become powerful voices in world environmental politics. However, little is known of the global picture of this sector regarding permaculture. Nevertheless, a new study at McGill University shows that environmental groups are increasingly focused on advocacy in climate change politics and environmental justice and that permaculture is gaining traction where in the words of Lawton, “we are close to a tipping point in making permaculture the norm”.

## References

- Holmgren Design - permaculture vision and innovation (2021) <https://holmgren.com.au>
- Hinkson, Melinda (2020) Refiguring the postcolonial for precarious times: introduction, *Postcolonial Studies*, 23:4, 431-437.
- McGill University (2020) "Environmental groups moving beyond conservation: New study examines the role of NGOs in global environmental politics." ScienceDaily, <[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/05/200528160536.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/05/200528160536.htm)>.
- Meadows, Donella H; Meadows, Dennis L; Randers, Jørgen; Behrens III, William W (1972). *The Limits to Growth; A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. Universe Books.
- Paradies, Y. (2020). Unsettling truths: modernity,(de-) coloniality and Indigenous futures. *Postcolonial Studies*, 23(4), 438-456.
- Stefan Partelow, Klara Johanna Winkler, Gregory M. Thaler. (2020) Environmental nongovernmental organizations and global environmental discourse. *PLOS ONE*, 2020; 15 (5): e0232945
- Sullivan, Rachel. (2008). The living culture whose time has come. *Ecos*, 2008(144), 8-10.
- The Permaculture Research Institute <https://www.permaculturenews.org/permacultureresearch-institute/what-is-the-permaculture-research-institute/>
- Thill, Michel (2016). 5 reasons permaculture has become a global movement. <https://www.sociallandscapes.co.uk/blog/2016/10/3/5-reasons-permaculture-has-become-aglobal-movement>
- Zaytuna Farm <https://www.zaytunafarm.com/about-us/>