



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

© Copyright Permaculture Association of Western Australia Inc. and authors.

What is Permaculture?



Bill Mollison (Australia)

[Presentation Transcription]

I'm replacing Lea Harrison, who has a perforated ear drum and can't fly. So I don't have any lecture notes, I'm sorry to say. Her lecture was "What is Permaculture?" The more you know about it, the harder it is to say what it is. And I know a lot about it, so you won't get much satisfaction out of me.

Let's look at the etymology: 'permanent' is a Latin word meaning to endure or to persist throughout, and 'culture' is any of those activities that support and distinguish human communities. Probably the easiest way to understand it is through subsets of words like 'agriculture.' When I say the word 'agriculture,' you think, oh, that is the activity which produces food for the community - and you would be wrong. Agriculture is that activity that produces commodities for the international market.

It was originally an activity that produced food for our communities, but it drifted away from that after about 1940, and the death knell was sounded when Mr. Kissinger, who arranged the bombing of Cambodia, the butchery of Cambodia - somebody once said, "Irony died the day that Kissinger received the Peace Prize." Mr. Kissinger had a scheme which he sold to American capital, called the ZAP policy, in which he suggested they take over the food resources of the world. How they would do that was to move food onto the stock exchange, onto the commodity market. So you can trade in food and buy futures in food.

Secondly, he suggested you could patent the seed, so those who owned the patents effectively owned the food. So, at that point plant patenting was introduced, and today, as I stand before you, you're lost. You can elect who you like, you don't control anything any more. A hundred percent of the patents on soy beans are owned by three companies, and so it goes. All the food you eat is patented and can be forbidden to you by those patent holders at any minute. Now, all hybrid seed is patented; open-pollinated seed can't be patented, to my knowledge. Traditional seeds may be patented, although there is a good defence against that.

All that happened without your approval or knowledge. Operating through financial systems, agriculture has been sold out, its seed, its farmers, its consumers, to the international market forces. It was quite funny: two Lebanese, who are very good in the market, bought all the futures in soy beans in the year they came on the commodity market. They were not intended to do that, and a law has been passed to prevent them doing that, because other people wanted to buy it. So for one year, two Lebanese got extraordinarily rich by owning the world's soy beans.

Soy beans are used in tofu, soy sauce, and are sold as 'health food.' Well, it's not. It's probably the most unhealthy food grown in what is called agriculture. It was grown only to paint cars - all duco, all paint for cars, has to have a soy bean oil base. It grows as the number of cars grows. You can have unpainted cars and we can stop growing soy beans. But if you demand a colour on your car, you have to have a few acres of soy beans. The whole soy bean kick was started by Henry Ford. He pushed the soy bean because it was so valuable to him. He used to say you could have a car any colour you want, so long as it was black, because he didn't have many other colours.

Soy beans, too, have a powerful anti-nutritional factor which prevents the uptake of protein. So they have to be cooked for six or seven hours. There's hardly any other food which is that poisonous. So they are a nasty little poisonous commercial seed. A little bit is left over, a tiny fraction, 0.005%, is used in health food shops for what is rather a risky food; if they haven't rinsed it enough, you will get a protein deficiency out of that. People who make tofu cook it the minimal time. There are plenty of beans without these factors, but they are not much used. But soy beans have to be grown to paint your cars, and that leaves an awful lot of soy residue, and they make up a large part of the feed industry for chickens and pigs, poor things. I always said that I don't trust anybody who voluntarily eats beans. One of my more famous statements.

So, agriculture, although it may originally have been intended to feed us, no longer does. It basically operates in response to a remote commodity market. That's what sets the prices, and what sets the demand. Very few people plant the seeds they plan. If they are hybrid seeds, there is no point in trying to keep them for tomorrow.

Kissinger's plan is working extremely well. If he controls the think-tanks and those seeds, he is, in fact, in charge of the world. He just wanted to be a dictator of the whole world, that's all. I did, too. He thought of it first. I just want to be emperor, just for a week.

Agriculture, then, was intended to feed us, but it no longer is so intended. Very little human food is grown in agriculture. Ninety percent of some of our crops go

to animal feeds. I travelled through Europe on the train a few years ago and took note of food growing on farms - I saw five acres of potatoes between Copenhagen and Switzerland. Very little food is grown on farms today. Mainly it is forage for animals, and fortunately that is backfiring; you can get mad cow disease from cows and you can get vancomycin-resistant enterococci from chickens and pork. Food produced by agriculture is becoming truly unsafe for you. There is a great word, 'agricolagenic' disease. That is, diseases that you have, caused by operations of agriculture.

The other disease rapidly spreading as a result of modern agriculture is the fact that you are all turning into women. When you look at the alligators down in Florida - they've got tiny little penises no good to anybody, no bigger than a wart, really. They don't have any testes. The number of males being born with penile deformities is large, and testicular cancer, and they don't have any sperm, to speak of, or at least none of the right shape to kick around. 85% of the sperm in some areas are deformed. This is due to agriculture, also, because they're pouring hormones and hormone analogs onto the soil and it ends up in the food of the chickens, pigs and cattle. Feminising chickens is a good thing...in the old days they used to cut open the males' backs and removed the testes. These days they just feminise them. When you go to Kentucky Fried Chicken, by all means, lick your fingers, but don't eat the chicken.

Vancomycin resistant enterococci - a great word - VRE, that's there because farmers used every antibiotic in their feed, and the only antibiotic we had left medicinally was vancomycin. But then the farmers used vancomycin. So now you are in the same position I was in when I was young: you don't have any antibiotics. You are in for an interesting time. When I was young, we all died of whooping cough, measles, diphtheria - I had that. Then all my friends died of TB. You are going to have to die of all of those, now. You will get accustomed to friends falling over in the playgrounds and being carried to the cemetery, which was the normality of life in Australia before antibiotics. So it is an interesting new game. We have forgotten how to die. You will have to swot up on that. To do it well is quite an art. Expectations of death - you are going to get it, anyhow - none of us is going to get out of this alive.

Agriculture went through a sad decline from 1940 on. What the agricultural scientists called traditional agriculture was never traditional. Traditional agriculture produced a high quality of food for people at the best level it could. What is practiced today is a very, very destructive activity for the commodity market, and farmers know that. Many farmers have left the land because of that. A lot of farmers in the States have pulled out of agriculture because the subsidies were so high. You could grow the rice, but you didn't have to harvest it. You could bale it up as hay and sell it, or give it away. That is always a sign of bad government when there are subsidies, because you try to give the people cheap food. In America, food is incredibly cheap. It keeps them quiet, keeps their minds off other things.

So we are not in a very good position today in regard to food. I saw it all happen, too. Unlike many of us, I was aware of it. I started up an open-pollinated seed company many years ago, 20 years ago, to save our seed. Jude Fanton and her husband Michel started up a seed library, where you could put seed in and take seed out, because libraries were immune from seed laws. I got attacked by 39 lawyers in my seed company, and you can't defend against that many lawyers based in New York

and Sydney. We collapsed it; next day we gave its goods to a new seed company, had to change the letterhead, and it continues today. Interestingly, it was called the Phoenix Seed Company, because when the phoenix dies, from its ashes arises a successor, and as it flies up to heaven, followed by all the birds, it tells the story of the death of its predecessor. Our first catalogue told the story of how we were wiped out. It doesn't matter how small or inconspicuous you are, you are under heavy legal attack if you try to sell open-pollinated seeds that people can pinch without profit. So there is a witch hunt to eliminate all those seed companies, and mostly they are gone. They have been absorbed into large and multinational companies. Multinationals have also taken over the retail of seed by buying most of the gardening business and shops. So it is pretty well sewn up. You sit there, a prisoner of Mr. Kissenger. Not a nice position to be in, I can tell you.

He experimentally switched off the bread in Chile when it looked like the socialists were getting in. Americans equate socialism to communism, and communism is bad, so as soon as the socialist government came in under Allende, they switched off the wheat. Had a little trial in food control, and it worked; Allende was brought down by bread riots. And they got Pinochet and repression, 40,000 people tortured and shot. Some of you may know about it and some may have experienced it. They tried it in Australia, but our army refused to fire on us. That's what saved us. But they did get rid of our government. Interesting, isn't it?

Permaculture was born in reaction to this mess. It subsumes organic agriculture. We just assume that we will grow food cleanly. It doesn't use sprays or hormones, or all these things. It's an eerie thing that all the books on permaculture up to 1970 were on gardening tips - plant your beans six inches apart, etc. Every book on permaculture was on gardening tips. There was no design. When I realised that in the late 60s, the hair went up on the back of my head. Nobody told farmers how to design for eliminating bad effects of climate and wind. You can take out wind, you can take out frost, by correct planting. And nothing was related to anything else. We didn't have any books on the design of agricultural systems. I wrote the first one in 1978. There were no precursors. There was a little book on design in landscape by PA Yeomans in Australia, on water design in landscape. There were no other books on design.

Dimension was recently added to design by Masanobu Fukuoka in Japan. He collapsed time. He planted his crop into the remains of the preceding crop, so he didn't have to crop, plough, reseed, start another crop. So he was able to get many crops more. That's the last word issued on design. There may be other dimensions to design yet to come. Now that we have started the process of issuing books on design, there will be smarter people among our students than we are, and if there are not, they are pretty, damn silly. So permaculture is a book on design. I think most people in the media think it is a book on gardening. It is a very sad, backward step, indeed. If I get on talkback radio, nobody asks me serious questions, they ask me why their lemon tree's leaves are going yellow. We know why that is; they planted it in a boggy place or they don't give it enough urine. So there's a way out: lift it up and piss on it.

That's what permaculture is about: very common sense. It is in response to changes in the rational economic control system which has been imposed, more and more

upon us. It is an attempt to return to systems of small gardens. In some countries gardens produce 90% of the food. It is true in Russia. Agriculture produces very little food. It does the most destruction, it has the most land, it doesn't produce much food that people actually eat. Gardens do. So if you can increase your gardens, you can get rid of agriculture. I think, in the near future, it should be a banned activity.

Agriculture is the most destructive activity on the face of the earth. It is responsible for poisoning sixty percent of our water supplies, and ruining most of our landscape. Mining is a minor activity compared to agriculture, when it comes to soil destruction. We can't lose much more soil in Australia. If you look at the number of acres of land available per head, plotted over the last century, it's in steep decline. We hardly have any land left on which to grow food. In the coming year, we are 45 days short of food. So you are running into real problems. The more soil scientists we have trained, the more land we have lost. I had a soil scientist the other day say she couldn't get a job. I said, "You've saved hundreds of acres from erosion."

If you don't know what permaculture is now, you will have to ask somebody. It's a design of systems with which we can live.