

The Reason I Don't Like Permaculture

2009

I don't like permaculture. I can practically hear the gasps of shock. I can almost see the looks of both perplex and anger. How could I not like permaculture? Is that even allowed? Isn't liking permaculture mandated by some great god of environmentalism?

I never quite liked permaculture. I wanted to like it. I did my best to like permaculture. I read the books. I listened to the groovy talk. I just couldn't get excited about it. Something about permaculture just rubbed me the wrong way. I decided to puzzle out what it is that I don't like about permaculture, and that is what this post is about.

Permaculture, for those who don't know, is a field of study, a set of practices, a way of life, and very nearly a religion that promotes, among other things, perennial polyculture. Many descriptions of permaculture refer to it as sustainable agriculture, which is, to my way of seeing things, a contradiction in terms. In fact, the term permaculture itself means permanent agriculture, which, again, seems like an impossibility to me. There are many other aspects to permaculture beyond just the growing of food. However, growing food is at the foundation of permaculture, and it seems fair to talk about permaculture in those terms.

I ought to first state that I have no problem with perennial polyculture. What I do have a problem with is the attitude with which permaculture goes about growing perennial polyculture. What I have a problem with is the types of relationships that permaculture perpetuates. As far as I'm concerned permaculture does not challenge the fundamentally flawed and dangerous energetics of civilization. Even if permaculture is more harmonious than standard agricultural practices, it seems to me that it leads to the same eventual demise, at least in a spiritual sense.

The relationships of civilization, from what I can see, are relationships of domination. Within the framework of civilization our human relationships are relationships of domination. Even the healthiest of human relationships still has occasional

grapples for power. Even our relationships with ourselves are ones in which we seek to control our minds and bodies through prayer, clothing, exercise, meditation, and millions of other practices. Our relationships with other animal species are ones in which we dominate. Just look at zoos, vivisection labs, factory farms, fur farms, dog breeders, work horses, race horses, and every other exhibit of our relationships with other species of animal to see evidence of that. Our relationships with plants are ones in which we dominate. We breed, genetically-modify, plant in rows, clearcut, plant in containers, and decide which are good and which are unwanted. We also seek to dominate rivers and mountains as is evidenced by dams and mountaintop removal mining. Civilization seems to know no limits on its desire to control. The U.S. space program recently announced that they would bomb the surface of the moon for scientific study.

We can see the results of this type of relationships. The results are devastating. The most egregious and horrific results are those that we can see all around us, the fact that our home and our loved ones are being killed. Many rivers no longer reach their deltas. Those that do reach their deltas manage to carry sediment and industrial and agricultural toxins to the oceans, creating dead zones where nothing can live. Fisheries are collapsing world-wide. Two thousand miles of waterways in the Appalachian region no longer even exist because they have been covered over by the rubble from mountaintop mining. African elephants may go extinct within fifteen years. Glaciers are melting at alarming rates. Oil spills are endemic. An area twice the size of Nebraska turns to desert every year. Landfills are leaching toxins into groundwater. I could go on for hours with examples.

The way I see it the way that civilization teaches and requires us to see relationships is completely wrong and not an accurate representation of the truth. Civilization teaches us that the world in which we live is a world in which the inherent qualities are scarcity and competitiveness. Civilization teaches us that we must dominate or be dominated, that our very survival depends on getting for ourselves at the expense of others. But that seems counter to what I observe in reality. When I look at what is actually going on I see a world that is abundant and nurturing. That is not to say that violence and danger don't exist in the natural world. They do. But civilization seems to exaggerate the claims of violence and danger in order to manipulate people into an incorrect and distorted worldview.

We're taught to fear the natural world. We're taught that the only way humans can survive is through subduing the natural world. Unless we dominate, we're told, we will live lives of terror, constantly battling against those who would kill us. But that seems incorrect to me. Consider the animals that we're supposed to fear. Wolves, bears, lions, snakes, alligators, and panthers, to name a few. The solution to the fear according to civilization is to kill these animals. But isn't the fear exaggerated? Will a wolf or a bear attack a human for no reason? I'm not an ex-

pert on wolves or bears. However, I'd have to say that it seems very unlikely to me that either would attack humans unprovoked. They might attack if they felt endangered by a human. Or they might attack if extraordinarily hungry. But under average circumstances I'm guessing that a wolf or bear would just as rather have nothing to do with a human. And the fact of the matter is that prior to the advent of civilization humans lived alongside these other animals for hundreds of thousands of years without having to dominate nor be dominated.

If civilized humans and their relationships have managed to bring the entire world to the edge of total collapse in just a few thousand years then it seems to me that we really need to re-examine the way in which civilization has taught us to relate at a very fundamental level. Comparatively, uncivilized humans lived for hundreds of thousands of years while contributing to the health of the world in which they lived. Perhaps we could look to the way in which the uncivilized relate in order to learn a better way to understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

Since I am not indigenous, nor do I have much first-hand knowledge of indigenous human cultural views, I may be mistaken in my understanding of how indigenous human cultures view themselves in relationship with others. However, it is my understanding that many indigenous humans see those they are in relationship with as allies, ancestors, and friends. I have read accounts in which indigenous people of North America talk about plants and animals as their ancestors. I have read accounts of indigenous people from all many different places around the world in which they describe their understanding of the world as being a place that gives and nourishes, and a place that they have a relationship with in which they desire to give and nourish in return.

What bothers me about permaculture is that in my experiences with permaculture and permaculturists there seems to be an unchallenged fundamental way of seeing relationships that is still entirely civilized. We've seen what the results are of that way of relationship.

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