



Credit: Kurt Stenberg

## Introduction

**Permaculture**

per·ma·cul·ture

/'pərməkəlCHər/

*noun*

Permaculture is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and nonmaterial needs in a sustainable way.<sup>1</sup>

The implication that all of the world's problems could be "solved in a garden" seemed overly simplistic, but there was something truly remarkable in that statement.

I still clearly remember the day I decided to quit my job as an engineer in the oil and gas industry. I was at my computer and about to issue a request to have a multi-thousand-acre laneway of forest cleared in preparation for a new pipeline. With a flash of guilt and concern for the forest life, I hesitated issuing the request for a moment. On one hand, I disagreed with the destruction of this ecosystem, but on the other, I was an active consumer and petroleum products were the foundation of nearly everything I used and needed in my daily life. At that moment, an email from a friend arrived with a video link, providing the perfect distraction from my moral dilemma! I clicked through and started watching the five-minute YouTube video, *Greening the Desert*,<sup>2</sup> that would completely change the course of my life. It is the story about a man, Geoff Lawton, who had turned ten acres of desertified and degraded land in the Dead Sea valley into an oasis. I was amazed at what this man had accomplished, but confused by his final statement in the video: "You can fix all the world's problems in a garden."

Note that, at this point in my life, I had never grown a garden, or even been interested in gardening. The implication that all of the world's problems could be "solved in a garden" seemed overly simplistic, but there was something truly remarkable in that statement. Over the next few months, I became obsessed with understanding this metaphor and the idea of converting degraded landscapes into abundant ecosystems. I discovered that Geoff Lawton taught something called permaculture, and despite having invested four years of my life into studying engineering, the very definition of which is "the discovery, development or utilization of matter, materials or energy for the use and convenience of humans,"<sup>3</sup> permaculture design filled a gaping hole. In addition to actually providing methods and principles for the design of human habitat through an ethical framework, it provided a profoundly positive key insight. In Geoff's metaphor, "gardening" meant engaging with our surroundings in a way that provided for us, yet enhanced and improved ecosystems at the same time. In short, we humans could be as regenerative as we are destructive. I wanted to be part of this revolution.

A few years later, I found myself in a classroom on Geoff's farm in Australia on the first day of a permaculture design course. He walked in, wrote the words "Evidence to Act" on the board, and started an exposé about how fragile the world really was. I knew it

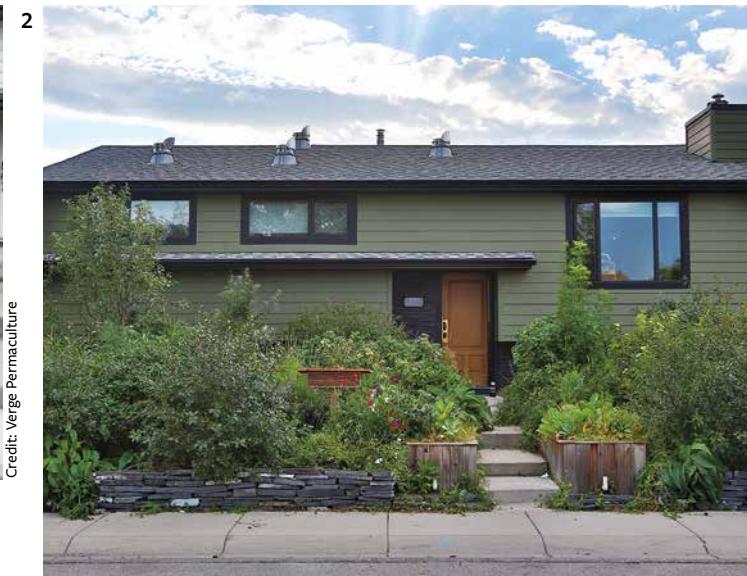


Credit: Jarett Sitter

was bad, but as he described the global and accelerating trends of soil erosion, biodiversity collapse, ocean dead zones, food nutrient loss, peak oil, climate change, peak phosphorus, and more, I started to picture our entire civilization trapped between an immense cliff and a giant row of dominos streaming off into the distance. Any one of these issues seemed significant enough to cause a cascading failure, and in fact, in my daydream I could already hear the ominous sound of tumbling far off in the distance.

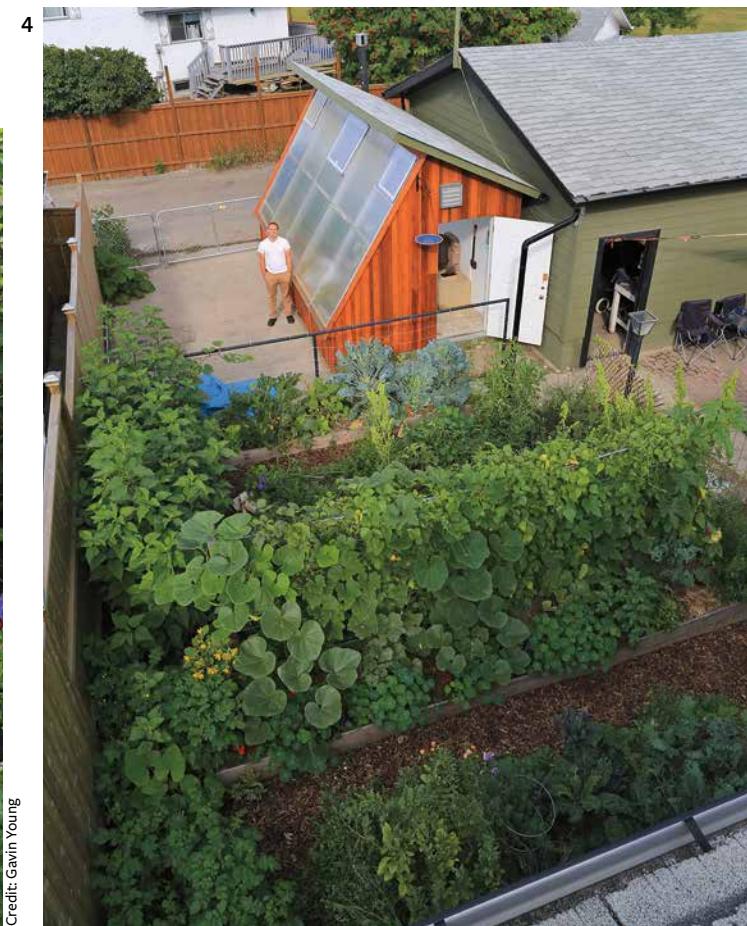
The rest of that course and time spent on Geoff's farm led me through cycles of grief: denial of how bad things really were, anger at all those "other people" who either created the problem or weren't

**FIGURE 1.** Perhaps you've also felt this same impending sense of doom: that our civilization is about to topple over the edge of a cliff.



Credit: Gavin Young

**FIGURE 2.** (1) Avis family home in 2009. (2) Avis family home in 2015. (3) Michelle's and my other productive endeavour during this time. (4) My first passive solar greenhouse, heated with a rocket-mass heater.



Credit: Gavin Young



## The Roots of Permaculture

in the mid-1970s, Australian housemates Bill Mollison and David Holmgren started to develop ideas about stable agricultural systems. This was in response to the rapid growth of destructive industrial-agricultural methods. They saw that these methods were poisoning the land and water, reducing biodiversity, and removing billions of tons of topsoil from previously fertile landscapes. They announced their “permaculture” approach with the publication of *Permaculture One* in 1978.

The term *permaculture* initially meant “permanent agriculture” but was quickly expanded

to also stand for “permanent culture” as it was seen that social aspects were integral to a truly sustainable system (to find out about the roots of permaculture, get a copy of *Permaculture One*, Mollison and Holmgren, 1978). There have since been numerous other authors who have tackled the subject. Some of our favorite books include:

- ▶ *Permaculture: A Designers' Manual*, Bill Mollison, 1988
- ▶ *Introduction to Permaculture*, Bill Mollison, 1991
- ▶ *Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, David Holmgren, 2003

doing something about it, bargaining for some way I could just escape to a bomb shelter in the woods, depression at the hopelessness of it all, and finally acceptance that if I was part of the problem, then I could be part of the solution! I returned home with hope and a new mission. I was going to take responsibility and get my house and garden in order to show a better way and lead by example.

Fast-forward a decade, and Michelle and I had transformed an inner-city home into a permaculture demonstration site complete with a passive solar greenhouse, renewable energy systems, micro-livestock, composting systems, a retrofitted hyper energy-efficient home, food forest, rainwater harvesting systems, and of course a productive vegetable garden. To date we have taught thousands of students through our education company, Verge Permaculture, published hundreds of blogs and videos, consulted on hundreds of projects, helped organize a permaculture community group, and most recently, moved and started developing a 65-hectare (160-acre) rural property.

Despite all this work, I must sheepishly admit that for years I was often ashamed to identify myself as a permaculture practitioner or to even mention the word “permaculture” in most professional circles because of a common misperception that permaculture is simply about growing a vegetable garden.

**While vegetable gardening is absolutely essential to permaculture, and I am not belittling its importance in the slightest, putting a herb spiral in your backyard while you still source the majority of your basic needs from the degenerative food, water, and energy systems is simply permaculture tourism.**

## The Problem with Permaculture

When I was first introduced to permaculture design, I was blown away by the elegant, ingenious, practical, and seemingly simple solutions that Mollison and Holmgren proposed to solve the systemic problems for all of our food, water, shelter, and energy systems. But when I started doing more reading, visiting online forums and blogs, and taking courses, I encountered something quite different.

What I thought was a design system for all of our basic needs seemed more like example after example of gardening tips and tricks. And I know I am not alone in this because the most common response I get when I ask someone if they have ever heard of permaculture, if it isn't outright no, is ya, that's like organic gardening right? I shudder to recall how often I have heard certified permaculture teachers, designers, and even my own students, despite my best efforts, explain permaculture as "organic gardening on steroids."

While vegetable gardening is absolutely essential to permaculture, and I am not belittling its importance in the slightest, putting a herb spiral in your backyard while you still source the majority of your basic needs from the degenerative food, water, and energy systems is simply permaculture tourism. I liken this to claiming that you've "visited" Mexico, when in reality you simply spent two weeks in a gated five-star resort lying on the beach. What started out as a system to redesign every aspect of our human habitat based upon ecological and systems-thinking principles has the risk of transforming into nothing more than a collection of neat ideas for hipster gardeners looking for another hashtag to draw attention to their social media posts. In fact, if it weren't for the original teachings of Mollison, Holmgren, Lawton, and a few others I have had the privilege of studying under, I would have abandoned permaculture long ago. Sadly I know many former colleagues who have done just this. After years of struggling to put permaculture into practice, they throw their hands up and tell everyone "permaculture doesn't work." A statement that is, I think, as absurd as claiming "ecosystems don't work."

Why does permaculture get abandoned? Why has it not been more widely adopted by farmers, ranchers, builders, engineers, architects, and governments as an ethical solution to our growing global food, water, and energy problems? Why is it so often watered-

down to “gardening on steroids”? These questions were keeping me up at night because their existence suggests that there was a problem with permaculture—something important was missing in how the teachings of Mollison, Holmgren, and others were being taught, understood, and practiced. I felt an urgent need to understand and address this problem, as I continued to see exponential growth in the ecological, social, and economic problems that I knew permaculture could solve.

### ***The Biggest Struggles***

With the above-mentioned questions in the back of my mind, I began to notice that whenever I was talking with a practicing permaculturist about their property, the conversation often focused on how challenging it was to put permaculture into practice! Hoping to get to the bottom of things, I began preemptively asking questions like *What is the biggest problem you are struggling with right now?* or *What is your weak link?* as often as I could. After hearing hundreds of answers, combined with requests for advice, it became evident that I could categorize the answers into five major themes. These themes provided my first clues to understanding the problem with permaculture, and for that reason, I call them the five struggles of permaculture.

Before I introduce these five struggles, let’s do a little experiment. I want you to ask yourself the following question, ponder it, and then provide an answer, either out loud or in your mind before proceeding to the next section.

*What is the biggest problem you are struggling with right now putting permaculture into practice?*

With a clear answer in your mind, lets see how it compares to the list in Table 1.

How did your own answer match up? Which biggest struggle best describes where you are at right now? Do you remember a time when you’ve experienced any of the other biggest struggles?

As you ponder these questions, consider the following patterns I have noticed about the five struggles of permaculture:

- ▶ People tend to move through all of the struggles sequentially, in the order I’ve presented, starting at the top row and moving downwards, although sometimes they skip over experiencing one or two of the biggest struggles.

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How we garden reflects our worldview. When we see the world as a collection of independent and isolated elements, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to grasp the interconnectedness of natural systems. How could we then garden ecologically, or live and act responsibly in an interdependent world?

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Dave Jacke,<sup>4</sup> author and permaculture teacher

- ▶ If they manage to overcome the burnout in the fifth struggle, they start back at the top and cycle through again.
- ▶ It is normal for your answer to be a mixture of two biggest struggles if you happen to be in a transition phase. For instance, perhaps you are feeling slightly directionless (you don't know what you actually want) but also obsessed or excited (you don't have enough information) at the same time.
- ▶ If you feel your own answer is tied between rows that are not next to each other in the table and for instance you feel like you are both obsessed (you don't have enough information) and anxious (you don't know where to start), ask yourself which of the bordering biggest struggles you are closest to. If you are closer to

**TABLE 1.** The Five Struggles of Permaculture. The challenges and struggles you will encounter when building your permaculture property can be grouped into five categories.

Biggest Struggle	Common Questions Asked or Statements Made
I don't know what I should do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ My partner(s) and I aren't on the same page.</li> <li>▶ I can't figure out which of these elements I should choose.</li> <li>▶ How big of a property should I get?</li> <li>▶ Should I farm or homestead?</li> <li>▶ Rural or urban?</li> <li>▶ I'm not sure which direction to go.</li> <li>▶ What would you do in my situation?</li> <li>▶ I'm not sure what I actually want.</li> </ul>
I don't know where to look.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What is a good source of information about this topic?</li> <li>▶ What are your favorite books / video channels / blogs / podcasts?</li> <li>▶ What courses, conferences, or workshops should I register for?</li> <li>▶ Which consultant should I hire?</li> </ul>
I don't know how it all fits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ How do I create a usable property design?</li> <li>▶ How do I keep all this information straight?</li> <li>▶ How do I know if my design is right?</li> <li>▶ I'm worried that I've got it all wrong.</li> </ul>
I don't know where to start or what's next.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I'm not sure how to prioritize my time and money.</li> <li>▶ I'm worried about not getting it right.</li> <li>▶ My partner is really chomping at the bit.</li> <li>▶ I don't want to paint myself in a corner.</li> </ul>
I don't know when it will end.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I feel like I'm spinning my wheels.</li> <li>▶ I'm about ready to give up.</li> <li>▶ Permaculture just doesn't work.</li> </ul>



burnout (you are financially, physically, emotionally, or environmentally bankrupt) than being a little overwhelmed (you don't have enough information), then your biggest struggle is that you don't actually know what you want.

- ▶ If you feel like you could fit all of the categories, I press you to pick your biggest struggle. If you are still adamant that you're experiencing all five struggles right now, then you are most certainly in the burnout category, and you are reading the right book!
- ▶ If you feel confident that you have never experienced any of these struggles, then I guarantee that you have not been practicing permaculture long enough!

Although it is extremely helpful to categorize the biggest struggles this way, as you'll see soon, these struggles are really symptoms of something that is lacking. And that something is what this book aims to address.

### **The Six Ps of Epistemology**

Before I can divulge what I believe to be the root cause of these struggles, I first need to introduce a model that describes any system of study that humans use to acquire and apply knowledge. I call this model **The Six Ps of Epistemology**:

**Patterns.** Repeating events that result from the interaction of two or more forms of energy or matter.

**Paradigm.** A set of unconscious assumptions that constitutes a way of viewing reality.

**Philosophy.** The systematic gathering of information about the interaction of energy and matter through the activity of logical reasoning.

**Principle.** A proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or for a chain of reasoning.

**Practices.** The application of an idea, belief, or method.

**Process.** A series of steps taken in order to achieve a particular goal.

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epistemology

epis.te.mol.o.gy

\ i-pi-stə-'mä-lə-jē \

The study of the nature of knowledge, especially with reference to its limits and validity.

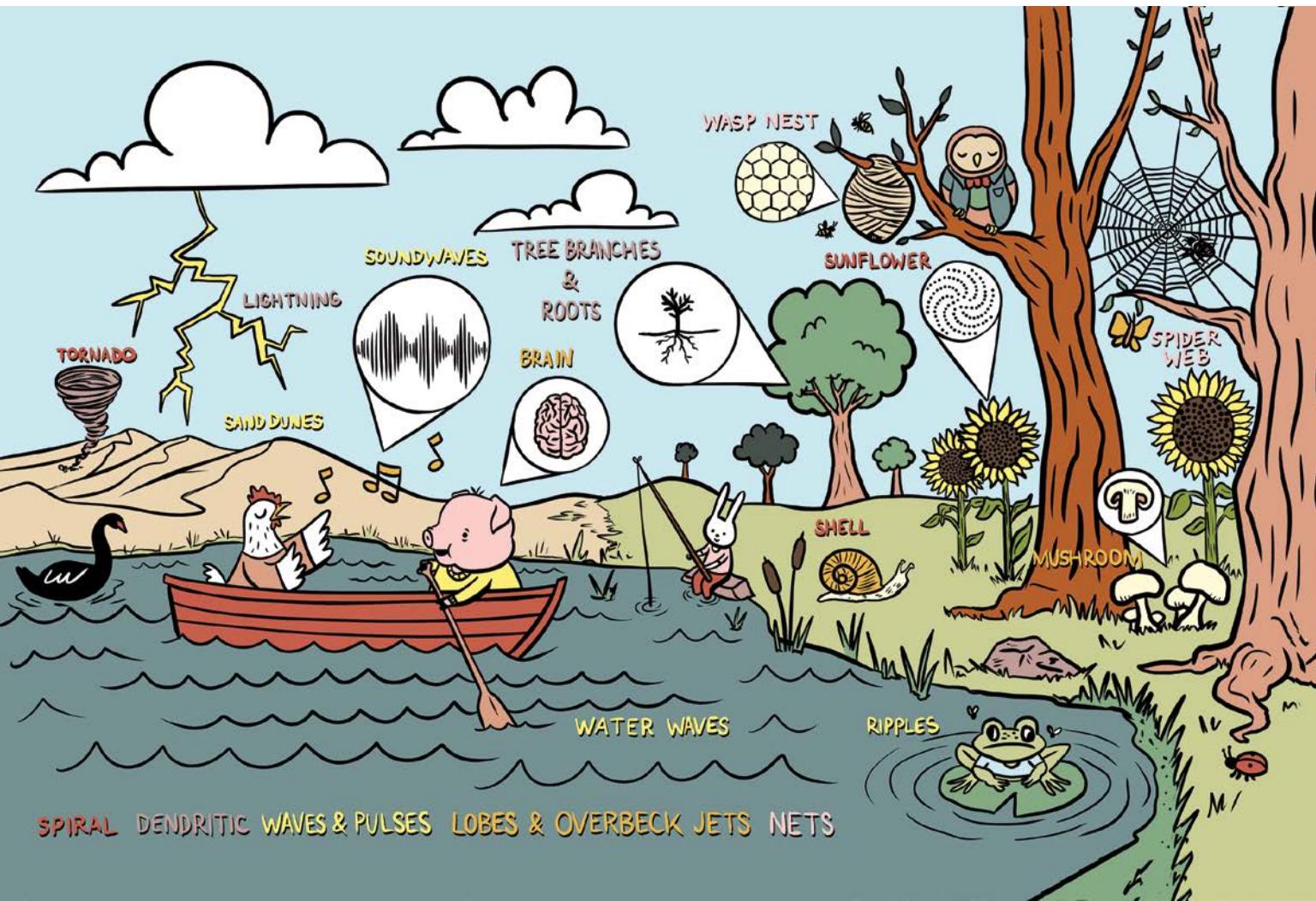
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Each of these represents a different stage in which new information is discovered and eventually applied. The foundation of this model (as well as the source of all our knowledge) begins with the

occurrence of a *pattern* which is some kind of a repeating event that results from the interaction of two or more forms of energy, or matter, somewhere in the known universe. Electrons interact with protons, elements bond to each other, wind erodes rock, waves ripple sand, moons rotate around planets, planets rotate around suns, more of the same forms a galaxy, many galaxies become a universe, etc. It is important to note this interaction of energy or matter occurs regardless of our perception of it. This is objective reality.

*Philosophy* is the attempt to study and, hopefully, understand those infinite and objective patterns of the universe (the Greek word *philosophers* means “lovers of wisdom,” they were the original scientists). However, the only way we can perceive the world is through

**FIGURE 3.** The interaction of two or more forms of energy or matter form patterns, which can be found everywhere you look throughout the universe.



Credit: Jarett Sitter



the subjective and ever-changing unconscious *paradigms* that are based upon our past experiences and our current mindset or beliefs.

From the subjective philosophy of the patterns of reality through the lens of our unconscious paradigms come conscious *principles* that serve as rules of thumb about how we believe specific aspects of how our world works and how we should act.

Those principles then give birth to *practices* we can take into the world to achieve our individual and collective goals.

And finally, as those practices, or events, are repeated over decades, even centuries, a new pattern begins to emerge. The form of this pattern is a hierarchical and chronological ordering of the best practices that reliably streamlines those activities. This is a *process*.

Given that *Permaculture: A Designers' Manual*,<sup>5</sup> was only published in 1988, permaculture is still a relatively new paradigm for the study of the patterns that make up our reality. While the principles upon which it is based come from ecosystems that are as old as the planet itself, the few decades permaculture has existed is not a lot of time for the infinite number of practices to be filtered down through trial and error into a step-by-step process that works reliably anywhere in the world. As such, much of the permaculture content available today is too focused on specific practices. The solution to all of the five struggles is a clear step-by-step *process*.

**Much of the permaculture content available today is too focused on specific practices.**

### You Need a Process (Not a Prescription)

Many excellent step-by-step process-oriented resources have been developed that deal with individual elements of a permaculture system like forest gardening, annual gardening, natural building, water harvesting, and passive solar greenhouses. Some even describe step-by-step activities for designing a property on paper but fail to offer a plan for actually implementing that design or managing the property long term. Other resources deal with the process to manage a property holistically but have no mention of ecological design. To my knowledge, there has never been a complete and clear step-by-step process described for how to design, develop, and manage a property that provides for all your food, water, shelter, and energy needs in harmony with your surrounding ecosystem.

Think back again to your own permaculture reading, research, or training and notice how most books, courses, consultants, and content focus almost exclusively on one or more of the patterns, philosophy, paradigms, principles, and practices, *particularly the*

I myself have made the mistake of blindly following the prescription of more than one of a growing number of gurus before I figured out that the root cause of overwhelm was not a lack of information, tools, technique, skills, or prescriptions, it was a lack of a *clearly defined process to design, develop, and manage a permaculture property.*

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The problem is the solution.

Bill Mollison<sup>6</sup>

*practices*, in the epistemological model but fall short when delineating a process.

There are even a few resources available where a permaculture practitioner develops a process that works for their property and then encourages others to copy what worked for their context. However, this step-by-step *prescription* often has unintended side effects!

It is no wonder that I and so many others struggled to put permaculture into practice, why few professionals and governments have adopted it, and why so many people say permaculture just doesn't work. I can empathize as I myself have made the mistake of blindly following the prescription of more than one of a growing number of gurus before I figured out that the root cause of overwhelm was not a lack of information, tools, technique, skills, or prescriptions, it was a lack of a clearly defined process to design, develop, and manage a permaculture property.

#### ***Clarify, Diagnose, Design, Implement, Monitor***

I first met my co-author Takota Coen in 2014. He grew up on an organic mixed farm in central Alberta and after completing his first permaculture design course a few years prior had already spearheaded some major changes on his family farm. He called and asked if I would mentor him to start his own permaculture education and consulting business. Impressed with his initiative and his knowledge, I agreed, and it wasn't long before he was teaching in Verge Permaculture classrooms and co-consulting on our projects. We discovered that the combination of his on-the-ground practical organic farming experience and my process-oriented engineering background allowed us to tackle complex, multidisciplinary projects with a very unique perspective.

We began working on another project as well—to distill, articulate, and improve upon the process I had been using in my consultancy practice. We had a vision to be able to share this process—the way to think about and ultimately solve problems—in a manner that others could follow and apply to their own permaculture property projects. Leveraging our combined foundational experience, we tested ideas and tools with clients and their real-life projects. As we filtered and ordered our own practices, the patterns began to emerge, and five distinct phases, or steps, became apparent:



**Step 1:** Clarify your vision, values, and resources.

**Step 2:** Diagnose your resources for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

**Step 3:** Design your resources to meet your vision and values.

**Step 4:** Implement the right design that will most improve your weakest resource.

**Step 5:** Monitor your resources for indicators of well-being or suffering.



Soon we began teaching this process and sharing the accompanying tools to small groups of students. To our surprise, our students started producing designs that exceeded anything we, as consultants, could have ever created for them, and best of all, they were successfully implementing those designs. When we finally stood back and asked ourselves why does it work, it dawned on us. Each of the five steps corresponds directly to the five most common struggles we had noticed for years in our clients and students, and through our own personal experiences practicing permaculture. Table 2 shows each step in relation to the biggest struggles it addresses.

As our students followed this process with great success, we not only realized that it addressed these five common struggles, we also had a second major epiphany. In our private consulting engagements, Takota and I both had to spend hundreds of hours to get acquainted with the land, identify the client goals, translate it all into a design, coordinate the implementation, and then finally train the landowners to manage it all for themselves! This was not only cost prohibitive for most land stewards, it was also hard for us to scale our land regeneration efforts. Distilling and teaching our own internal process to others meant we could help an exponentially larger number of people, and motivated students were producing better designs than we could have ever done for them, for a fraction of the cost. It is for this reason that we say the best person to design and manage your land is you. No one knows you (and what you want) better than you do. No one knows your land better than you do. And no one else is going to be interacting with your property, your own masterpiece, in an ongoing way like you will be.

So, how then, do you actually use this process to create your own masterpiece?

**TABLE 2.** The 5SP Process. Each step in our Five-Step Permaculture Process (5SP Process) addresses one of the five biggest struggles with permaculture.

The 5SP Process	Corresponding Biggest Struggle
	<b>Step 1:</b> Clarify your vision, values, and resources. I don't know what I should do.
	<b>Step 2:</b> Diagnose your resources for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. I don't know where to look.
	<b>Step 3:</b> Design your resources to meet your vision and values. I don't know how it all fits.
	<b>Step 4:</b> Implement the right design that will most improve your weakest resource. I don't know where to start or what's next.
	<b>Step 5:</b> Monitor your resources for indicators of well-being or suffering. I don't know when it will end.

### ***Mimicking Michelangelo***

When the Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti was asked how he was able to create his immortal 5-meter (17-foot) tall statue of *David*, he is reported to have replied, “It was easy; all I did was chip away the stone that didn’t look like David. I saw the angel in the marble, and I carved until I set him free.”<sup>7</sup>

While I know nothing about carving marble, this quote beautifully captures the spontaneous, intuitive, common sense, even mystical experience of designing and developing a permaculture property as more of a process of elimination that seeks to uncover



what was already there than a process of creating something new. But this quote and many others about the creative work all seem to leave out two important aspects.

The first aspect missed that is easy to forget is the dogged persistence required to complete a masterpiece of any kind. In Michelangelo's case, he had a love of working with marble from an early age and spent his first twenty-six years honing his artistic skill in his father's marble quarry, and subsequently at the best art schools of his day and by completing numerous famous commissioned works, before he ever laid hands on the rock destined to become *David*. It took Michelangelo two years to complete *David*, and various biographers reported that he labored constantly during that time, rarely eating, sleeping only sporadically with his clothes and boots still on, sometimes within sight of his statue. Even when it rained, he continued to work in the open courtyard. Both Takota and I can relate to this kind of obsession and endurance. To this day, I still wake in the middle of the night with an idea that demands I jump out of bed to either write it down, confirm its validity by looking at my designs, or going for a moonlit walk across my own emerging sculpture. Just as in the case of *David*, this commitment more than pays off. I have long since lost count of the value of the opportunities seen and problems averted by always sleeping at the foot of my statue.

The second, and most important, is that experts always have a process that took thousands of hours of painstaking trial and error to develop and master. In the case of Michelangelo, it is difficult to prove what his exact process was because he destroyed much of the evidence of how he worked, most likely to conceal his methods from rival artists. But some artifacts reveal a workflow that likely entailed first creating rough sketches on paper often using molds of human body parts to ensure anatomical correctness. Those sketches would then be turned into a small terracotta model presented to his patron for approval. Michelangelo would then create detailed drawings for the marble slab he needed and would often oversee the stonecutters in the quarry to ensure the quality and safe transport of raw materials. His sketches were transferred onto the rough marble using plumb bobs, measuring sticks, and calipers. He would then create a miniature three-dimensional model, out of wax. This, presumably, enabled him to warm and reshape his original design as

**Experts always have a process  
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implementation progressed so that any unforeseen problems could be adapted into unimagined possibilities. But it also allowed him to submerged the wax model in water so that, as the level was dropped incrementally, it was possible to use the waterline both as a filter to hide the unnecessary details and as a reference point for the next strike of hammer and chisel on the real sculpture.

These two aspects of persistence and process are also often missing from the creative nature of building a permaculture property. Fortunately, the Five-Step Permaculture Process (5SP Process) addresses both, as explored below:

- ▶ **Step 1: Clarify** is about making sure that you actually want to be a sculptor and, from there, what you'd like your sculpture to be.
- ▶ **Step 2: Diagnose** is all about gathering and organizing the tools and information you need to sculpt, as well as finding the perfect slab. It's also about putting in the work and sleeping at the feet of your statue to make sure you don't miss any insights it whispers to you about how best to set it free.
- ▶ **Step 3: Design** is about letting your blank slate influence you as much as you influence it, in effect seeing the angel of the design inside the rock of diagnosis. Then making mistakes on paper or, better yet, adaptive three-dimensional models instead of in stone or on the land.
- ▶ **Step 4: Implement** is about strategically chipping away at the emergent design one piece at a time until that angel trapped inside is finally liberated.
- ▶ **Step 5: Monitor** is about using suffering and well-being as your waterline to keep the work on track yet enable quick adaptations to your wax model as necessary.

The cumulative effects of persistence and process aided Michelangelo to build his *David*, and these two things apply just as much to building a permaculture property as they do to sculpture. If you're looking to move past the obstacles that have been blocking you from creating your ecologically regenerative, financially sustainable, functionally resilient, and enjoyable property, our 5SP Process may be just what you need. Let me now explain how this book and its companion website are designed to guide you in learning this process.



## About This Book and the Companion Website

I've spent this introductory chapter describing why it is usually not a lack of information or technique that makes designing and managing land so difficult. What's missing is a clear step-by-step process.

The next chapter is called Step 0: Inspect Your Paradigm. Although not technically part of our five-step process, your beliefs are fundamental to the reality you create, and as such heavily influence your success with your permaculture property. This chapter is also a crucial discussion on how a global paradigm shift is likely the only action that will save us from our own societal collapse. Each of the subsequent five chapters describes one of the steps in the 5SP Process. Following the epistemology model presented earlier, each chapter will start with a discussion of the patterns, paradigms, philosophies, and principles underlying that step. In the last part of every chapter, we share some specific practices that we (or others) have developed and that we use personally, teach our students, and/or find particularly useful in our consulting engagements. We'll share questions, exercises, worksheets, workflow tools, and templates. The practices are all numbered, both because we encourage you to tackle them in sequential order and because it makes it easier for us to refer to them throughout the book, as well as on the website. Know, however, that it's not at all important for you to mimic our exact practices. If a particular exercise doesn't work for you, you are strongly encouraged to modify it or even develop your own that suits your individual needs. Just make sure that it meets the chain of reasoning (i.e., the principles) of that step. You will likely even realize that some things that you are already doing will fit nicely within the 5SP Process. I'll close out the book with a system to plan, prioritize your tasks, track timelines, and keep you organized by putting everything presented here together in your own *Building Your Permaculture Property Planner*.

While the linear nature of reading and learning necessitates that I present each of these steps one at a time in specific order, it is important to note that in reality there is often an iteration of all the steps simultaneously. Just like playing a guitar isn't reading music, then keeping time, then strumming a rhythm, then making a chord: you have to learn all of these things independently, but to make

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If you give up on trying to change larger structures and just go off on what some would say is a personal indulgence or being a survivalist, it can be seen as incredibly negative or pessimistic. But the other way to think of it is this: through manifesting the way we live and acting as if it's normal, you're defending yourself against depression and dysfunction, but you're also providing a model that others can copy. And that is absolutely about bringing large-scale change.

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David Holmgren,<sup>8</sup>  
co-originator of the  
permaculture concept

**Instead of focusing only on the destination, you need to focus on how to best put one foot in front of the other towards the better future we all know is possible.**

music, you have to put it all together all at once. More than that, this process is not just learning how to copy someone else's song, it's about learning how to write and play your own solo. And you'll have to read the book a few times over, and commit to the process and associated practices for at least a year, before you'll likely feel like you can conduct a symphony.

To help you get there faster, the companion website, [mypermacultureproperty.com](http://mypermacultureproperty.com), is where you'll find troves of additional resources, downloadable templates, bonus materials, our latest musings, updates to this book (perhaps even updates to our process!), and more. If the Greek philosopher Heraclitus will continue to be right in his observation that "change is the only constant," then our only hope of developing a clear step-by-step process for surviving and thriving in a complex world is making sure that it can be adaptive to those changes. And while everything in this book has been tested in our personal lives and professionally with our students and clients, new patterns and new understandings of old patterns are constantly emerging. We will endeavour to keep our website up-to-date with these ongoing evolutions.

If you take nothing else away from this book, remember this: you do not have to know exactly what kind of food, water, shelter, and energy systems are the best for creating resilience and abundance for your permaculture property, never mind the entire planet. Concentrating on this would be like walking across the bridge in Figure 4, and focusing your attention on the destination that is a great distance off and guessing where your next step should be. I guarantee that using this approach to design a property, let alone to fix our entire global fragilities, will bring about a quicker collapse.

Instead of focusing only on the destination, you need to focus on how to best put one foot in front of the other towards the better future we all know is possible. You need a process because, like Canadian designer Bruce Mau<sup>9</sup> wrote:

*Process is more important than outcome. When the outcome drives the process, we will only ever go to where we've already been. If process drives the outcome, we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there.*



## Your Very First Practice: Get an Accountability Partner



Before you get started with any practice from any of the steps, I want you to do a simple but crucially important action: go find yourself an accountability partner.

The best accountability partner will be someone who is also building their own permaculture property and not directly involved in your project (i.e., not your fellow land steward, your partner, parent, child, etc.). You are looking for a mutually beneficial peer-to-peer relationship where you can set up regular check-ins, discuss your goals and the practices in this book, and hold each other accountable to getting things done. Not only will these conversations help you feel motivated and supported, they are also important for you to be able to have your own insights and make your own connections about what you are doing and learning.

There's real science behind this, and it has been shown that peer pressure is powerful, especially when we are making complex decisions. When we started including this practice in our workshops on permaculture land design, the resounding feedback from students was that having an accountability partner was one of *the best things* about the process. Although I can't easily pair you up with someone else who is currently reading this book, the internet has made it infinitely easier for you to find someone yourself. And with numerous free platforms for video calling and computer screen sharing, it has never been simpler to connect with someone—even if they live on the other side of the planet. So don't be shy. Head to your local permaculture gathering, an online forum, or a social networking site and let others know that you are designing your permaculture property and are looking for an accountability partner. You'll likely be surprised (and thrilled) with the interest and the response as many people already recognize the value of this practice. You can also check our website for resources and opportunities to connect with folks there, but whatever you do, don't skip this practice.

**FIGURE 4. (over)** If you take stock of your surroundings, you will notice three very hopeful facts: the terrifying cliff you are standing before is actually a canyon and the other side is filled with unimaginable possibilities of ever increasing well-being, the sturdy bridge of permaculture has been shuttling people across the gap for decades, and this book provides you with a process to avoid the five struggles of permaculture that pose as your biggest stumbling blocks to building your own permaculture property.



Credit: Jarett Sitter

