



THE ORIGINS OF PERMACULTURE AT THE EDGE

*This short article was written at the same time I was finalising the text of **Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability**. It was a contribution to an anthology by writer Carol Patterson about Tasmania's distinctive status in Australian culture with pieces by notable Tasmanians. The book project did not proceed.*

*As well as interpreting aspects of the origins of permaculture, in this piece I apply the principles **Use Edges and Value the Margins** and **Use Small and Slow Solutions** to explain the remarkable upwelling of creative innovation from an isolated island population of less and half a million people.*



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The environmental crisis, is one for the whole of civilisation, especially the current centres of power in the global cities¹. There are good reasons to believe that we will only succeed in dealing with the environmental crisis when we do so in large cities. However, I believe the inspiration, examples and wisdom for the solutions comes not from the centre, but from the margins, where people live at the edge between culture and nature, between modernity and tradition. The idea that the hinterland provides a wellspring of human biological vigour, values and renewal for civilisation is an old one, but I believe the ways in which this is happening are diversifying and intensifying as we approach the end of the fossil fuel era.

THE ACTION IS AT THE EDGE

The permaculture concept emerged in Tasmania in the mid 1970's from a brief working relationship between Bill Mollison and myself². It has since developed into a world wide movement designing and demonstrating sustainable land use and living.

I am sometimes asked (generally by North Americans and Europeans) why I think permaculture emerged from somewhere like Tasmania. (My answer is that) Tasmania is a place where modernity and nature collide, both destructively and creatively. It is far enough away from the sources of the dominant paradigms of global society, but where the benefits of a democratic society, modern education and relative affluence have been available for as long as in anywhere else in the world. It is a place where the inspiration and lessons of nature and rural culture can be infused into urban and intellectual culture.

Hobart, capital of Australia's second oldest and most decentralised state, is not set within a cultivated landscape but clings to the foot of the wild slopes of Mt Wellington. For me it symbolises a proximity between civilisation and wilderness. From the property on the lower slopes of Mt Wellington where the permaculture concept was born, it was possible to drive (or catch a bus) 5 km in one direction to the city centre, state parliament or university. Five kms in the opposite direction on walking tracks put you above the treeline on the south west face of the mountain with nothing more man-made than a fire trail between you and the great wilderness of SW Tasmania.

I was attracted to Tasmania by both the natural and intellectual environment. More specifically, I came to study at the Environment Design School, led by Hobart architect and educator Barry McNeil. E.D. This school was³ the most radical experiment in tertiary education in Australia and attracted design students and staff from around Australia as well as overseas. In this intellectual hot house, I met Bill Mollison, whose life and ideas epitomised a creative bridge between nature and civilization, and between tradition and modernity. As the fisherman/ bushman who left school at fourteen, he went on to become a wildlife researcher, university academic, environmental activist, co-originator and teacher of permaculture around the world.

1 It has been argued that Sydney is Australia's only global city

2 The results were published in Mollison, B. & Holmgren, D. *Permaculture One* Corgi 1978

3 For 10 years from 1970 to 1980 before it was academically emasculated.

The physical and cultural environment that gave rise to permaculture also produced the world's first green political party and was the first place in Australia where the organic agriculture grew from isolated individual farmers to a vibrant network⁴. This upwelling of intellectual and creative action at the edge of civilisation illustrates the permaculture design principle *Use Edges and Value the Marginal*⁵. Based on observation of both nature and managed landscapes, this principle suggests the edges between adjacent systems are the most biologically productive and active. It helps us overcome our cultural bias toward the centre, rather than the edge, in land use and society. Tasmania represents both a geographic and a conceptual edge or margin. This extension of the application of the principle of edge, draws on the value of "marginal" land and farming methods articulated by American organic farmer, environmentalist and author, Wendell Berry⁶. Marginal systems are ones which provide a space for diversity to survive and innovation to emerge.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Another reason for intellectual innovation in Tasmania is the more human scale of its social and political institutions. With a democratic federal state representing only half a million people, it is possible for innovation at the fringe to directly influence the mainstream of Tasmania politics⁷. In the big cities of the great nations, the massive scale of establishment culture and institutions makes for an apathy and acceptance that the world is a bad place that cannot be changed.

New Zealand, being an affluent and democratic sovereign nation of only two million people has similarly fostered remarkable social and environmental innovation. While teaching permaculture in Europe in 1994, I saw many inspiring examples of environmental innovation. However, after visiting 8 countries over six months, it was only in Denmark, a nation of three million, where I had the sense that the vitality and relative scale of the various "sustainable alternatives" was comparable or greater than what I was familiar with in Tasmania and New Zealand. While Britain and Germany, like the USA, continue to generate a great mass of innovation and action, the influence on the average citizen, mainstream media or political institutions seems negligible.

A more human scale model for the nation state than the economies of scale demanded by fossil fuel based capitalism reflects another permaculture design principle, *Use Small and Slow Solutions*. Permaculture is based on the assumption that a sustainable low energy future will require us to overturn most of our current cultural assumptions. It's natural that Tasmania should play a significant role in this process.

4 The Organic Gardeners and Farmers Association founded in 1972.

5 For a full exploration and reinterpretation of permaculture principles see Holmgren, D. ***Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability***, Holmgren Design Services (in press 2002)

6 Berry, W. ***The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*** 1977 Sierra Book Club

7 The current resistance of Tasmania to the onslaught by the multinationals' genetically engineered crops is an other example of how small scale fosters divergent possibilities.