

38. Permaculture and Food

Many of the changes in our attitudes, understandings, beliefs, practices and activities around the production and consumption of food, and many other things, may be encapsulated in our general shift from corporate industrial agriculture to more distributed food permaculture and sustainability.

Permaculture is rooted in a desire to understand and emulate successful natural systems, evolved over millions of years in Earth's amazing life and life systems incubator. In nature, nothing exists in isolation. Each thing does its thing, and the outputs of one thing are the inputs to others, as essential parts, contributors and inter-changes of a very complex, inter-dependent, ever-related, mutually beneficial, extraordinary and yet ordinary, inter-active web and dance of being, energy, exchange and benefit.

Life and life supporting natural systems are nested and multifarious clusters of energetic being, creating and changing patterns, open to, interacting and changing with other energetic patterns, that give each what it needs to provide for the needs of others, in brilliant and virtuous cooperation and collaboration, allowing and making all to be integral parts of something much greater than it-selves.

Permaculture recognizes and tries to understand, respect, allow and emulate the whole-istic ways natural systems are comprised of many different parts working alone and together to take care of the needs of all, by having each part contribute to others' needs, so all needs are met, all thrive, and all together create and are parts of a functional, self-regulating and whole system supporting the life of all. One's trash is another's treasure. All are fed. All contribute and thrive. Whole is holy. All are one.

Sustainability is the end state of permaculture systems. When the permaculture machine is a virtuous perpetual motion machine, running as a whole system, without needs for external inputs, it is sustained. The system's energy is maintained as energy changes forms and moves around within the system. Sustainability is a goal to keep a system machine running without unused waste or any harms done. Zero waste is a sustainability goal. All outputs are inputs. Everything participates, and all are served.

Industrial agriculture was hard-nosed business trying and failing to shortcut or outsmart natural systems to produce at lowest possible costs foods we could be convinced to pay as much as possible for, so owners could maximize monetary profits, which is getting more money than is necessary and fair. Agriculture largely ignored and tried to bypass natural, sustainable permaculture systems by cheating with artificial external inputs, life-killing toxic chemicals, petroleum fertilizers and genetic manipulations.

Modern industrial agriculture did things like:

- select, breed and manipulate a specific sub-species for optimal consumer shelf-life and -appeal, even if other sub-species are more nutritious or diversity would serve us better;
- clear vast fields of cheap land, wiping out most natural life there, without regard for that or any other life, and without regard to how far that land is from those that will consume that food;
- plant only that sub-species there and kill anything else that tries to live there, with ugly poisons, to maximize yields and profits from that species from that land, ignoring harmful impacts of those poisons on anything else, like bees and other insects that pollenate many kinds of plants;
- eliminate ruthlessly any undesirable naturally occurring variation to that species;

- use massive farm machines for planting and harvesting, ignoring harms to environment and life;
- use artificial watering systems, ignoring and not caring about natural water systems, pumping underground aquifers dry, diverting water from other pathways and uses, and poisoning natural waterways without regard to impacts that has on anyone or anything else, now or in the future;
- genetically manipulate plants, so they can be patented, so owners can extract money for them;
- ignore complex natural webs of life in soils that support life and, instead, turn soils, feed plants fossil-fuel and other chemical fertilizers which can artificially support specific plant life, and ignore the harmful impacts of those fertilizers on anything else, like living things downstream;
- spray plants with toxic chemicals just before harvest, because that makes them more efficient to process, improves yields and profits, improves shelf life or makes it look better on shelves, without regard to impacts on health, like problems digesting wheat glutes, and making life sick;
- harvest before plants, vegetables and fruits are ripe and healthiest, because they're transported long distances and wouldn't hold up well underway or look good on shelves otherwise;
- exploit illegal immigrant farm labor to get work done cheaper than is fair, because that labor is afraid of being deported or otherwise getting in trouble, to keep prices low and profits high, without regard for the impacts that has on labor markets and human lives;
- treat foods with intense temperatures, radiation and other processes to make them look better, even if it makes foods less healthy and creates other ignored health and environmental harms;
- transport foods long distances to markets, without regard for harms that does to their quality, at artificially low costs, because fuels are artificially cheap, without regard for harms to life, climate and environments from burning those fossil fuels;
- ruthlessly drive farmers and distributors with different values and practices out of business, through legal, regulatory and business manipulations;
- manipulate governments to get taxpayer subsidies for even profitable big farm businesses, to make foods artificially cheap, outcompete healthier or foreign alternatives, and increase profits;
- harmfully and expensively process, wastefully package and add artificial and harmful chemicals to foods, to "add value," so they can be sold at higher prices and maintain shelf-life unnaturally;
- resist and disinform fair descriptions and labeling of agricultural and food practices, so consumers remain ignorant and have a hard time making informed choices;
- if the species is animal, treat them inhumanely, crammed together in concentration camps, force feeding them horrible things, like themselves, not allowing access to open skies or lands, keeping them drugged so they don't get sick in spite of mistreatment and horrible conditions, and so they grow unnaturally, kill them in horrible ways and conditions, without regard for them or what fear, suffering and associated hormones do to meat quality.
- Waste extraordinary amounts of perfectly good food, because it doesn't look good on shelves.

These kinds of practices were used to optimize profits to farm and food business owners, ignoring as many harms as possible to environments, life webs, human or other life, making food artificially cheap, because they didn't count real costs and harms borne by environments, life systems, humans and life. Those harms rippled out around the entire planet, creating all kinds of negative effects.

We were only given choices of eating relatively few species, rather than benefitting from food diversity. Soils, forest and river systems, and life within and around them, were degrading and dying.

Underground aquifers were drying up and collapsing, losing their capacities to hold water in the future. River and stream systems and life that depended on them were dying, choking on algae blooms fed by artificial fertilizers. People were getting sick on these “Frankenstein Foods.” Business and power within agriculture was increasingly centralized in few owners, who were able to use their wealth and power to control and manipulate governments, for their benefits, and often to the detriments of others.

During the great changes of our time, our values changed. We came to value natural life and life support systems, beauty, and being in healthy natural environments. We sought solutions that were good for “us,” with definitions of us expanding to all humanity and life. We valued good health and ways to cultivate it, including good health, food and water, land and air. We valued real wealth, which included healthy environments, beings and spirits, fairness and diversity. We valued doing no harms. We sought to restrain greed, ego, money, power and negative energies and cultivate good energies.

With permaculture, we do things like:

- Understanding that we may never understand dizzying complexities of life and natural systems, try to know, understand and respect natural life and life systems anyway; and try to not interfere with or harm them and to let them do what they do, trusting and restoring them;
- Respect, honor and allow the diversity of life and spirit to flourish, and don't use poisons;
- Take only what we truly need to create the abundance we need to survive and thrive;
- As much as possible, try to emulate natural systems in the food systems we create and manage;
- Seek to create perpetual motion permaculture systems and sustainability in all we are part of.
- Produce as much food as possible locally and naturally, requiring little transportation.

We learned from traditional practices, like in Scoura, Morocco and other places in Africa, where they sustain life in hard desert conditions, by planting different kinds of plants in proximity to each other, where each provides the outputs needed by others and contributes to soil health and productivity, and together all provide for a diverse diet for all throughout the natural seasons of the year.

Families and communities now grow much of the food we eat where we live and eat it, even in cities, reducing transportation needs, costs and impacts, creating healthier and riper foods, and integrating us with natural food systems. We grow food indoors, wherever people live indoors, in sustainable ways. For example, systems include fish ponds, fungus gardens, rich soils, diverse plants, recirculated water and artificial light in closed systems, in which each provides what is needed by other parts of the system, and healthy fish, mushrooms, vegetables and fruits are produced that humans eat when they're perfect. We share our abundance, so less food is wasted. We have more plant-based diets, so we use land more efficiently growing plants than raising meat. When we take meat, it's from animals that have lived well.

We have gone back to using durable and safe containers for foods, taken back and reused by suppliers, like the U.S. used to do with soft drink and milk bottles, and much of Europe still did with beer bottles, so we stopped producing and wasting so many harmful plastic containers. We don't process and package foods harmfully, sharing most foods in natural forms. We don't use poisons and fossil fuels.

We take the time to prepare natural foods in delicious ways, dividing labor for that in communities, and we take time to enjoy food and drink together, in ways that build relationships, care and community.

We respect and honor life, providing good lives and deaths to all we take as food. Waters are clean, and air is clean. Soils and forests are healthy. People, life and living systems are healthy.