

Thought for the month March 2018

A few years ago I first became aware of and interested in the way of looking at the environment known as permaculture. In brief, it's a design method that aims to learn from the way nature has solved problems in order to create productive systems that are as efficient and effective as their natural counterparts. In even briefer terms, you could call it 'systems biomimicry'. This in itself isn't an unusual or even new idea; but what is special about the permaculture way of thinking is that it's allied to an ethical framework in which design is founded on care of the environment, care for people, and consideration for both the present and future resources of the world.

As an example, many woodlands contain a huge diversity of plant, animal and fungi species and produce vast quantities of biomass per acre with or without human intervention. How does it do this? The simple answer is that each species and each individual organism in the woodland exists in interdependent relationship with the others; its behaviours being adapted to the environment around it, its requirements drawn from that environment and its waste products returning to feed it, so that ultimately little or none of the biomass produced is wasted. What if a woodland were *designed* to be made up of species selected for productive purpose or their value in sustaining the habitat as a whole? The result is the 'forest garden' – an edible or otherwise productive woodland behaving similarly to a natural or semi-natural woodland but from which a diversity of crops can be derived.

But permaculture isn't just about food. Since the ideas first came together in the early 70s, the ideas of permaculture have been applied across the world in all kinds of context and to any kind of productive system, whether for food, energy, economic development or even the arts. Neither is it a closed ideology – a single idea whose proponents imagine the answer to all problems rests in adherence to a very specific set of beliefs or processes. And that's one of the things that most appealed to me when I first encountered it: that being interested in the ethics and the ideas didn't mean signing up to a fixed credo – just looking at challenges in a new way that might help with finding solutions.

The other thing that attracted me to permaculture, was however much more important. I've found that the growing number of people interested in this idea, coming as they do from a wide range of backgrounds and personal philosophies, all of whom are committed to putting environment and society at the heart of their approach to life, makes for a lively, open-minded and supportive global network – and above all, one which without denying the evident challenges faced by the world, is determinedly positive about the potential to meet those challenges together through intelligent design.