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# Observations

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## Enough Is Enough

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by Joel Glanzberg

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*Like a tide it comes in,  
wave after wave of foliage and fruit,  
the nurtured and the wild,  
out of the light to this shore.  
In its extravagance we shape  
the strenuous outline of enough.*

—Wendell Berry

Permaculture design is based on ethics. Although often taken for granted, ethics are central to all design considerations and management techniques. Otherwise, permaculture becomes objective recipes without context, something “out there,” not a system we are a part of. This is the essential difference between permaculture design and conventional design: it matters.

As usually stated, these ethics are 1) care of the earth, 2) care of people, and 3) limits to growth, or giving away surplus. The third ethic is really required to fulfil the first two. Without limits to growth and to our needs there can never be enough to go around. If resources are continually falling into black holes of unending growth and need, everything else must be sacrificed. The resources come from somewhere. If they are not returned there will be lack—starvation, nutrient deficiencies, poverty, habitat loss, etc.

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The main reason for our ecological, economic and social problems is that our idea of what we need is inaccurate. We think we need more than we do. In addition, we do not provide for our perceived needs where we live. Resources to meet our needs are brought from somewhere else, and the resources we do have are wasted. If we simply would define our needs more realistically we would tax the earth, animals and other people much less. If we provide for all of our needs

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*Joel Glanzberg is a permaculture designer and teacher in northern New Mexico. He is the founder of Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute, a high desert research institute.*

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where we live, using the resources we already have, we can stop degrading the land and people. This is why the prime consideration in permaculture design is to provide for all of the needs of the human and non-human inhabitants of the site, on the site. We can only be ethical by being sustainable on-site. If this cannot be done it is appropriate to question what the inhabitants consider to be their needs—to ask, “What is enough?”

As designers we cannot tell clients what “enough” is. But we can point out what endeavors are standing in the way of sustainability and suggest alternatives. We can recommend endeavors to which the site is better suited. And we can point out how these endeavors affect larger systems around us.

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A good place to start this analysis is by looking at the five types of investment.

- 1) **Degenerative:** Things that fall apart, such as buildings, roads, fences, etc.
- 2) **Generative:** Things which fall apart but can be used to fix other things, such as tools.
- 3) **Regenerative:** Things which fall apart but replace themselves, such as forests, herds, schools of fish, certain types of orchards, good non-profits, appropriate economics.
- 4) **Conservative:** Things which are not in themselves resources but which conserve resources, such as dams, insulation and seed banks. (It is always cheaper to conserve energy and other resources than it is to produce them.)
- 5) **Informational:** Information tells how best to use, manage, and maintain resources. Examples are libraries, songs, genetic material, intact natural systems, this article. . . .

It quickly becomes clear that any sustainable or ethical culture must put the bulk of its time, money, and energy into regenerative systems, an adequate amount into generative, conservative, and informational to create and maintain them, and the least possible into degenerative.

If we look around us most of what we see are degenera-

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tive assets. People will say, "There is a greater dollar return on a house than on an orchard." That may be true in a cash economy whose values are skewed by undervalued energy such as fossil fuels. In a "natural" economy, this is never true.

A large amount of degenerative assets can *only* be maintained by some kind of slavery. We see castles and manors created by feudalism, imperialism, and borrowing against the resources of future generations (which enslaves them to us). We also see ourselves enslaved by our own assets.

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Where I live, most people's yards are bare patches of dirt with two cars, a trailer home, and numerous mechanical entertainment devices (TV, stereo, 4-wheeler, etc). Simply to support this system, the residents must drive to work to earn money to provide for the needs of the system. They are enslaved to support their own degenerative assets.

All over the world we see old manor homes fallen into disrepair. They become too costly to maintain at some point, and the system supporting them falls apart. Because of natural laws, *this must happen*. Any system that relies on outside inputs of energy, money, and other resources to maintain itself cannot survive indefinitely. It is too top heavy. The pressure builds up and the walls collapse.

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Whatever the edge, whatever the resource, sooner or later a translator will come along to equalize the distribution of resources. This natural law should be a primary design consideration. Otherwise we are setting up unstable systems which are doomed to fail.

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Any time that there are more resources on one side of a boundary than on the other, the situation is unstable. Sooner or later a translator will come along to penetrate that boundary and distribute the resources to the other side. This may be a fungi taking nitrogen out of the soil into a fallen log to help it rot. It may be a bee taking pollen from a pollen-rich male flower to a pollen-poor female flower. Or a storm, washing a tall mountain down into the deep sea. A jay taking acorns from an oak thicket and burying them on a bare hillside. A

tree taking sunlight, turned into sugars, deep into the dark earth, and nutrients and water up into the sky. It could be undocumented aliens coming into the U.S. to work and take dollars back into Mexico. Or a burglar translating resources in your home out into the larger world. Or enslaved people taking power from the hands of the mighty into their own.

Whatever the edge, whatever the resource, sooner or later a translator will come along to equalize the distribution of resources. This natural law should be a primary design consideration. Otherwise we are setting up unstable systems which are doomed to fail. If we are to care for people, including ourselves, we need to design away from social and economic dead ends as well as ecological ones.

Like all ethics, remaining within the limits of growth and need cannot be enforced from the outside, or legislated. It must come from ourselves. Bill Mollison claims that the greatest blocks to peace, prosperity, and sustainability are information blocks. I believe they are understanding blocks. Information must be desired and then understood to be effective. Only we can turn information into understanding. Only we can decide what is "enough." ♦

*"It is the Way. Tal-con (the hawk) caught the slow (quail) and so the slow will raise no children who are also slow. Tal-con eats a thousand ground rats who eat the eggs of the quail—both the quick and the slow eggs—and so Tal-con lives by the Way. He helps the quail...Take only what ye need. When ye take the deer, do not take the best. Take the smaller and the slower and the deer will grow stronger and always give you meat. Pakoh, the panther, knows and so must ye....Only Ti-bi, the bee, stores more than he can use...and so he is robbed by the bear, and the 'coon—and the Cherokee. It is so with people who store and fat themselves with more than their share. They will have it taken from them. And there will be wars over it...and they will make long talks, trying to hold more than their share. They will say a flag stands for their right to do this...and men will die because of the words and the flag...but they will not change the rules of the Way."*

—The Education of Little Tree