

Gabions: A Reclamation Tool

By *Tim Murphy*

Cultural adage: When faced with a technical question, consult an expert. "Gee, Beave, why would anyone purposely build a dam that leaks?"

Gabions are porous dams; literally, stone filled baskets constructed of any suitable material. In this country the basket fabric is generally wire, while in China the traditional material is bamboo. The baskets are usually placed across streams or arroyos, but different alignments can be used to accomplish a variety of goals.

A porous dam delays the passage of water over a small portion of the earth. Infiltration increases, runoff decreases, and the channel broadens. The slower moving water drops its load of silt and duff. Expansion of the lush riparian edge follows.

The beaver, a fellow edge being, once occupied the niche that we attempt to fill by building gabions. He instinctively found ways to expand and enhance his environment to insure life, and a future.

Gabions allow us to use the beaver's strategy on watercourses that flow intermittently, extending the riparian edge high into the drainage system.

In addition to revitalizing riparian areas threatened by erosion, gabions can be used in a number of water

harvesting strategies, as well as to focus and harvest water energy.

Gabions are easy to build and make use of cheap and readily available materials. In spite of their simplicity, they have the potential to make powerful changes. Their application in riparian areas is limited only by the creativity of the designer.

It's important to remember that a drainage system is made up of land as well as water courses, just as a human face or a leaf is composed of more than veins. An effective permacultural strategy must deal with the whole, and may require an array of tools and techniques such as those described here.

