

Permaculture Ethics Workshop: The ethical dilemma

Description | This mini workshop explores the three ethics in permaculture utilizing permaculture and non-permaculture sources. After reading and discussing the ethics, an ethical dilemma is proposed that challenges permaculturists and aspiring permaculturists to make a difficult decision.

(Read through each of these ethics as a class. 10-15 minutes)

Earth Care.

-The primary design ethic.

“The planet comes first when we are designing permaculture systems”
(Boom, Boehnlein, 2015, p. 14).

In Deep Ecology and many ecological traditions, there exists a threefold process of self-identification. First, as youngsters usually, we identify only with our self: ‘Everyone else exists to serve me and my interests.’

Second we learn to identify with other people, “Experiencing ourselves as connected parts of a larger whole” (Macy, Johnstone, 2012, p. 93). It isn’t merely subsuming or yielding our identity or self-interests to that of the larger society. It does begin with the recognition, however, that as a species, we are dependent on each other—whether it’s the farmer, the truck driver hauling the food, or our dear friends and family. We are all connected and our livelihoods depend on each other. Another way to state this is that a healthy community is made up of healthy individuals, and healthy individuals make up and support a healthy community. Both are dependent on each other.

Third is the “ecological self,” an identity wrapped up with the earth. For a very explicit expression of this identity, Macy and Johnstone (2012) quote rain forest activist, John Seed:

I try to remember that it’s not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking” (p 93).

The point at which we realize our self-interests are bound up in the interests of ecosystems—that if we degrade the environment, we degrade ourselves—we understand what the ecological self is all about. After all, without ecosystem services, like bees or the hydrological cycle, we will simply not be here.

People Care.

-Second to Earth Care, but incredibly important. People care is straightforward: Design to meet the needs of people. Your design should directly benefit people, especially since people have the capacity for beneficial Earth Care. Expanding the above-mentioned dependent relationship between healthy communities and

healthy individuals, healthy people require a healthy earth, and a healthy earth requires healthy people.

There is an important exception to the Earth Care over People Care hierarchy, however. Think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: essential needs must be met for higher needs to be realized. For those suffering from poverty, who are oppressed, historically marginalized, or otherwise lacking in basic necessities such as safe drinking water, healthy food, sanitation or access to just and equitable systems, environmental stewardship registers high on Maslow's pyramid. Only when people have basic needs met can we begin to prioritize Earth Care over People Care.

Share the Surplus.

From purely a design perspective, this ethic concerns redistributing surplus yields, including waste, back into the system to secure its health and perpetuity. According to Boom and Boehnlein, "That can mean rolling them back into the system (for example, composting food waste and putting that compost into the garden) or sharing them with someone else to help increase their capacity to care for the earth (p 15).

Beyond the design imperatives created by "share the surplus," the social and ecological implications of this ethic are widely interpreted and often times contested. Leftist permaculturists, especially the more radical variety, see this ethic as reinforcing an anti-capitalist worldview. It must be understood, however, that the political terrain of permaculture is diverse—from evangelists to libertarians, anarchists, communists and everyone in between. It's not that any singular definition or interpretation of this ethic is wrong, it is more a testament to the fact that you don't have to be an anarchist (or leftist or liberal) to do or use permaculture.

(Discuss the three ethics as a class with the following discussion questions and/or other questions that arise naturally from the reading. 15 minutes)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the relationship between earth care and people care?
 - a. When does one trump the other?
 - b. Do you agree with this assessment? Describe a scenario with prioritizing one may be problematic?
2. Describe a personal experience when you have enacted or observed any of the above ethics. (e.g. not littering, planting a garden, government policy, permaculture activities)
3. Describe the difference between the design aspect of share the surplus, and the social and political dimensions of share the surplus.
4. Describe a scenario where the ethic of Share the Surplus could be exercised in your own life.
5. What is your take on share the surplus?

(Once comprehension of ethics has begun, shift towards application in the below scenario. This assignment seems to work better with groupings of 3-5 students each tackling this ethical dilemma)

Scenario:

Boden is a small town located next to one of the world’s premier ski resorts. There are 12,000 people in the town officially, plus an additional 5,000 people that aren’t generally counted in the town’s census primarily due to their immigration status. These 5,000 people make up a substantial portion of the labor pool required for the operation of the ski resort’s numerous amenities—hotels, restaurants, and the ski mountain itself. The worker’s labor is incredibly cheap, due to their often times compromised immigration status, that is exploited by the often times shady employment practices of the resort. These political and economic forces create numerous problems for the town of Boden and all people who reside there. Essentially, there exists a racial and economic divide, where one segment of the population is wealthy and predominantly white, and the other, poor and predominantly people of color and lacking in basic necessities such as access to healthy food and legal systems.

The town of Boden is divided over a piece of land directly adjacent to the historic downtown business district. This piece of land was once a trailer park for the mostly immigrant workers. The city, pressured by the citizens of the town, evicted the trailer park for failure to abide by zoning regulations. At least this was the official reason. Many people feel that the eviction was due to the simple fact that the wealthy residents considered the park a threat to their property values.

For the last three years, 4 major stakeholders, each representing a different interest have emerged.

Stakeholders	Interests
Developers	Economic Development: build a luxury hotel
Residents group	Turn the land into an eco park complete with substantial and productive food forests available to all, community space open to all, and to create the park as a symbol of the town’s rich history and identity
City Council	Split between the interests of the developers and residents group
Immigrant justice advocacy group	Allow the mostly immigrant population to resettle the land in compliance with zoning and sanitation requirements

As a prominent permaculture designer with ties to many of these groups, you are hired on as a consultant for the city. While you are hesitant to jump into the middle of this hotly debated issue, you feel bound by your ethics to participate. And given your multiple connections and long history with the town, you feel can be an effective actor for the benefit of all. And plus, it's been awhile since you've landed such a lucrative contract, which couldn't have come at a better time as you are on the verge of defaulting on a number of medical bills and student loans.

What are you to do?

As a permaculture designer, you are not a neutral party when it comes to ecological design. You have a set of ethics that guide your design process. Deep awareness of the social, political, cultural and economic realities in which you are enmeshed, and the implications of your actions, is prerequisite for ethical action. So the question remains, what are you to do?

Supplemental: Permaculture Principles

How might the below principles apply to the above scenario?

Sources

Bloom, J., Boehnlein, D. (2015). *Practical permaculture: For home landscapes, your community, and the whole earth*. Portland, OR: Timber Press.

Macy, J., Johnstone, C. (2012). *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. Novato, CA: New World Library.