

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 14, 2010 at 8:58am

Permaculture: a good idea

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NCR Today

We hear a lot about "tipping points," those places at which momentum becomes irreversible, in connection with looming environmental challenges such as climate change. The Earth now spins toward many points of no return, reputable scientists say. Opinions vary as to how long it will take or whether indeed we have already passed through them.

"The tipping points are falling like dominoes," said Albert Bates, founder of the Global Village Institute for Appropriate Technology. "We are losing. We need to sprint."

Needed for that sprint are eco-tipping points, levers that dramatically reverse environmental decline and set in motion restoration and sustainability.

There are indeed many pioneering projects and efforts around the world that are not technological fixes so much as returns to ways humans have employed for hundreds of thousands of years or to ways and means that nature herself uses. Here's one involving the new/old science of permaculture.

The term "permaculture" was coined in 1978 by Bill Mollison, an Australian ecologist, and one of his students, David Holmgren. It is a contraction of "permanent agriculture" or "permanent culture," and it's about designing ecological human habitats and food production systems. It's a land use and community building movement which strives for the harmonious integration of human dwellings, microclimate, annual and perennial plants, animals, soils, and water into stable, productive communities.

The focus is not on these elements themselves but rather on the relationships created among them by the way we place them in the landscape. This synergy is further enhanced by mimicking patterns found in nature.

Permaculture practice has brought about some truly life enhancing efforts. Geoff Lawton's Dead Sea Valley Permaculture Project is a good example.

Lawton's recent effort in the Middle East is a true success story, offering positive solutions to many of the environmental problems common in this area: water shortage, highly salted land, agricultural production, and unsustainable housing.

Commissioned in 2000 by a Japanese aid organization to work in Jordan, his work concentrated on a flat ten acre, highly salted piece of land in the Dead Sea Valley, 400 ft. below sea level and just a few kilometers from the spot where Jesus died. His aim was to demonstrate sustainable farming practices on a piece of land the local agricultural department had deemed useless for any serious purpose.

They constructed two kilometers of water harvesting swales or ditches, designed to capture every drop of the limited rainfall in the area, with an uncompacted earth mound in the lower part used as a tree growing system. Drip irrigation was installed under layers of thick organic mulch obtained from fields elsewhere in the country, a technique necessary where evaporation is high and salted land the consequence.

A diversity of fruit trees were planted, and for each of the fruit trees, three fast growing pioneer and nitrogen fixing trees were also planted. This design mimics the natural ecosystems, from which permaculture draws its wisdom.

Nearly two thousand trees were planted. With well-educated locals in charge, Lawton moved on to other projects. On a return visit four months later, figs and dates were growing well and fruiting, plus guavas and pomegranates. Salt levels had dropped and soil fertility improved dramatically. The soil had come alive, the lifecycles within the soil were starting to lock up the salt, the process of soil creation had begun. The pale sandy soil was turning deep brown with the creation of humus in the land of hummus.

The site stood up to its severest test, the intense dry season that visits the area yearly. A year after the project began tests indicated no salt in some places on the site. The farm resembled a small forest along the contour lines of the water harvesting system.

In an area of intense conflict, human suffering and environmental degradation, a true miracle had occurred.

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Exporting his system to over 17 countries around the world, Lawton is part of a growing global movement which uses permaculture techniques to provide human needs in an environmentally responsible way. "Green wants to conquer," Lawton says.

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