Life Lessons on Maya Mountain

Contributed by Tracy Barnett
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Solastalgia – 1. A feeling of loss at demise of Earth; mourning for Gaia; profound ennui.

2. Lost connection to nature; an eco-psychological imbalance.

Antidotes: Ecological restoration
Permaculture

So begins Albert Bates in his introduction to permaculture – a design system whose name originated from the idea of "permanent agriculture" and evolved into a system promoting permanence in the human culture itself.

"Solastalgia is what happens when we find that we are one of the only animals that soils its own nest, and then lives in it. Then we get sad and depressed," he says. "We ask ourselves, 'Can we survive?'"

Bates, a founder of the Global Ecovillage Network and a prolific author and public speaker, has made his way through miles of Mayan villages and tropical forest to Maya Mountain Research Farm in southern Belize, as he does every March. It's part of a hectic schedule that has him traveling all over the globe, from Estonia to the Holy Lands and beyond, preparing willing participants for what he calls The Great Change: a transition to a world less dependent on petroleum and other carbon-based fuels, and more in harmony with the Earth.

An integral part of his lesson plan is permaculture. Developed by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, permaculture has grown into a global movement, an approach to sustainable development that strives to work with nature instead of at cross purposes with it. Today, he and Mexican permaculture leader Maria Ros are giving us an intro to the principles of the system. But first, Bates administers a little shock therapy – a collection of seemingly random facts that all add up to a wakeup call for a hypnotized nation.

In 2008, he tells us, "USAnians" – he refuses to submit to the convention that has expropriated the name of the whole New World for the sole use of one country – purchased 68 million vehicles, 85 million refrigerators and 1.2 billion mobile phones. The average European consumes 43 kilograms of resources per person, while the average American consumes 88.

"If we used as much energy per capita as Europeans, we'd be an oil-exporting nation," he tells us. At this point, the richest 7% – most of whom live in the US – produce 50% of the carbon.

It might not matter, he says, except that our acquisitive ways are driving the planet to the brink of destruction.

One-third of the world's largest rivers are losing water 2½ times faster than they gain it; they are drying up. 150 villages in Northern Syria have been abandoned due to drought. The same thing is beginning to happen in Mexico, Africa and southern Spain.

"Whole villages are having to pack up and leave. Where are they going to go?"

Desertification, increasing frequency and intensity of hurricanes, disappearing water supplies and rising sea levels are expected to produce an estimated 1 billion environmental refugees by 2050.

"We're in a cycle we created half a century ago that's still unfolding," he said. "The carbon from muscle cars of the '50s and the industrial plants of the '60s and '70s are still making their way into the atmosphere, going through chemical changes.

"We need a shift in human design."

Permaculture strives to use "more observation, less perspiration" by studying the lay of the land and the patterns of nature and working with them to create a harmonious design. The objective, he says, is to make oneself obsolete; in a good design, "the designer becomes the recliner."

That's why the hammock is an essential part of a good permaculture design, he maintains – although with his busy schedule, I'm having a hard time imagining him doing much hammock reclining.

"We have to ask ourselves: Can nature do it for us? Can we go with the flow? What is the flow?"

The three key principles, he says, are Earth care, people care and surplus share. That last part caught my attention. "If you don't share the surplus, it becomes pollution," he said, using as an example the fruit from an apple tree. Shared, it becomes a resource; left to spoil on the ground, it becomes a mess. The same holds true for any surplus production, he says. I imagine how different the world would be if sharing surplus were to become a part of the general ethic.

In fact, before the invention of money some 500 to 1,000 years ago, that was the case, he says. Early tribal people like the Cahokians created great trading centers that stretched from Nova Scotia and Alaska to the tropics, but trade was based on a friendly exchange, and hoarding wasn't a useful behavior.

Alternative and local currencies have been developed in recent years, giving greater emphasis to the trust-building component of building a local economy. One recent example is the Totnes Pound, created in Devon, England, as a part of the first Transition Town, a movement that is now gaining ground throughout the world.

Bates talked of many things: the process of personal change, the first step in social change; the principles of permaculture, which draws on concepts like biomimicry and stacking functions; and Peace Through Permaculture, a program that has brought together Israelis and Palestinians in innovative initiatives like the Marda Permaculture Project, despite pressure from the Israeli government.

“This is where we became a permaculture army that doesn’t have boundaries,” said Bates. “We’re not fighting for a nation, we’re fighting for a planet.”

The afternoon brought some graphic demonstrations of permaculture principles by Maria Ros, an amazing woman in her own right, who left a successful career as a professional dancer and university instructor to learn and teach permaculture and build an ecovillage in Quintana Roo.

Maria and Hector Reyes gave a session on designing for catastrophe, a subject they know well, living as they do in the hurricane zone of the Yucatan. Hurricane Wilma destroyed much of the work she had done on her permaculture farm for the past four years.

She remembers her house shuddering in the howling winds, fearing for her walls and roof as she looked out a window at the thatch-roofed Maya house next door. The palm fronds lifted and fell with the winds, emerging unscathed.

The experience was a traumatic one, but she learned an important lesson: The more we observe nature, and the more we incorporate those observations into our designs, the more sustainable our designs will be.
“The Maya design their homes with thatched roofs, so they are not only strong but they let the wild energy move through instead of blocking it,” she said. “In my house, the walls were crying against the wind.”

Bates chimed in with a dramatic illustration of the concept that I will always take with me.

He drew two circles on the chalkboard – one the size of a quarter, and several feet across.

“This is the earthquake in Haiti,” he said, “and this is the earthquake in Chile.”

Then he drew a corresponding quarter-sized circle inside Chile and a large circle around Haiti, representing the number of people who had died in each quake – slightly over 100 in the case of Chile, and thousands in the case of Haiti.

“That’s the result of design,” he said emphatically.

More on this concept can be found on his blog, The Great Change, which is well worth the read.

The day passed with many more lessons, and this was just the beginning. Tomorrow, we'll get a look at Maya Mountain Research Farm, with a tour by founder Christopher Nesbitt, who bought it from a cattle rancher in 1988 and converted it from a depleted, eroded and relatively unproductive tract to a richly diverse forest.

Here's a quick glimpse into my first amazing day at Maya Mountain. Stay tuned for the farm tour tomorrow, what Bates refers to as "one of the best examples I've seen of permaculture in action."

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About the author: An award-winning travel writer, Tracy Barnett's two-decade journalism career has included a master's degree in science writing and many years as an investigative and environmental reporter. She has taught journalism at one of the top journalism schools in the country, founded a Spanish-language bilingual newspaper there and went on to help start a group of Spanish-language dailies in Texas. She has traveled widely, but Latin America is the place that feels most like home. Tracy "at" tracybarnettonline "dot" org.

More about Maya Mountain: From one jungle to another: A modern-day pioneer

See the slide-show's photograph of the dugout canoe in the turquoise river you can drink out of.

Follow Albert Bates' blog at www.peaksurfer.blogspot.com and read his articles on CultureChange.org

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Announcement:

Classes Cope With Anxiety About Life After Oil Runs Out

Global Energy Crisis Brings New Opportunities To Connect With Community

SAN RAFAEL, Calif. -- A psychologist is teaching students to prepare emotionally and spiritually for life after the collapse of fossil fuel-based civilization.

"I think everybody knows deep down in their bones that changes are ahead, and that we are at the end of the world as we have known it," said Carolyn Baker, Ph.D., instructor.

Starts April 24. An Evening with Matt Stein, author of our course textbook When Technology Fails,
is also available. For more information, visit PostPeakLiving.com or contact André Angelantoni, tel. 1-415.754.3294
email:
aangel "at" postpeakliving "dot" com