Potential Constraints to Sharing Permaculture Ideas

ECHO Inc.

Gene Fifer at Cornell University wrote in response to Brad Ward's article on permaculture in *EDN* 129 (http://www.echocommunity.org/en/resources/7dae3899-6abb-483b-8ad6-67dd201654b5).

"I enjoyed your newsletter article on permaculture. I was the permaculture/tree crops intern at New Alchemy Institute back in 1983 under the direction of John Quinney, a permaculturalist from New Zealand. I have tried to bring this perspective to agricultural development also, most recently in Chad with Mennonite Central Committee. There are some difficulties in trying to bring this philosophy to developing countries and I thought I'd share my thoughts.

"The Australians and Kiwis [New Zealanders] who started permaculture were very individualistic and [came] from cultures that had strong institutions for land tenure and property rights. These guys were very much in the "back-to-the-land because civilization is going to crash" alternative/hippy culture. They also had an abundance of bushland to settle on. This is one reason why so many early designers had big sites under just one person's control. They never had to go through a village or community design process that would have required very strong consensus-building skills or asking chiefs or landlords for permission to change the landscape.

"They also didn't have to work in conflict zones or where theft and corruption were big. For example, in Cambodia, there was a big snail problem in the rice paddies that ducks would have solved—but ducks, as good sources of protein, would have been stolen, eaten, and been a net loss for the farmer. Often times crops are somewhat removed from where people live because they have had to cluster dwellings together for nighttime safety. This leaves any "investments" on the land very vulnerable.

"Most agricultural innovations that will be adopted by poor smallholders must show a monetary return pretty quickly. Appealing to people's sense of environmentalism, generational equity, or creation care just doesn't motivate. Many Western development staff feel that appealing to some kind of agrarian stewardship will resonate with people who are "close to the land" and "in touch with nature," but I have not found this to be true.

"The ecology and resource dynamics in permaculture are very scientific and appeal to folks with a Western, albeit alternative, scientific background. Folks in villages tend to not understand or believe very basic science including nutrition, public

health, medicine, or economics, not just agricultural sciences. So making appeals that explain about principles and philosophy tends to lose people. That's why showing is better than explaining.

"I appreciated your alternative ethical pillars of: 1) actively love God's image bearers; 2) diligently steward God's creation; and 3) live contentedly and joyfully share God's provision. Blessings on your work and I hope to read more about your experiences."

Brad Ward responded as follows: "I very much appreciate your feedback, perspectives and kindness. You have drawn out some really excellent points, especially regarding the filters through which the permaculture concept was originally organized and the continued weaknesses of 'development' (in this case permaculture development) that is imported through the dominant western paradigm that believes it knows what's best.

"In my view you are spot on with the observation that innovations must show economic returns in the near term for smallholders to be interested. It is all too easy for someone who has no experience of chronic food insecurity (and all the other manifestations of material poverty) to focus all of their concern on the 'Care for the Earth' ethical pillar. As I think about your comment regarding the 'close to the land/in touch with nature' native, I actually feel myself cringe remembering the times I have used that overlay in my way of thinking about smallholders. Taped to the bottom of my computer monitor, right next to a little slip of paper with my version of the ethical pillars of permaculture, is the well-known quote "Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, love them. Start with what they know, build on what they have." I like this quote as a reminder of priorities. I don't like it because it uses the words *them* and *they*. I realize the naiveté in wishing the us/them thing wasn't part of human reality. As for local village folks' lack of understanding of the mechanisms of science that we take for granted, that was not my experience in Central America. Folks I knew embraced cause and effect and liked to learn how things worked. Thanks for widening my view in this regard.

"In thinking about how permaculture has thus far worked itself out in an almost entirely western/individual context, I wonder how practitioners who believe in the usefulness of the design tools, and their applicability in any and every situation, can learn skills to present the 'design system' in a way that allows it to be absorbed, re-imagined and ultimately valued by folks whose cultures and societal norms have evolved in a very different way. Maybe this is the next frontier for the development of the permaculture tool box."

Caution about Inca Nut

Abram Bicksler, Director of ECHO's Impact Center in Thailand, wrote in response to the article about Inca nut in *EDN* 129 (http://www.echocommunity.org/en/resources/49ab85e7-b41e-40f9-bd35-cc16561473f1). "The Inca nut article does a nice job of highlighting this crop and some of its potentials. I might add a few cautions about its widespread adoption here in Asia. We have quickly seen it go from a crop plant of promise to an over-promised crop plant of monocultures! People (agriculture extension workers, development practitioners, farmers, etc.) are going crazy over it here; it has the

smell of another jatropha, palm oil, rubber, or date palm monoculture "get-rich-quick" scheme to it. It may in fact be a nice alternative to oil palm (have you seen the news about this "crime against humanity," as Indonesia clears and sets alight unthinkable square kilometers of rainforest to plant monocultures of oil palm?), but not if it is going in as another monoculture that leads to deforestation, over-reliance on pesticides, commodification, and market volatility, which are never good for smallholders.

"Also, besides a lot of land clearing in order to plant Inca nut in Laos and Cambodia, we are seeing a lot of hardwood poles being used to support the plants because they are vines and require trellising. This adds to deforestation, as Cambodia is also experiencing for increased black pepper production in the once-forested northeast. Gliricidia might make a nice living pole, but my guess is that smallholders will choose hardwoods over gliricidia due to management concerns of the living trees.

"So rabid is the excitement about Inca nut that we have begun dissuading people from thinking about it, due to the seemingly endemic "next big crop" mentality. If we do suggest the use of this plant, we have been promoting it not as a monoculture, but for home consumption (to help a family offset their cooking oil needs) in a polyculture environment, where it can use existing vegetation and can be a nice peripheral crop. Inca nut seems to have a great niche in a clearing or around the edges of a field."

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