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Decolonizing permaculture

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: The dreamcatcher is one of the most widely appropriated symbols. Full disclosure: I did not buy this one, or a photograph thereof, from an indigenous person. (Public domain photo)

When I gave presentations on permaculture last year, I mentioned that Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, the Australians who first codified what became known as “permaculture,” borrowed heavily from indigenous knowledge. “Borrowing” is the most charitable term I can use.

I also stated that decolonizing permaculture is ongoing today. I understand “decolonizing” to mean that the knowledge permaculture has appropriated is being recontextualized and properly attributed. If there are profits to be made from this, the peoples who compounded the traditional, generational wisdom have first crack at them, and should have a say in that wisdom’s use and dissemination — if not total control, akin to copyright, trademark or patent protection.

An experience at the last permaculture convergence, about which I wrote in fall of last year, brought this home for me. I have always been ambivalent about land acknowledgements: done right they revere a place and all life that springs and stems from it. Done wrong, they are gimmicky and fraught with virtue-signaling, as if merely by saying some feel-good words, anyone can dismiss the effects of five centuries of colonialism.

The key part of that overlong sentence is “anyone.” Does a person indigenous to the lands that you are acknowledging have to present the land acknowledgement?

At the convergence, we got tied up in that briefly. We were near Belfair, and there were no enrolled Twana/Skokomish or Coast Salish tribal members, or even partial descendants, present.

It was an awkward moment: perhaps a hundred people in a big tent, waiting for someone to have an idea most could support. At the margins, earnest conversations were whispered.

A guy who works with indigenous peoples was drafted, but he demurred. He didn’t think it appropriate.

Other people passed the torch back and forth until it somehow settled at last on a white woman who read something from her phone. The text included lyrics to a song from the 1960s (of all times), and was a bit of salt in the wound opened by the realization that there were no Native, or even Native-adjacent, people at an event celebrating all that we knew because of them.

Someone from the African diaspora was present, however, and she lit into a jeremiad about colonialism and permaculture after the lackluster land acknowledgement stoked her ire. Some strong words were said by many, but politely, and some people left eventually. A few were indignant. The occasion was teetering on the abyss of incivility for some time.

She showed her kinder side to all the next morning, but the point had been made. Having studied post-colonial literature, theory and history at length, I thought it time to revisit that course — but in the permaculture space.

I think it's best to start with where you actually live. If you don't know whose land you're occupying, native-land.ca has a fantastic interactive map worth weeks of exploring.

It covers the world (but is strongest in the “Americas”) and includes language and treaty overlays. Curious about how your home was taken? I just found out Harstine Island was part of the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, where an astonishing acreage spanning several counties was bought for \$32,500. In today's prices, that's ... my calculator just melted.

Native Land also has lots of other resources: teaching guides, discussion of land acknowledgements, a blog.

Tahoma Peak Solutions (tahomapeak.com) is “a Native woman-owned firm focused on empowering and building up communities in Indian Country.” Their clients include several tribes, Newman's Own, Seattle Aquarium and more. A podcast, a large number of food sovereignty and traditional lifeways initiatives, and symposia are just a sample of their work.

I signed up for its Virtual Food Sovereignty Symposium on June 27. It's on Zoom, free, and in the words of TPS owner Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot), aims to “bring together the best minds in Indian Country to share what they have learned so individuals, organizations and tribes can take those lessons to build a better food system.”

I look forward to listening, learning and sharing.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*