

The Outback as an Energy Sink:

Reflections on Institutional Futility



My active involvement in the educational center known as “The Outback” was the period from about Spring 1998 to Spring 2004. In the few years before that, I had another project to work on – The Farm on Donovan – and when that closed down (or rather was bought out) I shifted my attention to the university property, because I’ve found that ever since my first Permaculture Design Course in 1993, I always need to be in the process of setting up a “demonstration site.”

Upon arriving at Fairhaven College in 1994, I kept hearing about how “The Outback” was in danger of being paved over and converted into parking space. A student group had been formed to actively lobby and petition the University to get The Outback officially designated as an “educational” zone, thus saving it from pavement. As I walked through The Outback, however, it never seemed very “educational” to me. Maybe that’s because I had achieved so much more at The Farm on Donovan – achievement here meaning the establishment of a viable and productive permaculture and social space that was a real demonstration of principles of sustainability. At The Farm, we were actively practicing what everybody else was preaching: all you had to do was come over there and walk around or have a sweat or take a workshop or come to a potluck, and you could get some education. The Outback, by comparison, was basically an open space overgrown with blackberries. There were a few amateur garden plots; yet every Summer, as the students vacated, whatever productivity had been achieved would soon be weeded over, and by the beginning of the next school year everything was back to Step 1. Thus, there was no consistency or follow-thru from one year to the next – or even from one season to the next. As I moved my attention to this under-utilized institutional space, I thought I could change all that.

A big problem with The Outback was that it was not in anybody’s backyard, meaning that anybody who wanted to tend the place would have to travel there – not very efficient. In Permaculture talk: it was not in anybody’s Zone 1. I was fortunate to find lodging a short walking distance away, so I could afford to invest much more time there than the average interested student. In early Spring, 1998, I began my work.

Burke Mulvaney and a small crew had taken some initiative the previous year by building a small, funky stage up on a potential meadow. I say “potential” because the stage was literally tucked into a blackberry thicket. The area that was supposed to be for “dancing” had blackberry runners moving through it. (Watch your bare feet!) I chose this as the place to begin, because there I could synergize my energy with Burke’s.

I started digging out all the blackberry bushes around the stage and dance floor. This is a labor-intensive process that requires first clipping back the brambles, raking up the clippings, finding the core, and then digging out the core by the roots. Blackberry is so tenacious that there is simply no easy way to eradicate it. With the stage thus exposed and the emergence of a safe dance floor, I turned my attention to the perimeter: I thought that by making a lovely garden to frame the dance floor, dancing-people’s feelings of euphoria would be encouraged and enhanced by the scents and colors and patterns of the garden. In order to achieve this, I cut back a huge swath of blackberry, all the way down a hill up to the border of marshy creek-land. Instead of digging out all the roots, this time I practiced what they call “sheet mulching:” after clipping the brambles down to the core, I laid out a couple layers of cardboard on top of the clippings, and then spread wood chips on top of the cardboard, there to sit through the rainy season.

I was amazed at what I found underneath that blackberry thicket! There was a tree stump 5 feet tall, with its trunk fallen, laying down the hill. There was an old bath tub within the remnants of a fence; later I would learn that another generation of Outbackers had kept goats at that location. I also found a lot of opportunity underneath that thicket, for once the bramble had been cut down, there was a whole barren hillside to work with. This I began shaping into terraces.

By the next Spring, the cardboard was pretty well broken down, leaving open soil for planting. Thus began the process over the next several years of establishing what I called a “Permaculture Demonstration Site.” Over these next several years, I spent many hundreds of hours and many hundreds of dollars filling in the place and maintaining it – creating lush and diverse planting systems. Up on the “meadow,” framing what eventually became a large, open dancing space, was a sinuous garden with a little crescent-moon hill in the middle. A trail wound its way through the garden; at the center of a key juncture I set up a mandala garden bed. The trail was lined with black and red currants, with strawberries as groundcover. Many varieties of flowers, bulbs, herbs, groundcovers, and native plants thoughtfully filled in the various niches with the intent of producing an “effect.” The terraces featured dwarf fruit trees, at the bases of which I practiced creating “guilds,” which are beneficial associations of plants.

As the planting systems matured with each new growing season, they became more impressive.

Soon, students from Fairhaven and Huxley were coming by to tour the Permaculture Demonstration Site and take notes. One Huxley student, Tyrone Lafay, made the Site the subject of his Senior Project.

I want to make note here of a certain phenomenon I've witnessed before: that is, the creation of a high-energy, vibrantly-alive, well-ordered "space" will have a ripple effect: the space will tend to energize and influence the places around it, as well as the people moving through the space. Here's what I observed in The Outback – and I believe this to be a combination of 'cause-and-effect' *as well as* the synchronicity of a collective wish. As I began diligently transforming a previously degraded open space into a thriving demonstration site, the energy in the entire Outback was raising to new levels of refinement. Quite spontaneously, a self-organized and self-designated core group of us decided to employ the energy required for bringing forth the under-utilized potential of the site. This was an amazing time to be there: on a sunny Spring afternoon there might be a dozen individuals working on various aspects of the site – curiously enough, never with a faculty member or other university representative to guide or oversee the process. We, the students, thought that if we could really fix up the place, really make it shine and look beautiful, impressive, then the decision-makers in the University would surely recognize the value in the place and thus save it forever from the threat of being paved over.

I can't recall the exact timeline, but I do remember the following significant occurrences over the next few years: The stage was modified and reworked a couple times – each version an improvement over the previous. An entire photovoltaic array system – including solar panels, batteries, and an inverter – was *donated*, thanks to a grant written by Tyrone Lafay. Next thing you know, Jeffree Utter was conducting an "Alternative Energy" class, the applied component of which was to set up the solar system and get it working. Part of the set-up included wiring the stage – that's right, after that class we had a solar-powered stage! Burke Mulvaney started organizing "Earth Day in the Outback," which evolved into an entire festival – with live music, vendors and food booths, along with educational tours and activities for the kids. Other groups started using the stage to hold classes or give performances. A kid's Summer Camp appeared, at the culmination of which the young ones performed a play on stage for the parents. The cultivated areas expanded as the blackberry was further cut back, and one fellow even built a solid, high-quality greenhouse as one of his school projects. In short, The Outback was coming to life and realizing its potential as an educational and community space. All those involved in this renaissance were feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment. Camaraderie and community were a natural by-product of so many people coming together to fulfill a collective wish. One of the "old-time Outbackers" came by one day as I was weeding my garden and remarked "the place never looked so good," which sure brought a smile to my face.

During this whole period, I transitioned into my Master's degree program. At one step in the degree process, I was to give a prototype design in preparation for my final Graduate Design Project – this being a Whole Systems Design degree. For this preliminary step, I proposed to design and implement an “Ecovillage Design” class, using The Outback as the site for conducting the extended group design process. In this proposal, we would raise the energy to new levels by producing a site design for an *Ecovillage* Demonstration Site with the *Permaculture* Demonstration Site being just one component. Going through all the proper channels, my proposal was approved, and in the Fairhaven College Course Catalog for Spring 2001 appeared a 3-credit, 400-level class called “Ecovillage Design.”

The Ecovillage Design class was an amazing experience for me, the students, and The Outback. Here, for the first time in its history, we conducted a disciplined survey of site resources, produced maps and charts full of relevant data (one pair of students even produced a 3-D topo map), and laid the groundwork for proposing a meaningful, pertinent, state-of-the-art development for the place. As an “Ecovillage Demonstration Site,” The Outback would host a set of eco-dorms, built using natural materials and techniques, housing students in a “Sustainable Living” program. As we conceived it, the students, under the oversight of an experienced resident Mentor, would construct and maintain integrated systems of orchards, gardens, and animals. With the addition of hybrid renewable energy and water harvesting systems, the students would be able to achieve relative self-reliance living right there on site. With The Outback as their home base, students in the program would still have access to the educational resources of the entire University, so as to deepen and extend their theoretical, philosophical, and humanistic comprehensions. The Outback was already a site for festivals and community events, so we imagined the students in the Sustainable Living program as living in a sort of magical paradise. As an Ecovillage Demonstration Site, The Outback would be connected globally with a network of similar educational centers. This was a world-class proposal that would certainly have put Fairhaven and Western on the global sustainability education map.

I guess by this time – the Summer of 2001 – the energy was so high and refined that we really thought something great was destined for the place. During the Ecovillage Design class, I had set up an office in the old sauna by the Burns cabins and would show up every morning as if it was my job to manage the place. Two students – Katie Nixon and Eric Conn – managed to get an Independent Study approved whereby they were permitted to “live” in The Outback. Thus given official permission, they set up a campsite, and utilized and improved the outdoor kitchen. The three of us had a wonderful Summer maintaining the gardens, starting a nursery, continuing improvements, and generally keeping the place looking tip-top for the steady stream of visitors. This may have been the peak of the good energy flowing into The Outback.

I mentioned earlier that this evolution in Outback quality and refinement was achieved solely by the students themselves without any guidance, oversight, or instruction by any faculty member or university representative with associated experience. There *was* a faculty member at Fairhaven – everybody’s favorite Mr. Bornzin – who was considered The Outback “tutor,” you might say, the guy who signed off the Independent Studies and sponsored the student-led Applied Human Ecology class; but you never saw him out there. Since Mr. Bornzin was trained as a mathematical physicist, he would not have known what to do even if he *was* present. It’s easy to extend that assertion to claim that there was not an employee in the entire university system that would harbor a clue on how to begin setting up an “Ecovillage Demonstration Site.” I doubt you could even find an employee who could understand the purpose of such a Site, or why students would be so interested in establishing one. And thus the reasons for titling this essay “The Outback as an Energy Sink: Reflections on Institutional Futility.”

After the peak, there were some meetings held, with the Dean and with the Physical Plant for example – and somewhere in there an Outback Student Coordinator position was established – but for the most part the University behemoth plodded slothfully along as before. Mr. Bornzin kept signing off the same old Independent Studies while avoiding going outside. It was disappointing that he, as the faculty representative, never was able to augment the surge of new energy we created – and I’ve come to believe he preferred *not* to see a surge of energy in the first place. I think Mr. Bornzin liked it best when everything was in the ‘beginning’ stage – that stage where new students come along and clear away some blackberry to try their hands at creating a little garden for the first time. Then, by next year, all that will be weeded over and a new round of students can come along and start all over from scratch. What we offered instead was *real* development – and with that comes increased responsibility.

As often happens in a University, many of the participants in our Outback surge graduated, some moved away, while an Old Guard of us still lingered on – yet The Outback became less and less inviting to us. However much we may have wanted to make it a *community* space, we were continually reminded – more through attitude than outright reproach – that this was, after all, *university property*. I continued to maintain my Permaculture Demonstration Site, though starting to feel a bit conspicuous at times, like when the security patrol would drive by on the access road up above the meadow.

In April 2004 I began my doctoral program, which took me away to Santa Barbara for an Orientation Session. Upon returning to Bellingham, I did not have lodging arranged – I was in between living spaces – so I went to The Outback to sleep in the plastic covered ‘hoop-house,’ where wheelbarrows and tools were stored. In the morning I awoke and went to Wilson Library to begin my research. In the evening I returned to The Outback and read a little by candlelight

in the old sauna-office before retiring back to the hoop-house for my slumber. This pattern continued for a few rotations when, one night, just as I was tucking into my sleeping bag, a pair of flashlights was searchingly approaching me. Try as I might to hide and avoid being seen, these flashlights seemed to be homing in on me, as if they already knew I was there! Sure enough, the university police had discovered my hovel and had come to root me out! (I was later able to piece together that a young undercover agent had been given the assignment of patrolling the area between The Outback and the dorms, an area I walked right through to get to my abode). The ensuing conversation was congenial enough: I told the police not to worry, "I'm a teacher back here. I just had a skiff with my partner back home, and so came over here to be by myself and get some rest." They accepted my story at face value, gave me a warning, and told me to be on my way – so I walked out of there leaving my backpack and books behind in the sauna-office.

In order to resolve the warning, I was told to make an appointment with the Chief of University Police; but the idea of meeting with the Chief kind of intimidated me, so I kept postponing it. I did have to go down surreptitiously into The Outback a couple days after my being weeded out to recover my backpack and books; but otherwise I stayed away from the place. I found lodging up on South Hill at my friend Kiko's house, and so from there resumed my Wilson Library routine. This continued for, oh, a couple months, when one bright Spring day I was walking down the access road that lay above the meadow. From there I could look down and see my treasured Permaculture Demonstration Site – and could notice how clogingly overgrown with weeds it had become! You know about the 'rationalizing' mind? The mind that can somehow string together a series of pointed assertions to justify an action that may or may not be in your best interest? Well, on that day I was able to rationalize that it would be "OK" to go down and pull some weeds out of my Permaculture Demonstration Site – after all, I invested *years* fixing it up. There was still plenty of daylight, it was a weekday, and, gee, I'll look just like any other student tending a garden.

I must admit, I was thoroughly enjoying myself in that odd sort of gardener way, pulling out the intrusive 'unwants' so that the usually 'more-tender' can have their space to breathe. It was not exactly a wild abandoning glee but I was moving energetically, with concentrated joyful purpose. This garden had been my teacher for many years, a laboratory where I learned lessons such as which plants like to be together, which little micro-niches various species prefer, how to recycle nutrients on-site so imports are not needed, etc. This day was to be my final lesson.

Maybe I lost track of the time? It seemed that twilight was approaching when all of a sudden I was startled by the sound of a human moving aggressively down the brush on the slope leading up to the access road. It was a policeman moving purposely toward me – again! In an instant,

two more policemen converged from separate right angles. It was as if they had strategically planned and were now executing a military maneuver – and I was their target! I stood erect and did my best to look ‘at home.’ The first officer quipped, “What are you doing?” I replied matter-of-factly, “I’m weeding my garden.” His look of incredulity may have come from not understanding that anyone could possibly feel ownership for something occurring on *university property*; or perhaps my starting-to-grey beard made me look like an intruder on *university property*; whatever the case, as soon as they ran my ID they reminded me that last time I was in The Outback I received a warning, and since I had not resolved that, they were now going to arrest me for “criminal trespassing.”

This was a rather low point in my history with The Outback: Right there in that location where six years earlier I began clearing away the blackberry, right there where beautiful dancing devas in bare feet grooved to the sounds emoting from our solar-powered stage, right there next to the spot where the Ecovillage Design class used to circle and have seminar, right there close to the mandala where I enjoyed quite a few heart-to-hearts with beloved friends, right there I was handcuffed and then led away up the slope to the squad car. I could not hold back the tears, perhaps because on some level I realized that it was all over. All those years of passion, devotion, commitment, vision – the incredibly warm sense of community that we cultivated – was not going to have a successful conclusion, a tangible outcome.

Perhaps the university offers took pity on me, or perhaps they were bluffing to begin with, for whatever reason, they did not take me ‘downtown’ but rather let me walk away, again. I had to go through the whole court system, however, where a clever Public Defender managed to get me freed with just another warning and some community service time; but the stiffest part of the sentence was being eternally banned from The Outback.

After being arrested, I kind of lost interest. New vistas opened up for me, showing me layers upon layers of proficiency, need, and opportunity beyond The Outback. Last I heard, a student group had formed to design and get official approval for a certified stage – meaning a stage constructed by paid university personnel. After three years or so of process, I think they did finally get approval – and that would have been about *ten years* after the Old Guard had their first concert. I seriously doubt that a stage was ever begun, just because whoever students were spearheading the effort most likely have graduated and moved on. And ol’ Mr. Bornzin, I’m sure he’s still there signing off the same old Independent Studies, avoiding going outside, and doing his best to make sure that everything stays in the ‘beginning’ phase. It’s a pity, really, just because the University has access to such wealth and resources: they could really make a significant impact, creating something innovative and world-class. But alas, I think the

employees there soon slip into the dullard conservative mindset where their highest priorities are ensuring steady pay checks.

For me, The Outback superbly fulfilled its role as an educational site – and perhaps my persistence in working there beyond my welcome only amplified the learning! The camaraderie and community that was created there still fills my heart, the technical skills I learned there I continue to advance season after season, and I've gone on to present several more Ecovillage Design classes. If there is any bit of advice I could pass on to whoever student group is currently surveying the opportunities back there, it would be to not take it all too seriously. After all, you're dealing with a highly entropic system whose primary purpose for existence is self-maintenance. Give as much energy as you want, yet do so for the joy it brings in practice, not because you expect to see any results; because, when all is said and done, I'm sure you'll agree with me: *The Outback is a huge energy sink!*