

## OBSERVE AND INTERACT

(Notes taken by Leesa Ryan at Permaculture Southampton, 20 May 2017)

When we **observe**, we are collecting information. Nowadays there is much less direct observation as we gather much of our information second hand from the internet, social media, TV etc. The aim is to directly observe both **the detail** and its relationship to the wider environment (**the pattern**).

Observation is only worthwhile if we are then prepared to take appropriate action, to **interact**. It is necessary to prod what we are observing in order to reveal more about the subject.

### Exercise in observation – The Weeds in our Vegetable Beds

It was noticed that there were a lot of thistles, despite a “thistle patrol” being carried out a couple of weeks previously. So the question is, did these thistles simply get missed? If so, more careful observation next time! Were many of them not removed completely leaving parts of the root intact, which have subsequently re-sprouted? This could be checked by digging up and observing the root structure and if this was found to be the case, to dig more deeply next time. Or are these thistles simply new weeds? In which case we could check by measuring them to check how fast a thistle grows in a week.

### Choosing how to Interact...

**Observations are relative** – we are strongly influenced by our culture, conditioning and beliefs, and our ideas of good and bad. We tend to see what we expect to see.

Use a combination of **top down thinking** (the bigger picture and deciding what we want to achieve) and **bottom up action** (individual participation taking into account the fundamental details of the subject).

**The landscape is the textbook.** Nature will show us what we need to know if we take the time to observe what is happening.

Take a problem solving approach. When action is required try something, then observe if it works. Re-evaluate and take further action if required. **Failure is useful** as long as we learn from it. Just like with a toddler learning to walk, we need to encourage ourselves to carry on when at first we don't succeed.

**Simple solutions.** Often we don't appreciate what we have got until it's gone. Respect the simple things and those that we can't see, e.g. the work of soil organisms.

Make **small interventions.** When making changes, minimize disturbance to other systems. We should be careful that in trying to achieve our aim, we are not destroying something else which is valuable.

**Avoid too much of a good thing.** For example over use of fertilizers can change the balance of the soil and over time more and more is required to obtain the same effect. When considering the potential benefit, we should also ask ourselves, what is the cost? In these times of excess in our culture, it is very easy to fall into the trap of having too much.

We are more likely to have an open and enquiring mind if we see that the **problem is the solution.** When facing a problem we often tend to focus on the details (reductionist thinking) and lose sense of the bigger picture.

We often get stuck in habitual ways of doing things for fear of changing the status quo. It is important that we **recognize and break out of design cul-de-sacs.** In a rapidly changing environment, the way we have always done things may no longer work.

Traditional agriculture is labour intensive. Modern agriculture is energy intensive. Permaculture is information and design intensive, observation and interactive intensive. Take the time to see what is there, "Don't just do something, stand there"! At the same time don't ignore what you have learnt elsewhere – incorporate it.

Choosing a topic/focus, summarize observations and use design thinking guidelines to determine what can be done:-

### **Topic 1 – Discussion on Composting Weeds**

Due to the limitations of garden waste that is obtainable on an individual basis, the idea of collaborating with the local community was discussed to create communal composting.

Some weeds should not be composted because it is so invasive, e.g. bindweed.

Instead of using expensive compost bins, we can save resources by building our own e.g. from old pallets.

## **Topic 2 - Discussion on Controlling Slugs**

One of our members had already conducted intensive observation of slugs in his own patch. He observed that different types of slugs feed on different types of plant matter. There are specialists – some feed on the green leaves and shoots, some on the roots and some on rotting matter. He found an effective way to remove them was to provide a shelter for them, e.g. an upturned carton in a flower bed. The slugs would gather here and it was easy to remove them the following morning. Or they can be removed in the evening whilst they are in action – they are good food for ducks! It would be useful to observe at what time of year this action is most effective, e.g. before they start to reproduce.