**Sharing the Surplus – Canadian Interns Encounter Permacultura Cubana**

In just over 30 years, permaculture has grown from its humble Australian roots to become a flourishing global movement. By it’s very nature, permaculture is meant to be shared. This movement bears much fruit precisely because it is not tightly controlled or “owned” by any one person, organization or country; rather it finds unique expressions around the world and the movement as a whole benefits from this rich diversity.

Permaculture philosophy suggests that we value cooperation over competition, not only in our site designs, but also in our communities and in our movement as a whole. Over the past three years, we have had the opportunity to build such cooperation between the permaculture communities in Cuba and in Canada through the development of a unique and dynamic permaculture internship program based in the city of Sancit Spiritus, Cuba.

Each year, eleven Canadian interns travel to Cuba for seven weeks in May and June. Some of these interns have previous knowledge and training in permaculture and others do not. Some are students in university programs and are participating in the program for course credit while others are already working in their careers. But all of them are coming to Cuba with a strong desire to learn from the experience of the Cuban permaculture movement and to bring what they learn back to their communities and their lives in Canada.

The program begins with orientations and workshops in permaculture design principles lead by FANJ staff persons and local promoters. Then, with the guidance of the local promoters, the interns prepare a permaculture design for a new space identified by leaders of the Fundacion. Most of their time, however, is spent in the physical transformation of the site with many hours a day of labour under the hot Cuban sun – not an easy task for a group of Canadians! The results, however, have been inspiring and very positive. And most interesting perhaps, is that we can observe the manner in which permaculture principles are active in the process of the program itself.

We design our permaculture systems to “obtain yields”, and, hopefully, we will have a surplus of yields that can then be shared with others. This program has been designed to create a variety of yields: learning, leadership, solidarity, inspiration and motivation, collaboration between FANJ and The Urban Farmer and the University of Alberta in Canada, and of course the development of new permaculture systems within the city of Sancti Spiritus. Each year of the program, the Canadian interns return home feeling like even though they have worked very hard, they have received more than they have given. They have benefited tremendously from the surplus of passion, resourcefulness, creativity and skill that they have encountered in the permaculture movement in Cuba.

Consider the permaculture principle of “catch and store energy.” When we have effective design, we are capturing abundant sun energy in the leaves of our trees and then cycling that energy into soil, microbes, and back into our plants and into the animals and people who eat those plants, and then back to the soil once again when we use their manures. There are potentially an infinite number of cycles for that energy that has entered our system.

So too does this apprenticeship program catch and cycle energy into our systems. Canadians arrive in Sancti Spiritus with their desire to learn, their curiosity, their goodwill and their hard work – all forms of energy that become embodied in the design and installation of a new permaculture site and the permaculture community surrounding that site. Hopefully, the energy they leave behind continues to be shared and cycled for years to come.

But the Canadians too are gathering energy from the experience – they see new possibilities for creating sustainable communities, they learn many new skills, and their motivation increases as they are inspired by their Cuban friends. All of this energy and experience they take home with them and continue to cycle it within their own families, communities and projects for many years to come. As one participant reflected, “*Es muy difícil describir el impacto de esta experiencia en mi vida. Ahora entiendo que es posible satisfacer las necesidades básicas de la gente con sistemas sostenibles. Estoy mucho mas seguro para utilizar este visión en Canadá*.”

Permaculture also teaches us to “maximize edges.” We can readily observe that in most eco-systems, the edges are the places that have the greatest bio-diversity, such as the area where a meadow meets a forest. Edges are alive with life and with new possibilities as the unique mix of the two different systems creates a unique and novel set of conditions.

When we bring a group of Canadian interns together with Cuban permaculturists, we are creating a very interesting cultural and social edge where exciting new ideas, relationships, and projects can emerge. Each group retains their own identity but a new community is created that brings together the best resources of both worlds. This is not always easy as the linguistic and cultural differences can create many challenges but these “edges” offer tremendous learning and growing opportunities, and together we work to “turn problems into solutions.” One group member observes that, “*Ahora tengo más fe en el trabajo internacional. Entendimos como solucionar cualquiera conflicta en una manera positiva. Este programa fue muy útil para los Canadienses y los Cubanos*.”

On one level, this permaculture internship offers Canadians the opportunity to come to Cuba and learn about permaculture and to participate in the transformation of a physical space into a productive, beautiful, and biologically diverse permaculture system. Indeed participants have learned how to go about using “garbage” such as old tires, broken concrete, rocks, and many other materials to create something valuable. They have dug ponds, planted trees, created garden beds, painted murals, set up compost systems, and much more.

Participating in the transformation of a physical space has been very rewarding and the interns have learned many useful skills as a result. But the evaluations of the participants reveal many other, more subtle transformations as well. In the words of one intern: “*Cuando transformamos un espacio, también nos transformamos. Ahora entiendo que para tener una vida sostenible es muy importante formar parte de una comunidad. La permacultura es más que agricultura, es una manera de vida*."

It has been our great pleasure and privilege to walk down this road of cooperation and international community building with all of our friends in the Fundacion, both in Sancti Spirtus and in La Habana. Each year we continue to observe, evaluate and respond to the feedback from participants and leaders in order to create a stronger and more effective program that reflects the values of the permaculture movement that we all share. It is our hope that we may together generate a surplus of many yields that will be shared in Cuba and in Canada for many years to come.

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