

## Bill Mollison obituary

Ecologist and one of the co-creators of permaculture



*Bill Mollison on a plant and seed collection expedition in northern Tasmania. Photograph: David Holmgren*

**Matt Dunwell**

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Bill Mollison, who has died aged 88, was one of the co-creators of permaculture, an agricultural system that works with, rather than against, nature, on the basis that the natural world holds the key to stable and productive systems. Having developed the concept, he then travelled from his native Tasmania for 30 years to embed his approach worldwide. His ideas have spread widely – permaculture is practised in more than 140 countries and by more than 3 million people – even though in the 1970s the idea was considered, in Mollison’s words, “the highest form of sedition”.

Much of what he espoused was based on his great respect for the wisdom of subsistence farmers around the world, who have long used sustainable methods to grow their crops. In agricultural terms, this means planting diverse sets of crops, using perennial species to form productive stable systems, and ensuring the conditions for soils to be regenerated.

Other characteristics that he observed in the Tasmanian wilderness informed permaculture, for instance that the interfaces between different habitats are the most productive and that elements such as plants and animals need to be placed together so they are mutually beneficial – as once when he pointed out: “You don’t have a slug problem, you have a duck deficiency!”

Mollison pointed to further beneficial ecological consequences: “The only safe energy systems are those derived from biological systems. A New Guinea gardener can walk through the gates of his garden taking one unit of energy and hand out 70. A modern farmer who drives a tractor through the gate takes 1,000 units of energy in and gives one back. Who is the most sophisticated agriculturalist?” He held that “although the problems of the world are increasingly complex, the solutions remain embarrassingly simple”. Ecological systems would enable people to meet their own needs, take back control of their lives and reinforce nature rather than deplete it.

Born in the fishing village of Stanley, on the north-west coast of Tasmania, Bill (whose given name was actually Bruce), was the son of Roland Mollison and his wife, Amy (nee Harmon). His parents ran a butter factory, and later built the village bakehouse that Bill took over at the age of 14 when his father died, delivering bread with a horse called Topsy.

In his 20s, he worked as a fisherman, forester and trapper. He understood and celebrated the self-reliance of rural life in the 1930s and 40s, and his love of the natural world led him to join the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in 1954, working in agricultural research for 10 years before leaving to study biogeography, the study of the distribution of plants and animals, at Hobart University.

He was appointed a lecturer at Hobart in 1968, and some years later developed a new discipline, environmental psychology. At this stage he could have settled into a comfortable academic life. However, he felt increasingly trapped by traditional academia and sought instead to marry his studies in psychology with the natural world, seeking an elusive operating system that would inspire people through a systematic design process to build abundant and resilient lifestyles.

At the age of 50, after his university peers had roundly rejected his plea for a cross-disciplinary holistic approach to their work, he turned his back on formal education. Joined by an environmental design student, David Holmgren, Mollison started to sketch out the origins of what we now know as permaculture. Nobody had put together the architecture for a regenerative design approach that drew on knowledge of traditional

cultures while adapting to the opportunities of new technologies and systems thinking. It simply did not exist.

Into this framework they introduced concepts from other ecological pioneers, indigenous cultures and peasant farmers, combining them with a keen observation of the natural world. In 1978 Mollison and Holmgren published *Permaculture One*, the precursor of Mollison's more detailed *Permaculture – A Designers' Manual* (1988). This was to become the "permaculture bible", and is still used as a reference text for teachers. It expands the concepts at the heart of agroecology, agroforestry, carbon farming, regenerative agriculture, sustainable architecture and local money systems, providing the intellectual framework that supports the continuing evolution of his ideas.

Thereafter Mollison wanted to spread his ideas, and decided to teach an informal two-week course in permaculture, operating from what he dubbed "The People's Republic of Strickland Avenue", the street in Hobart where he and Holmgren lived. He devised a curriculum and shared it with anyone who might turn up – a move so audacious that it was laughable. As his students grew in confidence they taught similar 72-hour courses, and after 10 years of continuous touring and teaching, Mollison – with the help of his network of loosely affiliated teachers – had spread his ideas across five continents. In 1981 he received the Right Livelihood award.

Although his original principles remain in place, the courses have evolved to expand beyond agriculture and into areas such as design, engineering, construction and architecture, all based on an ecological approach, and his ideas have been taken up by the international Transition Town movement.

Mollison had a brilliant mind. He observed, he catalogued, and his systematic approach helped him to weave seemingly disparate ideas into the most detailed tapestry. In this sense he was a true visionary. He was also challenging, angry, driven by a deep sense of injustice, and merciless if crossed. He used to say: "First feel fear, then get angry. Then go with your life into the fight."

He is survived by his fifth wife, Lisa, four daughters and two sons.

- Bill (Bruce Charles) Mollison, ecologist, born 4 May 1928; died 24 September 2016