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East to West: Ecologically Sustainable Land Use and Settlement Patterns

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[Presentation Transcription]

What we heard from Bill this morning was a cry, a cry-out for people like us to be leaders. It doesn't matter what age we are, or what our background is, or what level we're at in terms of our learning curve, we all recognise that we have something to teach. We also have something to learn, and something to share. So what are we doing with local communities right through to State government agencies and think tanks and talking to ministers who make decisions in terms of policy?

It's about creating our future, it's about planning, being a transmuting bridge from now to the future. It's about what we know now and what we are not really sure of, and it's about moving forward into the future and estimating what we think we want, so we have some goal to work towards. Once we have that then we can come back to the present and we can live the present, so we don't have to live the future. Planning isn't about living the future; it's about designing it the way we want it to be.

To start off this session, I want us to start thinking, ourselves, internalising, and then we will start sharing with the people around us. Then we will work through some examples that I have been working on. I would like you to be part of that transmutation that will occur, that you will take it out into the wide world. I know you are already doing it because that's why you are here.

Focus now on who you are. Where have you come from to be here? Where are you right now? Where am I right now? Now, I've been given these things from tradition that I am bringing forward. There is the sacredness of tradition. And I'm taking it forward into the future and I have to bury it in the sands of time, to try out later. Something that is growing and living. I'm allowed to take one thing forward with me into the future, one principle. One ethic. I want you now to envision, what is that thing you are going to take forward into the future? That you are going to live now, in a whole way, and you are going to take forward to give to the children of the world. Picture it in your mind, in your heart and your hands right now. What I would like

you to do now is turn to the person beside you and introduce yourself. It's going to be an openness, a sharing, it's starting today and it's going to go on for four or five days and beyond. Share it now, this thing you are going to take forward into the future. They are going to share with you, and what you must do is join those two things.

Now, what's interesting is that we have got the word, 'stewardship.' We are combining words in a positive way. What we are going to be doing is actually manifesting policies with government, with communities, and there's other people I can see in the room today, like Robyn Francis and Max Lindegger, who are doing exactly the same thing with communities. It's amazing when you start doing it with words that actually go into documents and those documents become impressed into the community as policies to manifest resources to be spent. And I believe in those things; I don't believe we should throw them away. We have paid scant regard to those documents that are lying around. We say, "Oh, they are just done by the government," but they are our documents, we do them, we make them. And if we follow through, we can actually allocate our resources based on them.

Diversity is sometimes seen as adversity, but in a sense it could actually stretch our limits out, open our horizons. It might be better to talk with more people in the room rather than less, to look for different people to talk with rather than the same people. Not to focus on like-minded people all the time. Work with like-minded people and then go out and find other people. I'm encouraging the work you are doing in leadership in getting out into the community and doing design; include people – be inclusive.

Love – an all-encompassing word. How often do we use it when we are dealing with adversity or our adversarial – the people we are sitting across the table from in discussions? How often do we give love to them? In the work that I have been doing, I have been encouraging people of a wide range of backgrounds to actually work with love and to understand they are working towards a common goal, that is, to be sustainable, whether they are in business or whether they are based on community aspirations.

Equality means that when you are listening to somebody, you are actually hearing them. That's something it is very hard to come to terms with: active listening. Sitting in a room with somebody and listening to them, saying, "I don't agree with this but I'm going to listen." Often what that does to me is that it converts my thinking across and I start to broaden my horizons, and I see things I didn't see before. Some of the challenges we will face in the future are going to need a range of people in that room with us, on that journey with us. Just when we think we know everything, we are going to reach this point where we reach a crisis and not know how to deal with it. And there will be somebody there that has the information, has the idea, has the design, has the knowledge. And it may be in a package that we are not really used to. Out of the mouth of babes.

Life-long learning. We can learn from the landscape, we can learn from the people we are with. What we are actually doing as designers is facilitating; we are just linking things together, creating a web. In fact, on the earth at this moment, repairing the web. Biodiversity is critical. In terms of culture, it's important to hold on to what we

have left, to repair it and sew it back together again. But it's going to be a different quilt, isn't it; it's not going to be the same. And that's fairly exciting.

Sustainability is about ensuring that what we are using now, working with now, we can actually pass on to the fifth generation without damaging their opportunities to do the same thing. Some core objectives are individual and community well-being, equity between generations and also equity within generations, between young people and old people.

A lot of the design work I have been doing includes school children. It is amazing to get input from young people and combine it with input from local politicians and professionals. The kids are really clear about what they could support. What is scary is that 80% of young people, teenagers, don't think there is going to be a world to inherit. Now, they are the next leaders coming along. So there is this generation coming along that doesn't see very fruitful opportunities, yet when you look at the primary school students, they are full of passion. They know they can do it because they are already doing it: they are implementing recycling programs, they are out there doing landcare. The schools in my area are actually managing everything, like the tuck shop – they grow their own food and sell it to the tuck shop. The money from that they put back into growing plants that they plant out. Other schools are coming along to their school to learn. They actually have student teachers from the university coming along to learn how to teach: they learn from the kids. It's very exciting. So there is hope. But there can be gaps. We need to make sure that these webs are very strong. There are times when these older kids get very despairing that they are not going to make it.

We can't just do it with intellect; there is just too much information. So we have to go back to combining the heart and the head, and using intuition a lot more. I really believe in intuitive planning, the spirit of planning which is evolving through permaculture. It is going to bring out the whole of society. And I really believe positively that we can change the world with that. Another technology is about synthesizing that through genetics or microchips. You can program a lot of information on a very small parcel. We are doing the same in our head and our hearts. We suddenly realise we do have the answers when we read a book.

Think about this now: in the community where you live, or where you are travelling, what are you actually doing right now to manifest change?

Learning? Doing what is appropriate for the need? That is really important. It means that there is a need to be filled and you are filling it, providing information networking. Learning more about myself and understanding how I impact on others and interact with the wider community and the environment. Embedding myself in the community and the environment. What results when we embed ourselves in the community and the environment? It gives us a sense of place, which gives rise to a sense of being, belonging. That is what we heard this morning: that there is a loss of that sense of belonging. What I have been saying is that we must rebuild that on the local level, like planting a seed. Planning and design work is actually planting a permaculture seed in the minds of people. It is really exciting when you see it start to move out, and it starts to work in that process that permaculture calls stacking. Think about the community as a stacked environment. You have got those people

who are really reaching like a vine, the movers and shakers, moving upwards. The others are just little rocks, they just sit there, but they see everything. There are those who flit through, you know, people who appear and disappear in a community, but they have a profound influence. So let's use them as permaculture designers, to advantage. Let's use this understanding of diversity and variety.

Can you feel the power that is in this room now? We all decided to bring some positive change. Opening doors, to me, means 'broadening.' You can't really change things unless people have broad minds. The power of words: it's what we use every day, our communication. It's what will heal the planet, or damage it, because it is coming from our minds and our hearts.

The work we are doing with communities is like that, working on specific issues to do with communities, but they manifest as action voicing. Sometimes we are not actually voicing what our concerns are. As I said at the beginning, some people don't actually say anything. We encourage them to come out, and if they don't say anything, to write it, or act it out. In doing this, when they identify the issues they've got to deal with, they start finding their sides of the issues and it becomes a challenge. A challenge actually brings people together. How many times, through adversity, do our communities work together? They do amazing things. I'm surprised how often there seems to be no hope at all, and people pull through. I find myself crying when I see people survive things or work together, and you find out later that they never talk to each other. It's just this one time, there's this hope, they come together. We're at that point right now on this planet, where we have to take up the challenge of the issues that are facing us.

What we have to do to get back in contact with the earth, if we are going to renew the earth, we have to understand it, get our fingers back into the dirt. Now, everybody has to do that, you don't just do it with the little group you are with, a group of conservationists, and then slam those over there that cut the trees down. Anywhere I have been involved where there's been any environmental action, it is at the end of that period, when you are working together, that the change happens. And it doesn't happen until you are all part of that change. There is a certain amount of people who make that critical mass that you need. It is really exciting, that's what's happening. The community has been working here in the southwest, at Balingup. A small group of people worked together to influence quite a large process, the Cape-to-Cape strategy, This is a major strategy from Cape Leeuwin to Cape Naturaliste, which makes up a sub-region and is now looking to provide these basic guidelines, based on a vision of the future of protecting that coastline and promoting sense of community and caring for the earth. There are actually words in there like sustainable economic development, protect the earth, developing a sense of community. They are permaculture words to me. This is a document coming out of government, it is a document of the people, created locally along with people representing the Ministry for Planning and the Department of Agriculture. They have all got their hands in the dirt together. The key elements in the policy are about settlement, cultural heritage and resources and protecting these things. The strategy has actually set up a settlement hierarchy. This is like the work I have done with Robyn Francis in developing an approach to rural settlement, where we have clusters which then protect a wider area around, whether forest or agricultural land. This is just another example where these things are actually happening in

government now. It's happening from the people up, and it's happening from the top down. And that's the approach we need to do.

Bill was talking this morning about agriculture becoming a monoculture which has moved across the landscape and doesn't relate to the people. So we need to bring food back into the community. Urban farming is critical. The city farms you visit here, or wherever you live in the world, are part of that movement. The backyards are critical to the future. Let's not always take on the big picture; you should realise there is a lot of work we can do to protect the earth with just the small things we are doing every day. I want us to think about that while we are here at this conference. Are we permaculturists? Are we bringing change, or are we part of the process of decay? It starts with us and then we build outwards into the rest of the community.

The other thing I wanted to say was about visioning. Some people think visioning is quite an esoteric experience. But it's real. If we create a vision of something we want, we put it into words that other people can understand, we actually then have a common goal. Once people start to understand they have a common goal, then they lose some of those pretences and they become more open-minded. They recognise there are different ways of achieving the goal. And that goal may mean different things to different people. And that's OK.

With that process, you need to find a way to get from visions to actions. Here's the issue, turn it into a challenge, find some solutions. They can go anywhere, that's what we're doing. That's a process of logic. Visioning is actually going out there and understanding what you can manifest, then stepping back into the present and then working towards that. Everybody relates to that? How many people do it? I don't do it...very often.

We have got to go back to that process to get things done, go through it step by step, and we need to make sure we've got performance indicators there. For example, greenhouse gases. To reduce greenhouse gases we have to know why and how we are doing it, how to make sure we don't do it, and we have to know some indicator of what level we are at now so we can see if we are actually improving. There may be something you are putting in place that isn't actually working.

Changing the consciousness of the world, that's the most important thing to do. If you are going to change consumerism and dependence, people have to understand that they don't have to be dependent, that they have their own power. Like they were saying this morning, they have got the land out there to do the farming they need to do, they have the traditions they can follow through to teach. It starts off with the vision, not with the issues. But you have to explore the issues first and convert them into some challenge. Because the challenge brings people together. And when it is a challenge, people look for solutions. Actually, it's a lot of fun – these workshops we do can be a lot of fun. Sometimes it seems quite negative and fearful, people really start to enjoy looking at it, and at the end of the period they might work on a vision, something they might work towards together. Now they can go back to their own lives but they are always touched by that. They are never the same.

Here is a more corporate approach, something I have been using with governments, but the basics are exactly the same. Some vision or mission statement, a corporate

direction, whether it's a large company or a government agency or a community, a sustainable present and future – let's not always project out there – what about right now? It's easy to put off things rather than working on them right now. We need some universal principles, and they are the things we were talking about earlier. They are things that everybody wants to happen – love, equity; I don't think there are any people who don't want that, but we just don't know how to go about doing it. We are not used to sharing. From that we can work out some objectives and strategies to get there. The thing we haven't got – we, as permaculturists, know this – we haven't got case studies. So let's start using a bit of logic, then, and go through the intellectual process and actually start documenting things and put them up as examples. We need models. Over here there are tools: there are a lot of ways we can bring about those changes. They already exist in the community; we just have to find them and use those tools. Finally, we need some sort of performance measures or indicators to see if we are actually achieving that or not.

Take supermarkets: you have this vision, shared by that supermarket. We then have to find a model to show what we can do to that supermarket. Until we can do that, the supermarket will always exist. But if you can show a supermarket that has been converted to a different approach, which fits into the community, provides healthy food grown by people in their backyards, and provides extra income incentive to those people, then we can start using it. Then the tools become available. You can actually get regulatory change, if you want to, that allows people to grow food and allows them to sell it in the supermarket. It seem like a closed door because we think regulations and policies are things of government, and not of us. But we actually make those things: they are our law. They are the things that we have passed down. It's not oral any more – it's written. A lot of the laws of our country are good laws, but we have allowed them to be interpreted by a few, rather than by our communities. So, look at your local plans, your local strategies. Seek to influence them. Get a group of people together to do it. You have probably all been through this before, I'm not telling you anything new; I'm just reminding you that you are now leaders in this regard. And if you haven't done it, then you need to link with people who have. But we need to broaden that now to include a wide range of people in the community.

These are the four key elements for northern NSW to bring about a sustainable future. They will link with all the plans produced by local government, State government agencies and by local communities that are working towards a future. It's pretty powerful – this is permaculture, to me -protecting what we have got left of our existing ecosystems, agricultural land and amenities, making the area attractive – that's that sense of place, of belonging. Repair and regeneration: there's a wealth of work done there, a lot of industries developing around that. A lot of business opportunities now exist through appropriate economic development, to repair and regenerate. Redesigning things that aren't working. Using new designs, like composting toilets, permaculture gardens rather than a monoculture.

Finally, renewal. This whole renewal process of bringing back the nature of who we are, our place. These again are policies that are going to develop. They are being developed right now for a major region of Australia which has a population of about 350,000 people. In world terms, that may not be great, but for Australia it is quite significant. There is change happening, and I feel really excited about it. And I feel

positive about it. I would like you to think about how you can participate in this, if you aren't already. If you are, just keep going. Don't feel at times that you are going to burn out. There are a lot of people who can help you, but you have got to find them. And they are not going to be the people you think – they may be people you have never worked with before.

The issues given to us, the challenge, in northern NSW, were about the fact that rural residential development was sprawling out across the landscape and damaging the environment. It was splitting up communities; people weren't congregating in villages and communities any more. So we looked at it and said, some of the hierarchies that are in Europe and the Pacific, in traditional societies, seem to work well, where people can go in their own place and feel comfortable in their own village or their own town, and the services are there that they want. So we recommended that we go with that settlement hierarchy.

The second thing that we suggested was catchment planning. When you live in a village or hamlet, you need to know that you actually link into some place in the environment, that you are a part of a sub-region, a district, or a precinct, and that your own property fits into some context. Permaculture has been focused a lot on the individual properties. What I am asking you to do is link yourselves together, and see that you have got your grand permaculture plan for the world. It's not that hard. It can be done in a region; if it's influencing regions already in Australia, I'm sure it's going to be influencing the world in more ways than one. Not just in terms of the individual property level, but in terms of major planning, national planning.

In terms of this process, in Western Australia, in the last 12 months, Balingup leads the way Balingup is a small community of 300 people; this is a major news item in a state-wide newspaper about cluster development. So it's real, it's happening. This came out of permaculture designers getting together and influencing something at a regional level.

The Cape-to-Cape strategy sets up settlement areas where determined populations will fit into those areas. What they are doing is saying that around the settlements are conservation areas, major forest ecosystems, that will be protected. Agricultural lands that are valuable that were used purely as commodities, will go back and become highly valuable to the community for manifesting products that people want.

I'm suggesting to you that by getting involved in these planning processes, using permaculture, we can actually bring about major changes and shifts in consciousness. The exciting thing to us as permaculture designers is that if this is happening at a regional level and a state level and a national level, how much easier is it to convey at a local level. So, it's about changing the world from the bottom up and the top down. Don't think it is always just grass roots. There are people at high levels that we can influence and bring that change down, and it can happen very quickly.

We are no longer inheriting the earth from our parents; we are borrowing it from our children. It's time to do a lot of work.

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