

Northeast Permaculture and Beyond: An Organizational Vision

By Ethan C. Roland, AppleSeed Permaculture, January 25th 2006

Objectives + Introduction:

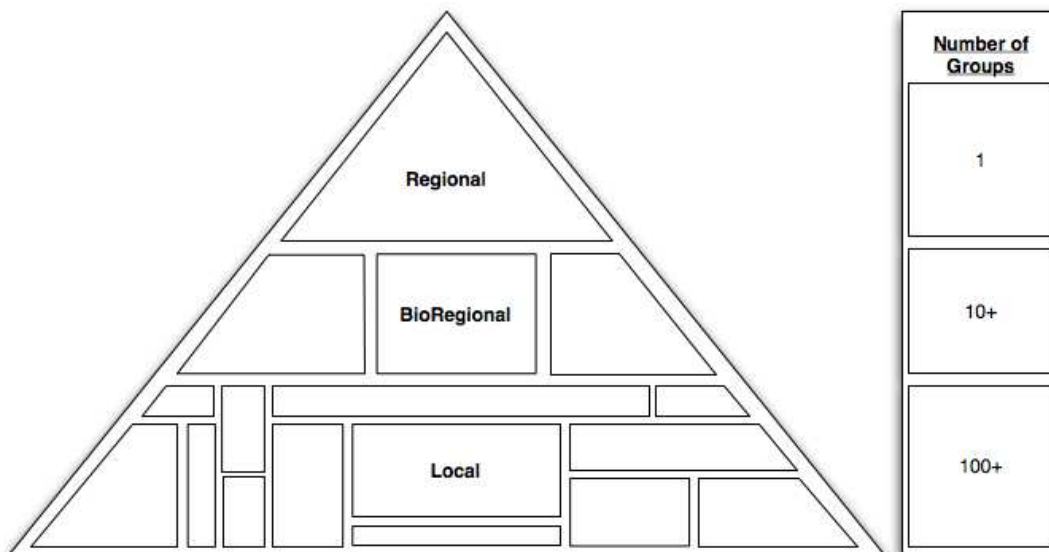
This document presents a possible organizational model for groups, projects, and people involved in living/teaching/learning the ideas of Permaculture Design. It uses the Northeastern United States as an example, but is applicable to any geographical area in the world. The organizational structure was inspired by Geoff Lawton of the Permaculture Research Institute during a Permaculture Design Course in the Hudson River Valley of Upstate New York. After presenting these ideas to a gathering of Permaculture folks in Northern Massachusetts in mid-January 2006, I was asked to formalize and distribute them to the wider Permaculture Community. I welcome suggestions/feedback on these ideas; see my contact info at the end of the document.

Multi-Tiered Organizational Structure

For us to be effective as Permaculturalists, we must be coherent in our communication and organization. But, we must also maintain the independent and decentralized spirit in which Permaculture was conceived. This model presents five tiers of organizational structure, focusing on the first three: Local, BioRegional, Regional, (Continental, and Global). Groups at each level maintain their independence; the higher levels of organization simply provide us with a way to communicate and cross-pollinate on a larger scale.

Visualized like a traditional food web, we will find the most activity at the base—at the local level. Following the concept of Zoning, activities closest to home will receive the majority of our time and energy. I love meeting and working with Permaculturally-minded folks from all over the continent, but I am also aware of the time and resources it consumed by all modes of travel. The reality is that my actions (and our efforts) will be more sustainable if we focus our day-to-day energy in our local communities.

Regional Permaculture Model

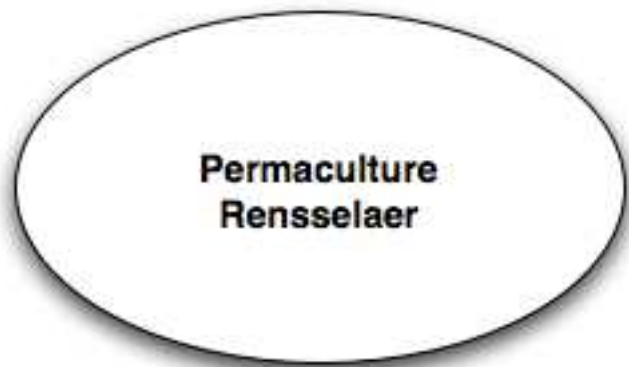


Local Groups

Permaculture, as the most comprehensive and holistic system for sustainable living , becomes interesting to more and more people every day. It steps past the ‘hippy’ stereotype and engages all citizens of planet earth, who are beginning to realize the need to live in harmony with nature. Last week I put an ad in my local paper that read, “Come to the first meeting of a community group interested in sustainable living through small-scale agriculture and cottage industry”. Ten people showed up! They had never heard of ‘Permaculture’, but were totally excited to find so many people in their own community who wanted to move towards local self-sufficiency. We will meet once a month in our local library, with some additional workshops and get-togethers organized around teaching and implementing the ideas of Permaculture in our local community.

We call the group Permaculture Rensselaer, because Rensselaer is the name of our county. We did not choose some trendy or abstract name... We want to present ourselves as we are: Normal people, citizens of our town, folks who live and vote in Rensselaer county.

This simple choice of name unites us with the local community and the local government. Our first meeting drew a huge variety of people from our area... When it comes to asking our local government for something (like permission to build a composting toilet, or use a graywater system), our argument becomes stronger because we ARE the local community.



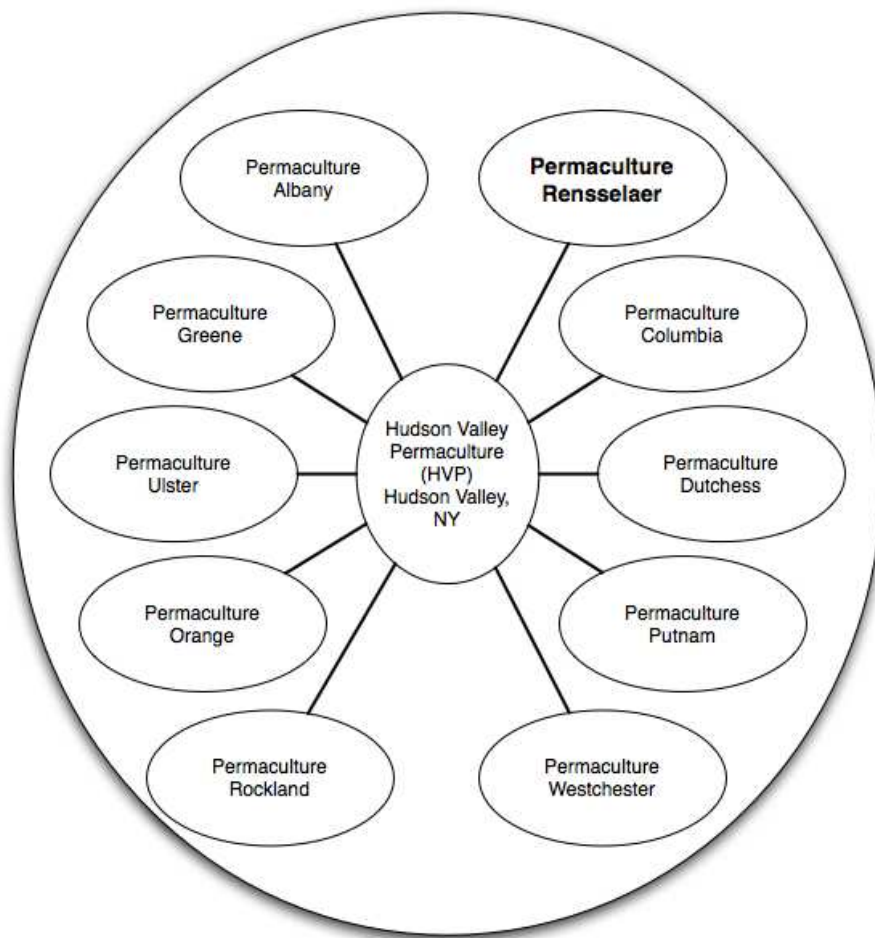
Finally, as more groups spring up in our BioRegion, we will all be recognized as part of a greater organization. Looking up ‘Permaculture’ in the phone book will yield a list of all the Local groups: Permaculture Rensselaer, Permaculture Columbia, Permaculture Ulster, Permaculture Dutchess... All counties in our BioRegion, the Hudson River Valley.

BioRegional Groups

But Permaculture Rensselaer is not alone. This small Local group is part of a larger organization, a mutual-aid network called Hudson Valley Permaculture. This group, composed of the 10 counties on either side of the Hudson River from Albany in the north to New York City in the south, roughly defines our BioRegion.

A few times a year, gatherings will be organized at a centralized location to bring the smaller Local groups together. We will meet each other, relax, share ideas, stories, successes, failures, and focalize all of our energy into a day of work on the hosting property. We will give workshops, share news from the Local groups, and coordinate future events/activities. In the following figure we see Permaculture Rensselaer as one node in the larger BioRegional group:

Hudson Valley Permaculture

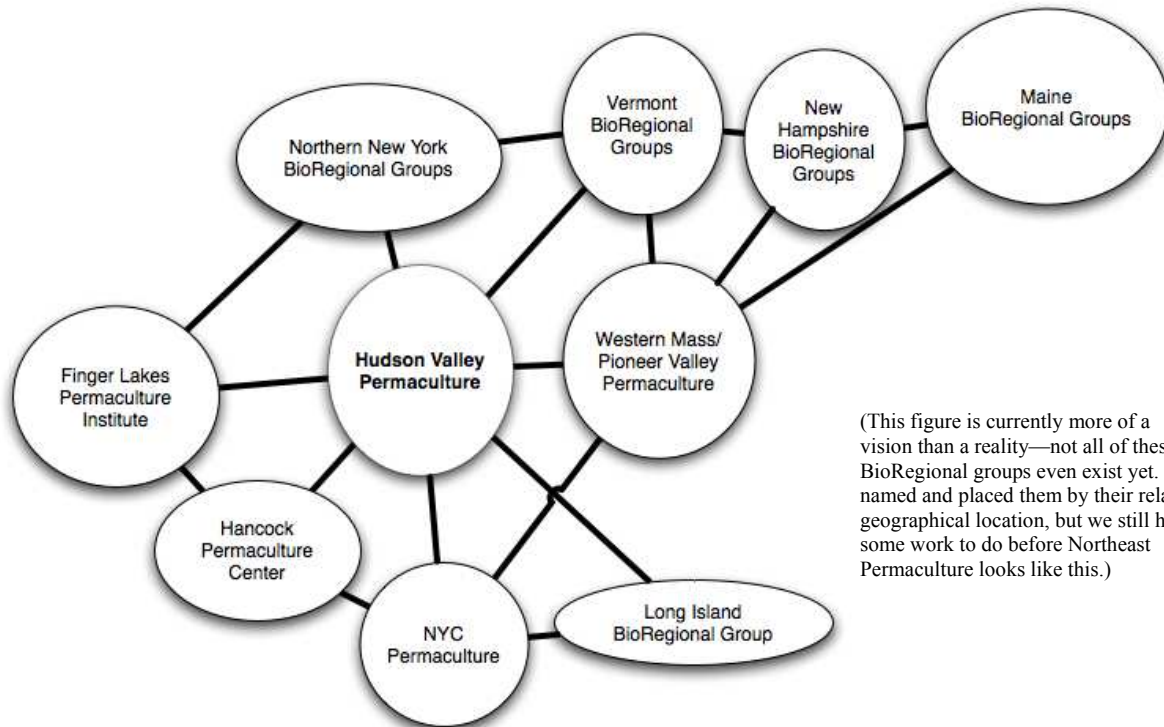


For the beginning stages, Hudson Valley Permaculture has been meeting monthly, more like a Local group. But after 3 months we are already overflowing—50 people showed up at the last meeting, pushing us to change the venue. The next step is to begin spreading out the energy, establishing and filling up the other local Permaculture groups. Redirecting our time and energy to Local groups will help in many ways: We will consume less resources to get to our meetings, we will excite more Permaculture interest in our local communities, and we might (gulp!) end up getting to know our neighbors.

Regional Groups

Next up in the organizational model is the Regional level. Much like each Local group is part of a larger BioRegional group, each BioRegional group is part of a larger Regional group. In this case, Hudson Valley Permaculture is part of the Northeast Permaculture Network:

Northeast Permaculture Network



(This figure is currently more of a vision than a reality—not all of these BioRegional groups even exist yet. I've named and placed them by their relative geographical location, but we still have some work to do before Northeast Permaculture looks like this.)

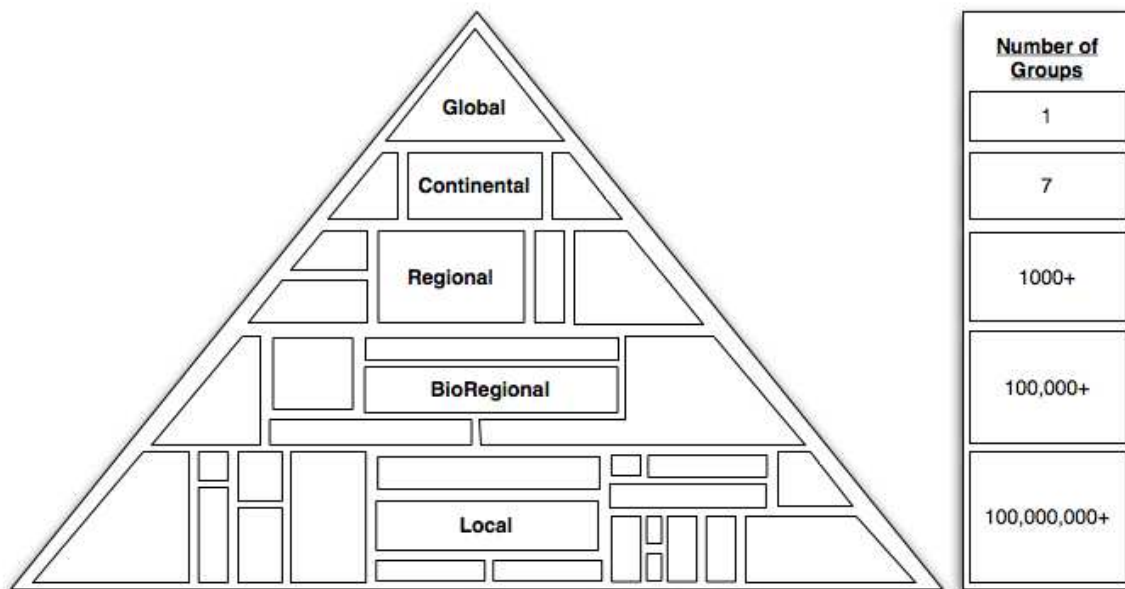
Just like the BioRegional level, our Regional group will gather forces once or twice a year, to cross-pollinate ideas and energy from all over the Northeast. Each of the BioRegional groups in turn are drawing people from their local groups, so that Regional gatherings are truly collection of people who are living Permaculture in their own local communities.

Continental and Global Groups

Understanding that organizing on a continental or global scale is a monumental and challenging task, I think that this model could conceivably be applied to other Regions and BioRegions. It is also important to note the exciting amount of coordination already happening worldwide. The past year (2005) saw gatherings at both the continental scale (Continental BioRegional Congress in North Carolina, USA) and the global scale (7th International Permaculture Convergence in Croatia). Another international gathering is planned for the summer of 2007 in Brazil. These excellent developments should be complemented with our efforts on the local level, to build a network that is as solid at the base as it is powerful at the top.

Re-visualizing the first figure to a global scale, we get:

Global Permaculture Model



Conclusions + Directions

The real point of this model is that we should be focusing our energies on the local scale. Instead of driving an hour and a half to talk about Permaculture, it would be great if I could just hop on my bike and ride into town for the local group meeting. One lesson we learn quickly through Zoning is that if we concentrate our effort on projects far from home, we spend a lot of time walking and not enough time doing.

We must begin working locally. But keeping a picture of the larger network in our minds will make us more coordinated, more communicative, and more effective. So let's all start putting ads in the paper and organizing local meetings—and looking forward to the party at the next gathering!

I'm pumped to get some feedback on these thoughts and this model; feel free to contact me: eroland@gmail.com; +1-518-610-1375; or online at www.appleseedpermaculture.com
Also, check out the Resrouces Page below for more info on Northeastern Permaculture...

Resources

Northeastern Permaculture Wikispace: www.northeasternpermaculture.wikispaces.com

Hudson Valley Permaculture (NY): www.hudsonvalleypermaculture.org

Finger Lakes Permaculture Institute (NY): www.flpci.org

Hancock Permaculture Center (NY): www.hancockpermaculture.org

D Acres Organic Farm and Educational Homestead (NH): www.dacres.org

Green Mountain Permaculture (VT): www.greenmountainpermaculture.com

Edible Forest Gardens: www.edibleforestgardens.com