HOW RE-CONNECTING WITH NATURE BEGINS IN THE BACKYARD

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Background/Context

- Urbanization and other factors such as technology make it so that most people do not interact or engage with the environment in their everyday life.
- This creates a sense of a discrete distinction between human and ecological systems.
- This disconnection negatively impacts human health, environmental health, and the ability of humans to live in harmony with the environment.
- A possible solution is offered in permaculture, a movement defined by its philosophy of "earth care, people care and fair share" and based on implementing design principles that mirror patterns found in natural ecosystems.

Research Question

What are the motivations and benefits to engaging in home-scale ecological design projects?

Fig. 1: Building a natural water feature for an HGO client

Internship/Methods

My daily responsibilities with HGO included assisting with various installation, maintenance, and design projects:

- natural landscape design (Fig. 1)
- food gardens
- integrated plant/animal systems
- water systems (irrigation, RainWise systems, etc.)

I conducted interviews with 11 past HGO clients to learn more about:

- perspectives and experiences with permaculture/home gardening/land design
- the values motivating them
- what they need from HGO in order to realize their goals
- overall benefits/positive outcomes

Results

Thematic analysis of the interview responses showed the following common themes (categories and connections shown in Fig. 2):

Interviewees' motivations, goals and values (visually represented in Fig. 3):

Personal well-being – includes functionality and aesthetics; for example, being able to grow food, having a place to relax outside, and creating visually beautiful spaces.

Sense of community – driven by a sense of place or a feeling of social responsibility; for example, connecting with like-minded people, having a space to gather outside, and feeling pride of ownership for their property.

Environmental responsibility - desire to be more sustainable and to care for the land. Examples include using native plants, focusing on renewing soil nutrients, reducing erosion, and considering individual actions within a larger ecological context.

Desire to **balance** function and beauty; personal and environmental concerns; costs and benefits.

Benefits and new things learned:

- Varied responses, but usually had to do with how their spaces suited their unique needs and aligned with their guiding values
- Spending more time in nature, more hands-on engagement with the ecosystem, learning about species and how they interact
- Increased connection to the environment and sense of place

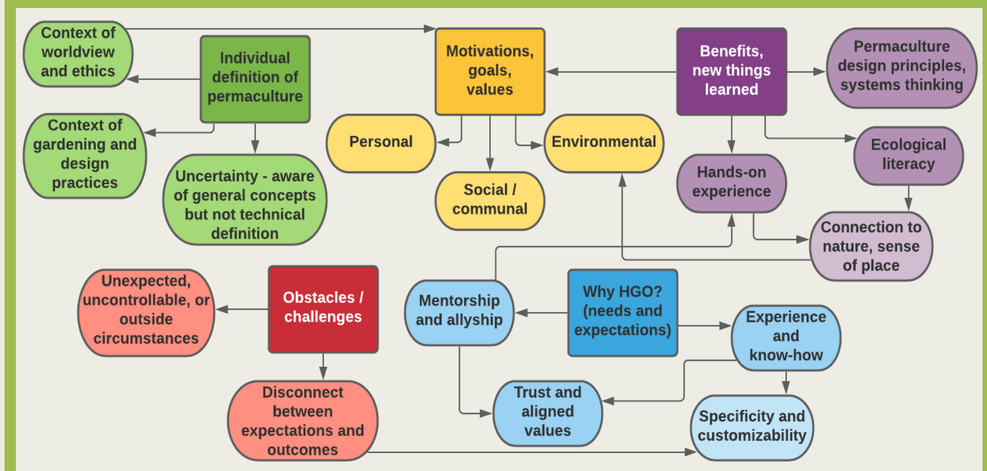

Fig. 2: Mental map of common trends across interview responses in each category. Arrows show thematic connections and which aspects likely impact each other.

Fig. 3: Word cloud based on interviewee motivations

Broader Significance

The overall variety in motivations highlights the need for **individualized paths towards connecting with the environment**, customizable to the unique situation of both the people and their land. This exemplifies the value of small-scale home permaculture projects, which can take many forms and are inherently personalized to work with the needs and wants of the involved human systems and ecosystems.

- Permaculture practices and related ecological design projects **benefit people** via the tangible benefits of improved outdoor spaces as well as physical and psychological health benefits;
- they **benefit the environment** via use of sustainable land management methods and increased awareness of how our actions affect the ecosystem;
- they **benefit the connection between people and the environment**. Interaction with nature is incorporated more into daily aspects of people's everyday behaviors and lifestyles.
- Having a strong personal connection to the ecosystem leads to more environmentally conscious actions.

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