TWENTY PRINCIPLES OF ECORESILIENCE: Personal and Cultural Adaptation to a Changed Planet

By Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist

We would like to offer a blueprint for how to strengthen communities as climate change intensifies.

A dictionary definition of resilience refers to the capacity of individuals, communities, and ecosystems to respond and adapt to disturbance. Building on this, ecoresilience includes creative adaptation and response to environmental disturbance and trauma, with global warming a pre-eminent and growing example.

The ongoing unraveling of every sector of our society and each ecosystem on the planet can feel overwhelming. With so many of our life support systems and those of countless other species coming apart, how can we go about healing the mess we've created? And how much can any one person or small group do in the face of a Perfect Storm of crises?

This huge project that theologian Thomas Berry called the "Great Work" of our time can sometimes feel too big, too overwhelming. So in order to take on our personal role in the shift towards a life-sustaining society, we also need to do the inner work of finding our own personal and local calling within this larger global project. No one person or group can successfully manage trying to fix it all.

And we must also discover the joy, excitement, and peace of mind that come from doing our part in this great adventure, surrounded by friends who share our passion and commitment to the restoration of life and health on our home planet.

TWENTY PRINCIPLES FOR CULTURAL ECORESILIENCE

1. Recognize Nature as Our Guide–Know and align with the movements and patterns of the natural world.

Contrary to our delusions of grandeur, in the long run humans are not actually in charge of this planet, nor can we indefinitely force it to fit our own selfish, short-sighted goals. To continue to survive as a species, we need to be in harmony with the rest of nature instead of fighting against it. Simply asking "What Would Nature Do?" or "How Would Nature Do This?" before taking any actions can help us begin to move in the right direction.

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Fungus, food, drink.

2.Respect the Wild Around and Within Us–Preserve greenspace and wild places–including in our hearts.

This basic principle seems obvious to most environmentalists, and it's critically important for true resilience that urban populations fully understand that nearby and distant less-human-controlled places—land and water—determine our fate. However, these places don't need to exclude humans. In fact places that we see as "wilderness" often diminish in the absence of the indigenous human caregivers integral to their ecosystem. We also need to understand that wild places and their inhabitants aren't here just to serve humans and that the rest of nature has intrinsic rights we ignore at our peril.

3. Come Home to Where You Live–Return to earthly reality in acts of deep homecoming.

To be truly resilient we need to leave behind the modern "nowhere and everywhere" fantasy

bubble fostered by the media, cyber-communications, and cheap, fossil-fueled travel. We can then relocalize and re-emplace our lives, reorienting to actual earth time and space. The disconnection from our own local, bioregional life-support systems (and the habitats of our local animal and plant siblings) allows us to thoughtlessly damage specific earthplaces. We can rediscover the deep pleasure of emplacement as we relearn the historical, geographical, biological, and even geological context of where we live and share it with our children and grandchildren. Finding or rediscovering a beloved place and truly committing ourselves to the welfare of its watersheds, land, air, animals, plants, and people is one of the most exciting life paths we can undertake.

4. Build Heartsteads–Create wisdom circles and gather around a common purpose.

We can organize local change efforts with people who resonate with a shared vision, goal, task, or dream of community that gives its members a sense of meaning, purpose, and agency. For example, a Voluntary Simplicity Circle that met every two weeks in Santa Barbara, California for 10 years forged deep bonds between participants and created support for making the kinds of changes each member wanted in their personal and activist lives.

5. Replace Monoculture with Polyculture–Welcome in who and what has been silenced or excluded.

Nature abhors a monoculture! We need merely observe a cleared piece of open ground to see how nature deals with a vacuum: it is soon full of a wide variety of plants and animals. And to limit a field to one species of plant involves constant "weeding" as we vainly try to remove the polyculture that wants to move in. We can learn from this rule of nature as we create our heartsteads, circles, and other human groups, opening our arms to all, even those our society might consider "weeds" or marginal. There can be no communal, political, or environmental revitalization without a renewal of truly inclusive community and social/environmental justice. This is no easy matter, of course, and we need a deep exploration of our various intersectionalities to understand where change needs to happen in our lives. It is especially important for those with "privilege" of any kind—European-origin, wealth, gender, sexual orientation, good health, etc.—to humbly undertake the hard work of facing how these advantages may blind us to the suffering of others—human or otherwise. Decolonization is a lifelong process.

6. Start Small and Learn as We Go–Make small initial interventions coupled with constant assessment.

This principle, articulated by permaculturist David Holmgren as "Use Small and Slow Solutions," guides us to start with least-harmful, low-tech, simpler, and time-proven solutions and reserve extreme measures for truly desperate situations. This approach is counterintuitive for many in modern industrial cultures as we are brought up to admire Big Everything. Forgetting that we live on a relatively small planet with limited resources in a backwater of a huge universe, we don't realize that being a giant makes us ever more vulnerable. Resilience demands that we begin to think small and make nimble, strategic changes.

7. Broaden Your Focus from Linear to Systemic–Shift your attention from simple causes to complex interactions.

Systems and Complexity Theory teach us that life is much more complicated than simple pushes and pulls, causes and effects. Living systems are characterized not only by their elements but by the interactions between elements. It is necessary to think the way nature does: in the round, focusing more on process and interaction than on content and element.

8. Simplify, Decentralize, Interlink–Keep an appropriate scale.

Starting small (Principle #6) reminds us of the importance of not growing beyond nature's limits. Poorly designed overcomplexity governed by giant centralized monocultures is the bane of modern industrial society and leaves us vulnerable to collapse. Think of the Titanic, the giant ship "too big to fail" that ended up on the bottom of the ocean. Simpler systems are often more robust—and can be interlinked into a highly resilient, interconnected web of new, earth-based cultures.

9. Act Local, Share Global–Be helpful well beyond your community.

Rebuilding local community and relocalizing the basics of life—food, companionship, building materials, medicine, entertainment, work, our support systems, the economy, and more—is a basic principle of sustainability. But no community can be fully self-sufficient, especially in a world in which humanity has long been a planetary species. Centuries before modern globalization taught us its cruel lessons of displacement and irresponsibility, pockets and cultures of humanity spread information and trade networks wherever we lived, in conditions pleasant or inhospitable. The counter to a *Road Warrior* post-collapse chaos of "all against all," as Hobbes put it long ago, is for groups and communities to pool resources, share knowledge, build kinship webs, and form strong alliances based on common needs.

10. Rely on Intelligent Redundancy–Set up backup plans and alternative resources.

Or as they say in the computer world: back up, back up, back up! The secret of ecoresilience, whether physical or cultural, is having multiple backups, fallbacks, and interconnections.

South Beach Community Garden.

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11. Create Wise Governance–Reimagine community leadership developmentally.

This is probably the most difficult cultural ecoresilience principle of all, perhaps because women and men have been pondering "right governance" for millennia without taking developmental maturity into account. For our era and critical situation, we need to rely on the inclusive practices of council, restorative justice, egalitarian power-sharing, and peaceful conflict resolution to resolve inevitable differences—while also encouraging natural leadership. Inspired by indigenous wisdom, we need to create initiatory procedures through which leaders must be tested to guarantee their responsibility, self-reflexivity, wisdom, courage, and emotional maturity.

12. Decommodify Life–Redesign the economy.

To create wise and equitable governance, we must take back control of community leadership from those who benefit most from today's corrupt global economy. The word economy comes from the Greek "oikos" (home) and means management of the household. But as Senator Gaylord Nelson famously remarked, "The economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment." Our society's privileging of the money economy over everything else has gotten us into the mess we're in: we have turned almost everything, including human beings and the rest of nature, into a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace for profit, with disastrous results.

13. Adopt an Ethos of Care–Make sure everyone is embraced.

Another part of reinventing community governance involves revisioning local and global care systems. We need to take a deep look at our crumbling family and community support networks to see how they can be creatively redesigned for maximum physical and mental well-being for all—including "all our relations."

14. Prepare Crisis and Trauma Teams–Develop emergency readiness and train first responders.

Rapidly degenerating global conditions demand robust and resilient crisis preparation and backup plans. We need the redundancy mentioned above: multiple ways to perform each function. And as part of our redesign of community governance, we need to reinvent emergency preparation and community protection practices, rethinking the deep meaning of true "security" philosophically and realistically, while not ignoring potential threats from flood, drought, fire, toxins, pandemics, criminal behavior—or even military attacks. We need to train psychologically-savvy, flexible, resilient, and redundant first responder trauma and ecoresilience teams to help the community survive proliferating extreme weather and economic disruption events as well as traumatic social events resulting from the unraveling or collapse of our culture.

Rainbow Gathering trading circle.

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15. Design for Replenishment–Build nothing that does not enrich the natural world and support future generations.

As William McDonough and Michael Braungart observe in their excellent book *Cradle to Cradle*, we have long been entranced by industries and products that ravage and pollute. Merely making them less destructive, while useful in the short run, remains within the alienating worldview that gave rise to them. The same might be said for cultural structures like overlarge cities, megacorporations, and even nations. Instead, we can design for right-sized personal and ecological health, productivity, and abundance. What we make can be good for the natural world of which we are a living expression.

For true ecoresilience in the 21st Century we need to combine traditional and contemporary knowledge and practice.

16. Combine Old Knowledge with New–Integrate the deep wisdom of the past with the smartest and most nature-friendly knowledge and practices of our era.

For true ecoresilience in the 21st Century we need to combine traditional and contemporary knowledge and practice. This includes educating our next generations with the understanding and practical/cultural skills needed to survive and thrive in very different conditions from the ones we now live in—instead of preparing them for a world that is rapidly passing away. Keepers of knowledge, tradition, and resources can help multiply, back up, diversify, and safeguard what the community depends on to survive and flourish.

17. Develop a Deep Appreciation and Understanding of Human Culture–Preserve, learn from, and expand the humanities.

In addition to practical skills, each person needs access to the stories that provide individual and collective guidance and call most deeply to our hearts, minds, and souls. From humanity's earliest days, gathering around the fire to hear tales has been basic to our species. This kind of learning finds nourishment in the tales and lore of every human culture, including

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history, philosophy, folkways, and the stories we have told and continue to tell about our life on this planet. The humanities engage us in discussions about primary values, about what matters most in life, and about paths that lead to fruition and wholeness and those we should not take. This is how we learn about human nature and what it needs, including justice, beauty, and purpose.

18. Slow Down and Reflect Deeply–Reground ourselves so we can stay sane during "The Long Emergency."

When we're in an extreme situation and are working towards quick individual or collective behavior change "or else," we need to pace ourselves, be especially gentle and patient with our progress, and tend the inner psychospiritual ecosystem with ongoing reflective practices, both personal and collective. There are many ways to do this. Artful community guides will be able to help us individually and collectively keep our spirits and positive energy up as we confront the challenges and make the necessary changes in how we live. This is a challenging and delicate endeavor, as we need to find a balance between "doom and gloom" and unrealistic escapist fantasy: the place where an accurate assessment of our situation is accompanied by enjoyment and gratitude for the richness of nature and all our relationships.

19. Explore Reverent Practices–Cultivate awe and appreciation of the more-than-human.

By exploring a wide variety of possibilities, we can discover and benefit from a consciousness-raising practice of our choosing. Many practices increase the feeling of awe and love for the world and its cosmic frame. Let us not hesitate to call such activities "spiritual" if we choose, although "reverent" might be an alternative for some.

20. Put Arts at the Heart–Celebrate, create, and ceremonialize.

Too many environmentalists are caught up in gloom, fear, and panic. While it's true that the situation is critical and life-threatening and we must yell "Fire!" to wake up our communities, it's also a psychological fact that most people can't effectively process unremitting traumatic information and soon numb out and resist such messages. As part of keeping our community's spirits up during Transition, we can foster and integrate play, festival, dance, music, drama, and all the arts to nurture the cultural life of the community, share people's rites of passage through the human lifespan, enjoy the experience of being together, and celebrate appreciative ties to Earth and the seasons. As we become more effective ecoresilience leaders and transition guides we learn to help ourselves and others balance the bad news with these simple joys of life: good food, music, inspiring stories, life-saving humor, beautiful art, joyful dance, kind friends, and exciting, earth-enhancing projects.

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