

Positive Footprints
by Susan Mason-Bouterse

Over 120 people gathered in Celo, NC on August 1-3 for the 15th annual Southeastern Permaculture Gathering. Participants ranged from age 2 1/2 to 91 and traveled from as far away as New York and Florida. As people began arriving on Friday morning, tents started popping up in the ball field and in the surrounding woodlands. One of the organizers, Sam Ruark, described the gathering as “one part festival, one part nature retreat, one part conference, and one part family reunion – they all blend so beautifully together.”

The gathering was held at the Arthur Morgan School (AMS) campus, located in South Toe River valley of the mountains of western NC. Not only is the campus rural, peaceful and beautiful, but the mission and culture of the school are closely aligned with those of the gathering. The central aim of the boarding and day school is to help each student grow into a confident and responsible young person who is able to live in harmony with others. Students and staff learn together by living together – sharing work, play, study and decision making. Similarly, at the gathering, everyone participates in the work of setting up, cooking, cleaning, educating and taking care of each other and the land in a good way. Bill Whipple, another gathering organizer, defines permaculture as “the process of identifying and replicating natural patterns and systems to live in greater harmony on the planet.”

The Southeastern Permaculture Gathering is funded through registration fees, which include camping, programs and three magnificent meals a day. Scholarships and work-trades are also available. Generous food discounts and donations from French Broad Food Co-op, Firefly Farm, Mountain Farm, Camp Celo Farm, AMS Gardens, Patrick Battle, Falls Creek Trout Farm, West End Bakery, Blue Hill Farm, Morningland Dairy Farm, and from numerous attendees who brought fresh produce from their gardens, also helped to keep costs down and quality high. Usha Ruark, who organized the kitchen, said that “serving healthful, vital, consciously grown food, lovingly prepared, was the priority: over 95% of ingredients used were organic, and nearly all of the produce was local to western North Carolina.” Marc Williams, one of the guest chefs, shared the following: “Most Americans eat only around 30 types of plants per year; at Saturday night's meal alone, there were 46 different plants offered in the food – many wild and most from the land where the gathering was held or from the people in attendance at the gathering.”

The gathering utilizes a unique organizing format: Open Space Technology. This innovative conference planning tool encourages creativity and allows people to get what they want out of an event. Through Open Space Planning, held on Friday afternoon and again on Saturday morning, participants offered topics for the 30 different “Affinity Circles” to be held during the gathering. Many Affinity Circle facilitators were experts in their field who have been paid presenters at other events. At the gathering, however, no one is paid to speak or make a presentation, and anyone is welcome to lead an Affinity Circle. Attendees freely share their expertise, interests, questions, visions, knowledge, and energy. The following are some of this year's topics/ activities: Belly Dancing; Broom Making; Bee Keeping; Making Compost Tea; Solar Energy; Home Orchards; Raising Poultry; Matrilineal Possibilities; Plant Walk; Local and Organic Food Systems; Transition Culture; Planning for Saturday's Ritual; Flute Making; and Mushroom Walk.

The Permaculture Gathering creates a supportive community in which participants can connect and explore the myriad possibilities of creating a more sustainable world. The gathering seeks to leave a

positive footprint, not only through participants who leave more informed, inspired and empowered, but also through actually creating positive system changes at the site of the gathering. For example, this year an Affinity Circle installed a rain water catchment system, generously donated by Lindsay Monroe of Morganton, NC. This "hands-on" learning experience left AMS with a fully functioning 350 gallon system. Another Affinity Circle focused on using humanure toilets to compost the human waste generated over the weekend. So instead of soiling water with human waste, the gathering created compost, which builds fertile soil and keeps the water clean. (Americans flush down the toilet 5 billion gallons of purified drinking water per day. Humanure systems are low-tech, reduce water usage, process the poop in a way that is non-odorous, and at the end of 2 years, produce pathogen-free, fertile compost.)

An exciting development occurred at the closing ceremony on Sunday morning. Bob McGahey, a long time Celo community member, former AMS staff and board chair, now on the steering committee of NC Interfaith Power and Light, shared that he would like to hold a follow-up conference in summer 2009 to the Celo Summer Institute sessions held in the 1980's and early 2000's (recently they've focused on deep ecology). Bob shared experiencing a "leading" to host a conference on "Remnants": building a sustainable human community in the Southern Appalachians from the "remnant of the just" (Isaiah). The conference would focus on piecing together quilted remnants from the best practices of each era of human habitation in this area: the Cherokee hunter-gatherer, the European farmer, and appropriate technological remnants of the industrial age.

After the Sunday brunch feast, an impromptu music jam, the group cleaning effort to leave the grounds pristine, and a sweet closing circle, the participants broke camp, shared goodbyes and traveled their various routes home. Still echoing in their hearts and in the mountain air were verses sung during the Foot Washing & Song Sharing Affinity Circle that morning: "Down in my heart I've got that everlasting light/ It shines like the sun and radiates on everyone/ And the more that I've got, the more I've got to give/ It's the way that I live; it's what I'm living for..."