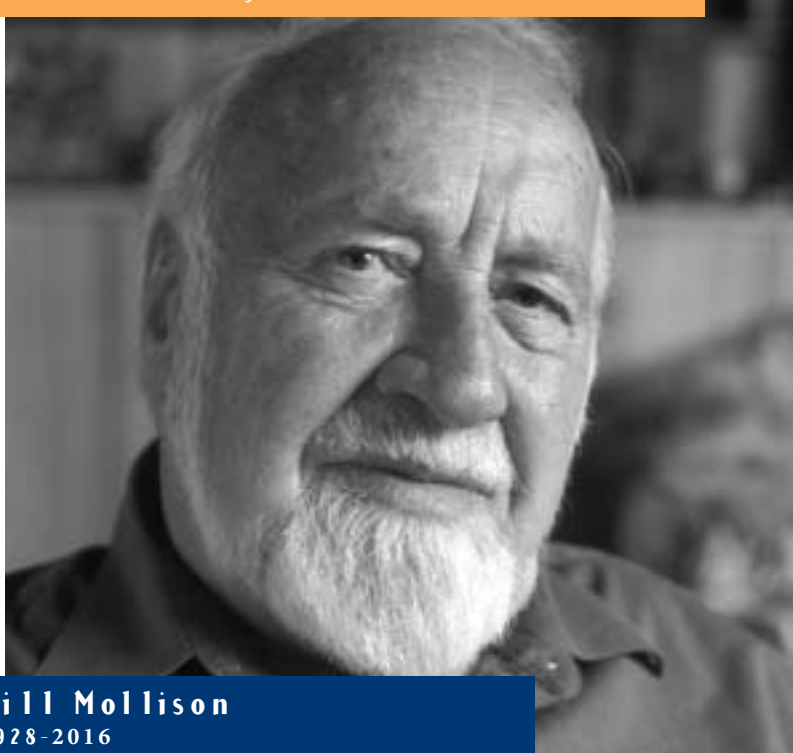


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Bill Mollison
1928-2016
Environmentalist, Founder of
Permaculture

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Bill Mollison

Director/Producer Rod Freedman

Executive Producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2003

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © NFSA

Also in Series 9: Betty Churcher, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Thomas Keneally, Bernard Smith, Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, Joan Winch

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SYNOPSIS

Bill Mollison has been vitally concerned about the environment for over 30 years, as a scientist, naturalist, teacher and campaigner.

He is the founder of permaculture, an innovative and extraordinarily influential strategy for environmental design. Its aim is to establish integrated, self-sustaining systems for agriculture and human settlement. Taught throughout the world, permaculture has been of enormous assistance to developing countries in particular as it focuses on empowering local communities and avoiding traditional bureaucracies.

This independent approach is not surprising, for Bill Mollison has always been a maverick. He grew up 'outside and solitary' in Stanley, Tasmania, leaving home in his teens to escape his mother's bullying. He spent most of his early working life in the bush or at sea, fishing and hunting for his livelihood and assisting in marine and wildlife research. Then, after more than a decade of study in environmental science and psychology, Bill began teaching at the University of Tasmania. It was after leaving academia in frustration that the idea of permaculture came to him. This is now the focus of his international teaching, consultancy and publishing work.

'Fury is what drives me, not love,' explains Bill. In this interview, he discusses his vision, his use of shock tactics and the tough upbringing that turned him into a fighter. A man of strong opinions who has been married five times, Bill believes he's never been proved wrong about 'anything with any meaning'. One thing is certain, this passionate and dedicated ecologist has served as an inspiration to many.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, SOSE/HSIE, Environmental Studies, Outdoor Education, Geography, Australian Studies, Community Planning, Design and Horticulture.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Family and Background

- Bill Mollison describes a childhood spent outdoors, a largely solitary time collecting shells and observing life in a little pond in his backyard. He speaks of Tasmania's fierce mothers, pushing their children outside, teaching them to be tough and self-sufficient: 'My theory is civilisation died when they let kids inside, and it was finally finished off when they let dogs in'. Write a paragraph comparing your childhood with what we learn of Bill's from this program. What do you think he would think of your lifestyle? Bill says his childhood experiences taught him to be stoic and to deal with pain: 'I can crack hardy'. What factors from your background have contributed to your personal traits today?
- Bill describes his mother as a bully: 'I hated her. I was really pleased when she died'. Bill says he decided early on in his life that no one was going to frighten him. Do you think this might have been in reaction to his mother's cruelty? What frightens you?
- The only thing Bill liked about his mother was that she deeply loved his father, who he describes as a good, kind man. During the Depression, Bill's father ran a factory, employing 26 people when he only really required six—he wanted the men to be able to feed their families. It's clear Bill still admires his father's generosity of spirit. Choose four words to describe each of your parents.

- Bill says his father is as alive to him today as the day he died. What does that tell us about their relationship and its importance to Bill? When his father died, Bill was 15-years-old. He said he showed no emotion; he pulled a blind down in his head to shut out the pain. Why do you think he might have reacted in this way?
- After his father died, Bill's mother forced him to leave school and find employment in a bakery, where he had to lift enormously heavy weights and work 18-hour days. He finally ran away from home, finding work on a shark boat. Apparently his mother yelled after him, 'You'll come crawling back in the gutter'. Why might his mother have been so mean? Imagine you are Bill's mother. Write a diary entry explaining your feelings when Bill leaves home.
- List six areas of work we see or hear Bill describe (e.g. bakery, fishing, rabbit-hunting, writing, university lecturer, CSIRO, museum). What skills would each of these lines of work require?
- Bill's childhood shell collection is now housed in the Hobart Museum. Are there any artefacts from your childhood that might be worth preserving?
- Bill was 28 when he married for the first time. The marriage ended after 18 years because of what he calls 'pseudo-incest'. He subsequently married another four times (he actually has to pause to add up his wives!). What sort of husband do you think Bill would be? What might be his strengths and weaknesses? Bill had five children by his first wife and one child by his fifth wife. What sort of father might he be?
- After his interrupted education, Bill went to night school and describes himself as 'hungry for learning'. He has shown a great capacity for hard work and determination. Given his passion for knowledge, why didn't Bill enjoy working at the University of Tasmania?
- Bill says: 'Fury is what drives me; not love of people, not love of the earth'. What is it that makes Bill furious?
- Essay topic: 'Bill Mollison is a hero'. Discuss.

Permaculture: A Design For Living

- Bill says we live on a planet in crisis. Do you agree? What are some of the problems facing our environment?
- How concerned are you about the environment? What are the key issues as you see them?
- What is an eco-system?
- Bill says: 'All my revelations have come from form'. What does this mean?
- Bill describes permaculture as a common sense, practical way to design your life. The entire system came to him in a moment of revelation. He chose the term because of its Latin roots: 'permanens', to persist indefinitely, and 'cultura', those activities that support human existence. Using the resources at the end of this guide, write a paragraph outlining the key features of permaculture. Can you find independent information assessing how influential it has been?
- How does permaculture differ from traditional agriculture?
- Bill used the media to promote permaculture—his delight in shocking audiences made him a marketable identity. What other qualities does Bill have that equip him to be a convincing spokesman?

- Bill sees permaculture's greatest success arising from its application in developing countries. He speaks of 'Robin Hooding around'—earning money lecturing in Europe and the USA so that he can then travel to countries such as India and Zimbabwe, imparting the principles of self-sufficiency inherent in permaculture—'You're looking at the world's biggest aid agency'. For Bill, it's about inspiring local communities to believe in their own abilities. He says the paternalistic attitude of the West, 'let's save them all', equates to its opposite position, 'let's wipe them all out'. Do you agree? Discuss the old adage: 'Teach a hungry man to fish and he'll never be hungry again, but give him a fish and he'll be hungry again tomorrow'. Research the work being conducted by an international aid agency in a developing country and present your findings to the class.

- A crucial component of permaculture is the idea of sustainability. Mollison wrote in 1978: 'Sustainable is defined as a system which over its lifetime produces energy equivalent to or in excess of what it consumes'. Give some concrete examples of how this principle of sustainability might be put into practice.

- What efforts could you make towards a sustainable future?

- Collect a recent newspaper article about an environmental issue. How might permaculture help to address the problem/s outlined?

- Find an article by another writer who champions environmental issues (e.g. Wendell Berry, David Suzuki). Make a synopsis of the writer's arguments and present this to the class.

- Bill says he's a teacher, not an expert. What is the difference?

- Bill says, 'The Indian ladies think I'm an Indian lady—and so I am'. What does he mean by this?

- The publishing arm of the Permaculture Institute is called Tagari, an Aboriginal word meaning 'those of us who are gathered here' or 'us mob'. Why might Bill have chosen an Aboriginal word for this venture?

- Bill is clearly satisfied with his achievements and the program ends with him reflecting on his life of adventure: 'I've done what I set out to do. Unless I go to the moon, what more can I do?' One imagines that Bill would think the whole notion of regret is futile, a sign of weakness. He also says he's never been proven wrong about anything significant. Do you think this mindset is unusual? Do you admire his clarity of purpose? Is it possible to be ambitious and modest? Do you think if Bill had a more moderate temperament, he might have achieved less?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Bill Mollison—Published Works

Bill Mollison, **Permaculture: A Designer's Manual**, Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, 1988

Bill Mollison, **Permaculture: A Practical Guide for a Sustainable Future**, Permaculture Resources, 1993

Bill Mollison, **Permaculture Academy Yearbook**, Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, 1993

Bill Mollison, **The Permaculture Book of Ferment and Human Nutrition**, Tagari Publications, 1993

Bill Mollison, **Permaculture Two: Practical Design for Town and Country in Permanent Agriculture**, Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, 1979

Bill Mollison, 'The Ways of a Barefoot Gardener' in Gina Lennox (ed), **In Search of Heroes**, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1998, pp. 238-303

Bill Mollison, **Travels in Dreams**, Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, 1996

Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, **Permaculture One: A Perennial Agricultural System For Human Settlements**, Tagari Publications, Maryborough, 1978

Bill Mollison and Reny Mia Slay, **Introduction to Permaculture**, Tagari Publications, Tyalgum, 2nd edition, 1994

Interviews

Alan Atkisson, 'Permaculture: Design For Living—An Interview With Bill Mollison' in **In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture**, No 28, Spring 1991, p. 50

Scott London, 'Permaculture: A Quiet Revolution—An Interview With Bill Mollison' in **HopeDance**, November-December 2001

Websites

ABC Online—Rural Legends: Bill Mollison
http://www.abc.net.au/site-archive/rural/legends/stories/4_1.htm

Appropriate Technology Transfer For Rural Areas—Introduction to Permaculture: Concepts and Resources
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/perma.html>

International Institute For Ecological Agriculture
www.permaculture.com

The Permaculture Activist
www.permacultureactivist.net

Permaculture and Sustainable Living & Livelihood
<http://csf.colorado.edu/perma>

Permaculture in the UK
www.permaculture.org.uk

Permaculture Net
www.permaculture.net

Permaculture the Earth
www.permaearth.org
This excellent site includes various definitions of permaculture and a range of interesting essays:

Simon Henderson, 'Building A Bamboo Farm'

Bill Mollison, 'The Terrible Time of Day'

Larry Santoyo, 'Constructing The Food Forest Orchard'

Larry Santoyo, 'Ecological and Economical Design'

Larry Santoyo, 'An Ecological Approach To Stormwater Mitigation'

Carole Tashel, 'Living Lightly On The Earth: Beyond Talk To Action'

The Permaculture Research Institute
www.permaculture.org.au

Tagari Publications
www.tagari.com

