

Joe Polaischer

Living and breathing sustainable living

Joe Polaischer pushes a wheelbarrow of seedlings past his adobe earth roofed house and parks it under a tree. Then he stretches his limber legs over a hand-made bench seat and sits down. He leans forward and launches into his favourite subject by saying:

“When I started giving talks in Matakana about ‘slow towns’ and sustainability nobody knew what it was.”

Joe Polaischer, world permaculture expert and teacher, wanted to turn Matakana into a ‘slow town’ – a place where people could sell their surplus food and crafts at markets. He envisaged the beautiful surrounding environment and parks being preserved for people to enjoy. He wanted minimal subdivision of fertile land and to keep the small village intact without any large franchise stores intruding.

Eighteen years later and after many talks and meetings he is beginning to realise his dream of a ‘slow town’ as it has become the basis of the Matakana Sustainable Development Plan.

“For the first time a local council has adopted a sustainable development plan in New Zealand. If we can only implement half of it I will be very happy,” says Polaischer.

And he should be as he has been very instrumental in educating the community and local government to make it happen.

Another surprise Polaischer found in the Sustainable Plan is the nomination of Rainbow Valley Farm as a heritage treasure. It is not the first time it has been recognised; it was awarded the Auckland Regional Award for ‘an outstanding project which has demonstrated ongoing commitment and real vision’ and it received the Rodney District Council Organic award.

You only need to look over the 50 acre property to understand why. As well as being extremely beautiful - it is a living example of permaculture in practice. Not bad for a property that was once mostly gorse and straggly bush.

“Without a good partner I could never have done this,” he says sweeping his hands to encompass the native bush, the organic vegetable garden and orchard.

His partner, Trish Allen, has to run it with the help of students when Polaischer is traveling around New Zealand and overseas giving talks and running courses on permaculture. As a world expert on the subject he is in big demand.

He also means they could not have created this haven and kept to the permaculture way, which is to grow all the food they need, minimize energy use and have zero waste, on his own as it is a lot of work.

It is because they have done such a wonderful job that people come from all over the world to see their mature permaculture farm. International magazines and television crews visit constantly to interview them. During the summer they have open days and run permaculture courses. Polaischer says their property is a farm and education centre where students often stay, work and learn on the farm.

Unfortunately, their education consent is now being challenged. Polaischer was shocked someone could contest it after approval had already been given. He says it is because Matakana is only one hour from Auckland that it is attracting people who only come in the weekends. They are often unrealistic about living in a farming environment and want to stop rural activity happening around them.

Polaischer says it is this new influx of people who complain – they often have different values that do not support sustainable living. In response the local government is trying to warn people from the city who move to the country to expect farming noises, smells etc. Polaischer shakes his head.

“This is crazy. They are making it difficult for everyone to make a living. We have to change our district plan for the future for self-sufficiency.”

In response to the difficulties they are having, the community have rallied around and set up the 'Friends of Rainbow Valley Farm Incorporated'. It intends supporting Rainbow Valley farm so it continues its permaculture principles and courses. Polaischer was really touched that people were so motivated to start this up.

Trish Allen says if they survive this challenge they want to do more permaculture education and research.

"It is so important to pass on the knowledge that Joe's got. He has so much knowledge and skills," she says.

For instance, as well as his teaching, Polaischer is always experimenting on their farm. He has trialed different fruits, vegetables, grains, animals, integrated pest management, companion planting, using insects for pest control and beneficial insects.

He is also trialing appropriate technology, alternative energy methods, passive solar design, healthy houses, natural building materials and alternative building methods.

After a couple of year's experimentation he writes up the research and the information is shared. He says because of global warming and the decline of energy sources this information is going to be vital to the community's future survival. He wishes that more people were proactive and started now instead of waiting for a catastrophe or when it is too late.

However, Polaischer is optimistic for the future for New Zealand and permaculture. He says he has lived in many countries in the world but this country is truly outstanding because it is isolated geographically and it has so much potential because of its resources, climate, ample water and small population therefore it is easier to make changes.

"We are so proud of how clean and green New Zealand is – let's live up to it," he says.

Polaischer is a warm and generous person who freely shares his knowledge. Without his work Matakana would not have become a 'slow town' and gardeners, farmers and students' world wide would not have had the benefit of learning about permaculture at Rainbow Valley Farm

The talk finished he picks up his wheelbarrow and walks it down to his Ute. The seedlings in the wheelbarrow are surplus to requirements so he is going to sell them at the market the next day. Polaischer does not just talk about sustainable living he lives it.