



Regenerative Farming



Photos © Quinta do Vale da Lama

In the Algarve, Portugal, 43 hectares of abandoned farm with ruined buildings has become a thriving community, Quinta do Vale da Lama, with polyincomes and an increasingly diverse ecosystem

Walt Ludwick
describes the journey

t began with a summer camp for kids, whose 10-year history on nearby Monchique mountain came to an abrupt end in the forest fires of 2003. Relocating the camp to an abandoned farm property near the coast that I had bought as passive investment and maybe 0 someday retirement home, was an easy decision. My wife Nita was the camp director and founder of the umbrella NGO, Project New Discoveries (PND).

After quick renovation of the ruins, 'Campo do Vale' opened its gate in 2005 to kids of all kinds, inclusion being a core value from the beginning. It was also open (during the off-season) to ethically-compatible groups – like permies!

Our Social Landscape

Thus began our adventures in permaculture, through Lesley Martin, who taught our first of many permaculture design courses on site in winter of 2008. She got us started with related practical projects like a vegetable garden, compost heap, compost toilet, etc. in a series of workshops integrating WWOOFers, interns, local staff and volunteers.

Did I say 'integrating'? As itinerant permies (urban types, often) meet local staff (practical country folk), colorful interactions tend to ensue. Moreover, given the legacy of adventure programs for kids (e.g. hiking, climbing, abseiling, canoeing etc.), introducing new farm-based programs like garden-to-plate pizza, full-cycle woolcraft, and localized storytelling was a real challenge.

Association PND finally based all of its operations here, and as we became acquainted with some tools for social process (e.g. Dragon Dreaming, World Café, Forum) and dynamic governance (e.g. Sociocracy, Holacracy, S3),¹ a hybrid social organism began to emerge. Through the organization of regular events such as Saturday night pizza-parties (that have become quite popular with the locals) and seasonal open days (every solstice and equinox), things began to flow more naturally, and even the boring stuff, like annual evaluation and planning sessions, became celebrations of succession and life.

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Our Economy

To afford maintenance and development of farm infrastructures, a limited company called Vale da Lama, Lda. was formed to carry on the business of AgroTourism. It holds the focus of, "Regenerating abundance of Mediterranean farm-based diet and lifestyle, shared as widely as possible."

We set a goal that the **EcoResort, our main accommodation**, would have all essential comforts without ethical compromise. This includes:

- Passive solar design, with solar thermic system for hot water, underfloor heat and swimming pool
- Grid-connected photovoltaics and energy-saving appliances
- On site biological sewage treatment
- Recycled water for flushing toilets and garden irrigation

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Essential services include:

- **Accommodation**, groups or families can rent the place or a portion of it – dynamically reconfigurable, thanks to rolling pallet furniture crafted on site.
- **Meals and refreshments** from 'Sweet Spot' garden café, from simple breakfast bar to full-course dinners in family-style dining room (locally-grown vegetarian fare), now open to the public for lunch in summer.
- **The farm shop** providing preserves of various kinds, dried fruits, natural soaps and herbal remedies served with the story of what's inside ... or better, in a workshop experience, so you can learn to make it for yourself.
- **Farm-based activities**, both organized workshops (e.g. bread and jam-making) and self-guided experiences (e.g. visit the chickens in backyard orchard, harvest eggs and oranges for breakfast, follow the braying donkey out to pasture, watch our 'woolly weavers' at work building topsoil and ground cover).

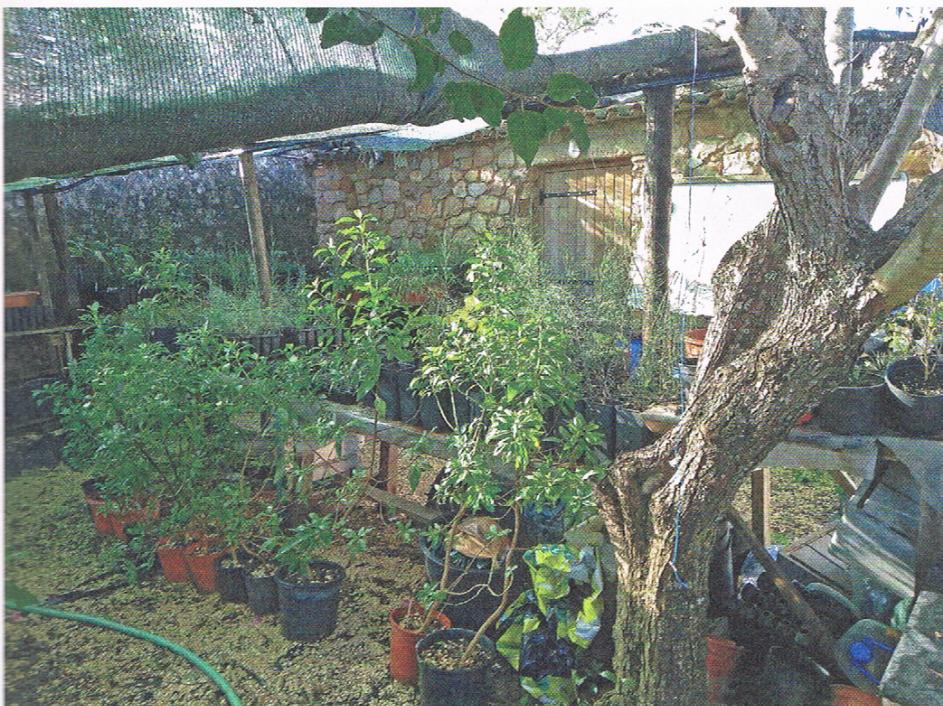
In partnership with PND, who bring pedagogic structure, facilitative expertise and ever-youthful energy, we're raising the quality of these AgroTouristic experiences. Moreover, by engaging new partnerships with local 'EcoPreneurs', we're spawning newly regenerative operations on site. These include: lowland pasture (20ha) regeneration using Holistic Planned Grazing with heritage cattle; artisanal bread, and organic cereals cultivation; a market garden and ASC (i.e. Ag-Supported Community; think CSA with a twist). This grows our economy, along with both community and the common resource base on which all depends – the essence of Fair Share economics, as we have come to understand.

Our Ecology

Earth Care – regenerating natural resources for future generations – as the ethical imperative about which we never quibble, is much easier said than done here in a brittle (hot Mediterranean) and windy climate with high pH soil. With the help of Hugo Oliveira, a landscape



Page 13, top:
Aerial view of earth building project – home and offices in foreground, with the Eco Resort and Monchique Mountain at the back



Page 13, bottom: Chickens process kitchen waste and fertilize the orange orchard behind 'The Sweet Spot' at Quinta do Vale da Lama's EcoResort

This page, top: Lunchtime at 'The Sweet Spot Garden Café' outside the Eco Resort kitchen

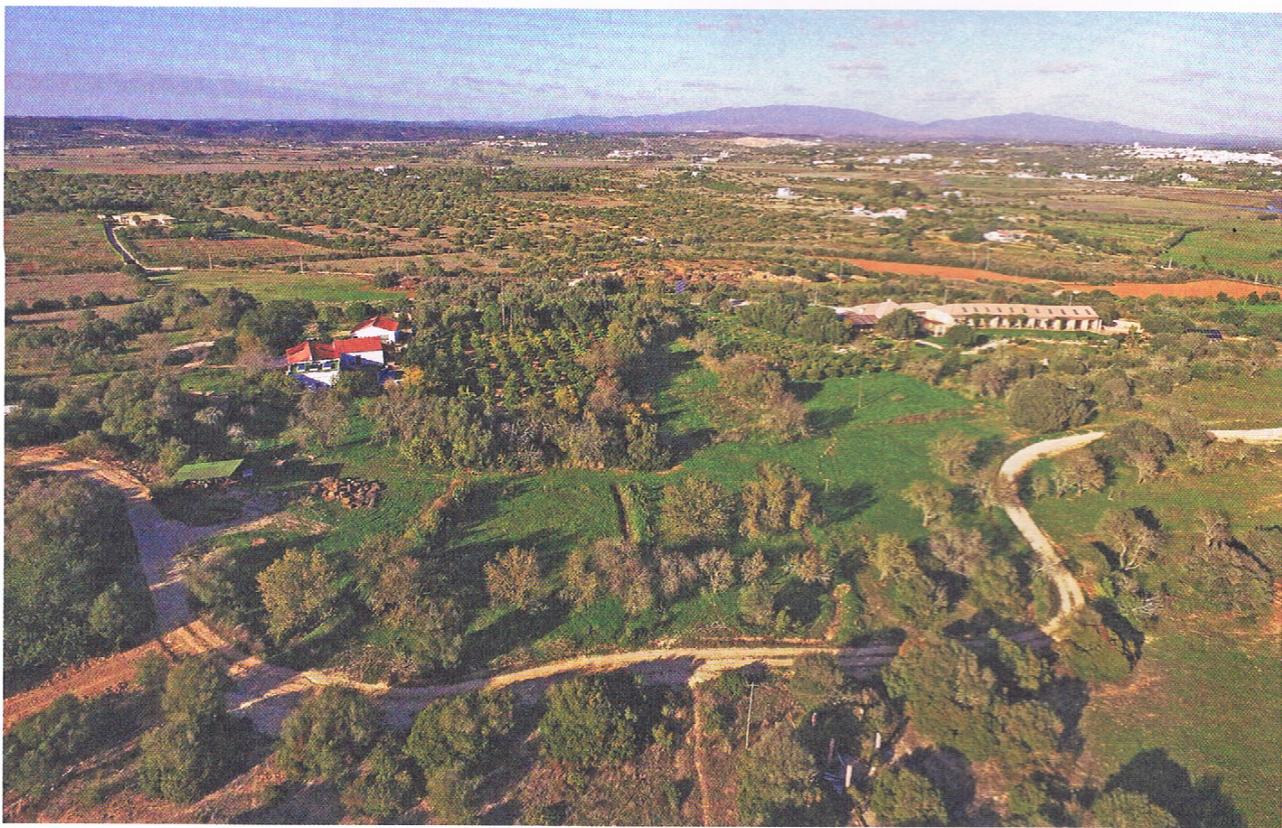
This page, bottom: Pop-up tree nursery outside the winery

ecologist and permaculture researcher,[†] we have outlined a program of eco-regen projects. These include a rainwater harvesting system, aiming to re-create rainfed agro-silvo-pastoral systems with a rainwater catchment strategy to increase absorption, minimize erosion and spread the water more evenly throughout the landscape. Earthworks were implemented to divert roads, create swales and hugelkulturs as well as slight off-contour berms. We also have a solar-powered/gravity-fed irrigation system, scaled to provide 200kL/week (our water budget) all through the dry season.

The south slope of the farm has been designed to improve pasture quality using Holistic Planned Grazing with sheep, together with traditional agroforestry practices (such as almond orchard over-storey, partially shading the pastures). We planted the swales with a fodder bank of

mulberries, vetiver grass, leguminous bushes (*Medicago arborea* and *Colutea arborescens*) and moringa, wishing to extend the feedstock available for the animals for the driest periods. Dense living fences were created with pomegranates and quinces to add an extra income from the system and to protect the fodder banks.

The rocky upper slope has been designed to maximize ecological regeneration of the local ecosystem, following the pattern of the natural forest and working with native and well-adapted species. We planted carobs and holm oaks as canopy species with an understorey of local shrubs and vines such as myrtle, wild asparagus, dwarf fan palm, Iberian hawthorn, *Medicago arborea*, broom, strawberry tree, mastic tree and wild olive. Wild life, occasional wild harvests and wilderness programs will be the focus of such areas. →



Agro-silvo-pastoral system at the heart of Quinta do Vale da Lama's water-wise dryland regeneration program

Permaculture Research

In 2016, a partnership was formed with the Centre for Evolution, Ecology and Environmental Change (CE3C – CCIAM) from the University of Lisbon's Faculty of Sciences. Last October, we hosted the first academic permaculture research course (see page 38). A key feature was to establish a research station that aims to collect data to monitor the design and implementation of the less hilly parts of the farm, by comparing the data between a normal swale and a hugel-swale, as well as the health of the pasture vegetation and soil quality resulting from the Holistic Planned Grazing strategy. We will be using time-sequence photographic documentation, based on permanent camera stands, pasture quality assessment via transect and systematic soil sampling with the ongoing help of the Science Faculty at Lisbon University (FCUL).

Overall Assessment?

In terms of objective scientific measures, we have made some progress in developing our own monitoring and evaluation system using three proxy indicators:

Ecological: *temperature gradient* – the single best measure of how we can best tend our land; think reducing temperatures, think creating microclimates!

Economic: *reinvestments of surplus in common resources* – until this year, a moot point as there were no

surpluses, but as surplus appears to be close at hand, it gets interesting.

EcoSocial: *happy connections* – i.e. the number of people in our network, and the richness of interactions facilitated therein.

Subjectively, I'm feeling good about what I see. Natural abundance is coming back; all essential functions are now covered by multiple elements, and yet many juicy niches remain to be filled.

Oh, and about our 'retirement' home: the retirement part is still a joke, but we do have a rammed earth and adobe brick home at last. This project includes two outbuildings that are earmarked for use as farm office and reception facilities and should be open to the public in early 2017. So, at the end of the day, even a bad one on this farm beats the best day I ever had back in my Toronto office!

[†] Hugo Oliveira (co-author), www.orladesign.org and CE3C-CCIAM (U.Lisbon)

¹ For detailed info about topics touched on in this article, see: www.valedalama.net/permaculture

Walt Ludwick, owner of Quinta do Vale da Lama, operated Weight Watchers franchises across Eastern Canada for over 20 years, until moving to Portugal to take up farming full-time.