

Putting culture back into the soil

Clive Adams, director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, highlights a body of cultural work that is bringing soil science to public attention

Soil Culture' is a programme that uses the arts to inspire a deeper public understanding of the importance of soil; a topic that has never captured the attention devoted to the conservation of 'charismatic mega-fauna' such as the giant panda or humpback whale.

Healthy soils are not only essential for the production of food to feed a growing world population but are a vital part of our global eco-system, acting as a carbon sink to reduce the impact of climate change. They filter our water and protect us from flooding. They also provide fibres for our clothing and timber for construction and fuel.

Today, soils around the world are being threatened increasingly by poor management and short-termism, resulting in compaction, contamination, erosion and salinisation, together with a loss of fertility, organic matter and biodiversity. In surveys conducted between 2002-11 in South West England alone (where our programme takes place largely), 38 per cent of its soils were revealed to be degraded significantly, leading to enhanced runoff and serious consequences for the wider environment.

Just as the first landscapes were being painted on the walls of Roman villas in the first century BC at a time of over-cultivation and deforestation, new art forms today can provide us with valuable tools to raise eco-consciousness, to help people appreciate the importance of their everyday surroundings and the resources they might take for granted or otherwise abuse. They can touch people in ways that science and conventional advocacy frequently fail us.

The linking of the words 'soil' and

'culture' may seem strange but it should be remembered that the word 'culture' was originally used in the 'agri-cultural' sense and it was only from the 16th Century that it increasingly came to be used figuratively; as the soil was improved by good husbandry, so the mind was improved by education and the arts. Perhaps it is now time for the arts and education to help put culture back into the soil?



Our vision of the urban public space as a foodscape posits a productive, socio-natural city

'It remains the sobering fact that even in the age of global communications and the internet, civilisation continues to depend on a few inches of topsoil for its very existence.' Graham Harvey, from *'The Killing of the Countryside'*.

The Soil Culture programme itself has its origins in conversations had over a decade ago with Graham Harvey when I curated an art exhibition on the history of British livestock farming in the aftermath of the last foot and mouth epidemic. In particular, on the damaging effects of insecticides and nitrogen fertilisers on the environment, which were being noticed increasingly in the 60s as a result of post-war farming policies.

It developed in earnest when, in early 2013, we entered into a partnership with

Falmouth University, who then secured support for a period of research from the Arts and Humanities Research Council; research which culminated in a Forum in Falmouth last July, which brought together more than 90 artists, writers and environmentalists.

The programme is now supported by Arts Council England, the British Society of Soil Science and South West Soils, and comprises eleven artist residencies across the South West and at Kew, nine of which have been selected from an 'open submission' and a commission for a roof garden at a new primary school in Bristol. To date, the first eight residencies have attracted 627 applications from around the world; a strong indication of the increasing number of artists who are becoming engaged with environmental issues.

The residencies are being held in a wide range of organisations from the Eden Project, the University of Exeter's Environment and Sustainability Institute in Penryn to the new Hauser & Wirth arts centre in Somerset and Daylesford Organic Farm in Gloucestershire. Each host sets a different brief for the artist, but all offer dedicated time for experimentation, the development of new work and unparalleled access to facilities and expertise.

Residency artist Debra Solomon, having contributed to the recent 'Restoring Our Soil' course at Schumacher College, will first show her work at Dartington's gallery in May/June. Based in Amsterdam, Debra is the founder of 'Urbaniahoeve' which develops edible, ecological landscapes in city areas and produces fertile soils out of urban waste. An exhibition will then bring together the results of all residencies and the commission and be shown across the South West, with a special launch in July/August at the Create Centre in Bristol during its year as European Green Capital.



DEBRA SOLOMON

'I DO EAT FLOWERS', 2013. Urbaniahoeve were commissioned to create this project on the footprint of a former ceramics factory in Maastricht

'Our vision of the urban public space as a foodscape posits a productive, socio-natural city.' Debra Solomon.

A second exhibition of work by a number of established International artists whose work has engaged with soils, sometimes over several decades, will be launched at Falmouth Art Gallery in September before going to Plymouth University next year. This will include work by Mel Chin, whose artwork uses special hyperaccumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated land, Paulo Barrille, Herman de Vries and Claire Pentecost.

Both exhibitions will be accompanied by a range of participatory activities.

During Dartington's Food Fair in May, landscape architect Charlotte Rathbone will run a 'Tasting the Place' workshop inspired by the work of Californian artist Laura Parker connecting the 'taste' of local soils with local wines and cheeses. Artist Peter Ward will also run a workshop using earth pigments and we are hoping to have a presence at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in May.

Of course, readers might have already noted that the United Nations has also designated 2015 as the 'International Year of Soils', and we are delighted that Soil Culture has been accepted as part of the official programme. The downside is, against the expectation of the UN that

governments of participating countries will support IYS contributions, Defra currently denies us any funding that will go towards the raising of public awareness over the plight of our soils.

We find this surprising because, as early as 2005, Defra's audit of soils-related education and awareness found that existing provision was hard to find and interpret. Although it indicated that exhibitions provided an excellent form of learning it noted that no museum had produced one on the subject since 1984.

What perhaps we should find less surprising is that Defra's lack of support is consistent with the role that the present government and farming unions have played in wrecking the European Soil Framework Directive last year; an initiative that aimed to give our soils the same protection as air and water. ●

Clive Adams started his career at Arnol Fini/Bristol in the 1970s. He founded CCANW in 2006 and Daro Montag, associate professor of art and environment at Falmouth University became its co-director in 2013. Its main office is at the Innovation Centre, University of Exeter. This article is based on one which first appeared in the March/April Resurgence & Ecologist magazine. www.ccanw.co.uk

Nick Reeves AWEInspiring Award

Each year CCANW and CIWEM's Art and Environment Network organise the Nick Reeves AWEInspiring Award which celebrates an artwork, arts project or body of work by a living artist (or group) that has contributed innovatively to CIWEM's vision of 'putting creativity at the heart of environmental policy and action'.

Last year's award was given to Vincent Walsh for his ambitious work in establishing the Biospheric Foundation, and this will feature in an exhibition at Exeter's Innovation Centre from 21 July to 21 October 2015.

The 2015 award is now open! To enter please send a short description of the artwork or project you are nominating, along with your reasons in a message marked Nick Reeves Award, to awards@ciwem.org before 21 July 2015.