



FOOD FOR LANDSCAPES: RECIPES FOR SLOW DISASTERS IN THE LYNEDOCH VALLEY

Narrative Report



FOOD FOR LANDSCAPES: RECIPES FOR SLOW DISASTERS

The Field Hospital initiative, created by British artist Andrew Merritt, is a long-term, multi-continental methodology that uses art, food, and ecological research to address "slow disasters": a term coined by Merritt to describe the long-term destruction of landscapes and their bioculture. The project's fundamental goal is to explore creative, practical ways to restore damaged environments and rebuild fractured relationships between people and place.

The first activation in South Africa, *Food for Landscapes: Recipes for Slow Disasters*, was developed in close collaboration with Loubie Rusch, wild food expert and founder of the Local Wild Food Hub, which she coordinates from the Sustainability Institute in Lynedoch. It was supported by the British Council, Design Week South Africa, and the University of the Western Cape's Centre of Excellence in Food Security.

The work unfolded through a series of connected events in October 2025: a public talk at Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, an intensive field activation in the Lynedoch Valley, and an exhibition and public session at Church House in central Cape Town during Design Week South Africa (23-26 October).





Why Lynedoch Valley?

The project is grounded in the Lynedoch Valley, in the Cape Floristic Region – the smallest yet most biodiverse hotspot on the planet, home to around 10,000 plant species, many of them endemic and highly threatened. Only a tiny fraction of the original Renosterveld biome remains; most of the landscape has been transformed by vineyards, infrastructure, and housing developments.

While more recently partnering on projects with the Sustainability Institute in Lynedoch, Loubie Rusch has, for over a decade been researching, growing and cooking with indigenous Cape foods, plants that were historically wild-harvested rather than cultivated, with a view to revitalising the use of plant foods that have largely disappeared from local diets and from the land. Her collaborative work spans surfacing community knowledge, incorporating Cape foods into food gardens and school feeding projects, restaurant collaborations and publishing her learning. Ongoing 'Edible Futures' research with plant traits ecologist Dr Nicola Kühn at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, includes running field trials that look into potential climate-resilient crops and their nutritional attributes.

In this context, “slow disaster” is not a single event but a drawn-out process:

- the displacement of Indigenous and pastoralist communities;
- the shift from seasonal, landscape-based food gathering to fenced-off, large-scale colonial agriculture;
- the introduction of plantation crops and enslaved labour;
- and continuing inequalities in land ownership, working conditions, and access to healthy food.





Lynedoch Valley embodies these overlapping histories and was chosen because there is already a strong network of local partners, including Valley Collaborative members that includes community kitchen organisers, farm workers, youth activists, and staff from the Sustainability Institute with an interest in carrying the project forward.

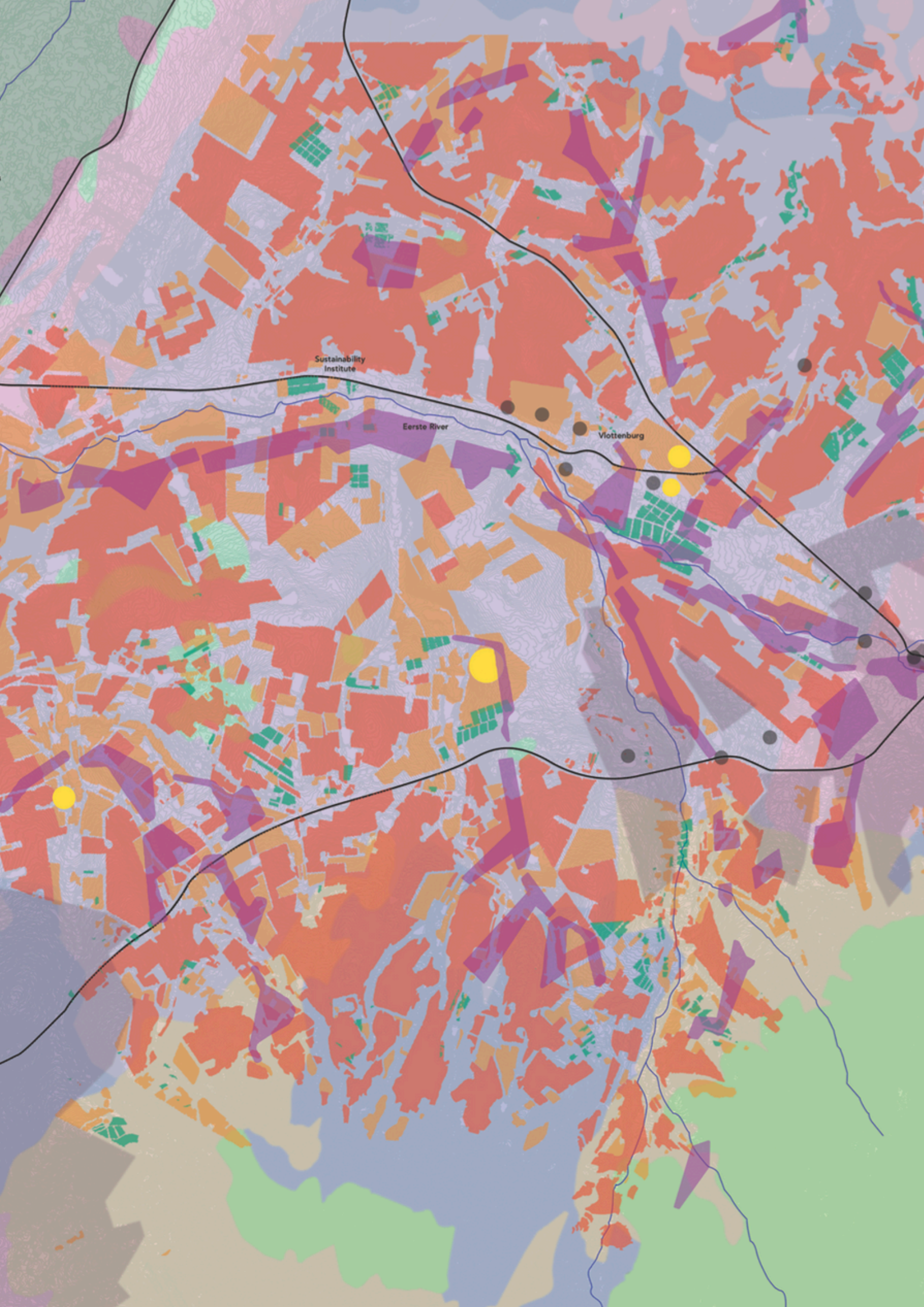
Mapping a Slow Disaster

Before arriving in South Africa, Merritt and Rusch worked together over months of online conversations to find a way of making this slow, complex history tangible. The result was a series of four maps of the Lynedoch Valley, each corresponding to a different moment in time:

1. Deep Past – showing the valley before colonial settlement, with its rich mosaic of biomes across which hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities had free movement, and whose lives were in intimate relationship with the seasonal abundance of the land.
2. Early Colonial Era – marking the arrival of colonists who claimed the land, and introduced plantation-style agriculture and enslaved labour.
3. The Present – mapping current land uses: vineyards, large farms, housing estates, and remaining fragments of threatened vegetation.
4. Near Future – a speculative map, left open as an invitation to surface participants' own proposals and “recipes for repair”.

These maps were developed through archival research, historical maps, biome data, and oral histories shared by Rusch and her collaborators, and then carefully redrawn by Merritt to make visible the cumulative, layered nature of transformation in the valley.





Sustainability
Institute

Eerste River

Vlottenburg

Crucially, each map was paired with food: tasters and small packaged samples curated by Rusch that corresponded to the foods present in the valley at that time, from indigenous Cape plants to dishes shaped by enslaved peoples' culinary traditions, through to contemporary industrial and introduced foods. The food became a way to literally taste the changing relationship between people and place.

Food for Landscapes at Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden

The first public introduction of the South African activation took place at Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden during the Happy by Nature anniversary event (18 October), an indigenous nursery and botanical studio working closely with traditional healers.

Here, Andrew Merritt and Loubie Rusch presented *Food for Landscapes: Recipes for Slow Disasters*, outlining:

- the Field Hospital methodology;
- the concept of “slow disasters”;
- the specific ecological and social history of the Lynedoch Valley;
- and how maps and food would be used as tools for conversation and repair.

The talk followed traditional opening rituals led by healers associated with Happy by Nature, grounding the project in local knowledge systems, herbal practices, and respect for ancestors. This encounter offered an early, diverse audience – healers, environmental practitioners, plant enthusiasts, and members of the public – and provided an important first test of how the ideas would land in the South African context.





The Lynedoch Valley Field Activation

Merritt had arrived at the Sustainability Institute with the physical components of the installation: the printed maps and carefully designed “disaster-style” packaging, printed onto silver-foil-like paper that were assembled, filled with foods and hand-crimped in the days that followed.

A key moment was the field activation workshop at the Sustainability Institute, attended by around 45 people, including:

- local farm and domestic workers from the Lynedoch Valley;
- community kitchen organisers;
- staff and youth from the Sustainability Institute;
- environmentalists, researchers, and local farmers;
- and representatives of NGOs and Valley-based initiatives.

The workshop was carefully structured to bring people with very different backgrounds, languages, and levels of formal education onto an equal footing. It began with a simple round: each person shared their first name, place of birth, and a food that holds meaning for them. This grounded the room in shared human experience before turning to the project's heavier themes.

Participants were then taken on a journey through the four maps, era by era. At each table, they were invited to:

- listen to the narrated history of that period;
- taste small dishes and drinks linked to the map's timeframe (for example, indigenous Cape plants during “deep past”, spice-based dishes associated with enslaved communities in later eras);



- reflect on how land use, labour, and access to food have changed;
- and share personal memories, emotions, and critiques.

The conversation that emerged was emotionally charged and complex: the room heard stories of dispossession, continuing farmworker precarity, violence, and generational trauma alongside reflections from landowners and institutional representatives who recognised their own complicity in creating or benefiting from these slow disasters.

In the final stage, participants turned to the Near Future map, overlaid with tracing paper. Responding to questions like “*What food does the landscape need?*” and “*What would healing look like here?*”, they drew, wrote, and annotated the map with recipes, interventions, and desires – from small-scale planting projects and community kitchens to ideas for safe public spaces and shared cultivation areas.

These drawings and annotations, together with later recorded reflections from participants, now form a crucial part of the project’s community generated archive that will inform future steps.



Exhibition & Public Session at Church House

The display from the Lynedoch Activation was moved Church House in central Cape Town, to be part of Design Week South Africa (23–25 October) to culminate in an interactive public session (26 October).

The installation brought together:

- the four large-scale maps of the Lynedoch Valley;
- the hand-crafted “disaster” food packaging from each era;
- photographs and visual artefacts from the valley;
- and a table display of locally appropriate indigenous plants and foods that can be replanted into the landscape.

Copies of Merritt’s earlier Field Hospital / Field Kitchen publication for Delfina Foundation were available for visitors to read, offering a broader context for the methodology.

On the final day, the interactive public session gathered around 70 people.

Visitors were able to examine the maps, drawings and display closely, and add their own reflections once Merritt, Rusch, and several local participants from Lynedoch had shared the story of the valley activation. Questions and comments were invited as the session opened up to conversation about possible “recipes for biocultural repair”.

Importantly, the audience here was notably mixed and





less segregated than is typical in Cape Town's cultural spaces: people from different racialised backgrounds, income levels, and professional roles shared a room, a table, and a set of questions without the project sliding into blame. By taking a very long, multi-millennium time lens, the work invited visitors to see themselves as part of an ongoing process, collectively entangled in both damage and potential repair.

Towards a Field Hospital in the Valley

While this first phase focused on mapping, listening, taking stock, conversation, and sparking imagination, it also seeded the beginnings of concrete possibilities. Discussions with partners in the Lynedoch Valley – including members of the Valley Collaborative, community kitchens, and Sustainability Institute staff such as community coordinator Ross – will now look to exploring how a “field hospital” for the landscape or “field kitchen” for local people might take root.

Considering local people's current capacity, initial community-led interventions that support discovering, and that lead to planting, tending and using medicinal and edible indigenous plants where space is available, could draw on and spring-board off existing efforts underway on the Sustainability Institute's campus.

The Valley Collaborative already has a long term vision of a local, centralised, safe and accessible community centre in mind. Landing and rooting a Field Kitchen in community spaces where local, climate-resilient ingredients can be cooked and shared, and then, a Field Hospital from where ongoing work on land, food,



ELD HO

ECOLOGICAL INFORMATION: salt pork was a food carried in vats of brine on long sea voyages to

FOOD FOR LANDSCAPES ++ FIELD HO

BULLRUSH/CATTAIL
Typha capensis

FOOD TYPE: carb, protein

PREP METHOD: add water & salt, form patties & roast on hot stones or in fire ashes

BIO_CULTURAL IMPORTANCE: traditional medicine and substance plant; rhizomes, young shoots rejuvenate the tall dry strap vines in spring

++ FIELD HO

LANDSCAPES ++

BIO_CULTURAL IMPORTANCE: sea pumkin was traditionally used as a vegetable in stews, as it holds up well as a cooked food. It has more recently become popular as a raw vegetable for use in salads and relishes, as it is becoming more widely available due to being cultivated

++ RECIPES FOR SLOW DIS

HOSPITAL ++ FIELD KITCHEN

ECOLOGICAL INFORMATION: there are many different species of Tetragonia that are all locally adaptive and resilient where they occur in the wild, both on the coast and inland, at low and high altitude. They are responding well to being brought into cultivation and are adapted to summer and winter rainfall.

FOOD TYPE: vegetable

PREP METHOD: serve with a cheese platter or as an accompaniment with mashed potatoes and smoked sausages

BIO_CULTURAL IMPORTANCE: fermented foods are a traditional form of preservation, is high in vitamin C, so helped to prevent scurvy and promote gut health during long sea voyages to and from the east

ECOLOGICAL INFORMATION: must be thoroughly cooked before doing so

++ FIELD HO

FIELD KITCHEN ++ FIELD

BIO_CULTURAL veldkool is one of that is still in use people have land and it is well loved in bredie, and will popularise due to

VELDKOOL
Trachyandra

FOOD FOR LANDSCAPES ++ FIELD HO

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++ FIELD KITCHEN

FIELD KITCHEN ++ FIELD

WATERBLONK
Aponogeton

FOOD TYPE: vegetable

PREP METHOD: serve with a cheese platter, with lamb, onions

BIO_CULTURAL waterblommietjes are few indigenous seasonal prizes in winter lamb and

and justice are coordinated and scaled up, is not a far-fetched idea.

The *Food for Landscapes | Recipes for Slow Disasters* activations revealed that while the hunger for change is already there among many, it marked a different way of looking at the Valley as part of a longer journey of healing.



Slow Disasters is a project initiated by Andrew Merritt and produced by Looking Forward. The initial implementations of the project are realised in partnership with the University of Cambridge (UK), Local WILD Food Hub at The Sustainability Institute (SA) and Cocina Colaboratorio at UNAM National Autonomous University of Mexico, with the support of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and Gaia Art Foundation.



Food for Landscapes: Recipes for Slow Disasters was supported by the British Council, Design Week South Africa, and the Centre of Excellence in Food Security, and hosted at Church House, Cape Town.



