

# Sharing our Bioregional Vision

Expanding and deepening the bioregional movement largely depends on our ability to share the meaning of bioregionalism with other people. To do this we need to boil down the many books and essays on this topic to brief talks that connect with people where they currently live.

In thinking about this I ask myself why I became a bioregionalist and why I have remained one for over 20 years. Seven enlivening “themes” won me to bioregionalism: (1) **Reinhabitation**, which I read in an essay by Peter Berg; (2) **Legitimate Governance**, which I heard in a talk by David Haenke; (3) **Human Scale**, which I found in a book by Kirkpatrick Sale; (4) **Humanity as the self-awareness of the planet**, which I gleaned from talks and books by Thomas Berry; (5) **Consensus processing**, which was freshly introduced to me by Carolyn Estes and brought to full flower in the bioregional movement by Bea Briggs; (6) **Ecofeminism** which was introduced to me by Judith Plant and which solidified my concern over the oppression of women with my concern over the oppression of nature; and (7) **Ceremonial companionship**, a theme that came to me from many sources. I will take Alberto Ruz and his company of dancers, singers, drummers, and pageant makers as my symbol for this characteristic of bioregionalism.

It seems to me that spelling out those seven themes might be helpful to others in their efforts to invite new people into the bioregional movement. Part One of this essay does that.

As I was writing Part One, I noticed that some misconceptions have arisen that have robbed the bioregional vision of much of its power. Here are four misconceptions that seem most important to me: (1) confusing a pre-civilizational vision with a post-civilizational vision, (2) mistaking “human scale” for anarchy, (3) confusions about the geographical meaning of the term “region,” and (4) mixing up long-range vision with practical strategy. Part Two of this essay summarizes my grappling with these topics.

So here is an outline of this essay:

## I. Seven Keys to the Wisdom of Bioregionalism

1. Reinhabitation
2. Legitimate governance
3. Human scale
4. Humanity as the self-awareness of the planet
5. Consensus processing
6. Ecofeminism
7. Ceremonial companionship

## II. Misconceptions that Rob the Bioregional Vision of its Power

1. Confusing a pre-civilizational vision with a post-civilizational vision
2. Mistaking “human scale” for anarchy
3. Confusions about the geographical meaning of “region”
4. Mixing up long-range vision with practical strategy

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# Part I: Seven Keys to the Wisdom of Bioregionalism

## 1. Reinhabitation

This is a simple but very profound notion. It means transforming our sense of “home.” Reinhabitation does not involve movement to some other place. It means a whole new perspective on the place we already occupy. It is like leaping up in the air and coming back down on the same place but finding that everything has been transformed. It is leaping out of our nations, states, provinces, counties, zip code districts, and other human-made districts and landing on our natural planet, on one of its continents, in one of its biomes, in one of its regions, a region fashioned not by human hands but discerned by humans as a gift from the planet. This region of geographical features, flora, fauna, and humans becomes our fresh awareness of home. Perhaps we have known all along that this was our home, but have been confused by neighbors who told us that we were Texans or Canadians or Mexicans or Southerners or New Englanders or some other name that speaks of human occupancy of a natural geography rather than of a natural geography of which we humans are one responsible member. All along we may have felt bonded with a particular set of animals, trees, grasses, flowers, birds, geographical features, weather patterns, seasons, and other humans who notice and revere these special gifts. But until we make the reinhabitation leap, we may not see clearly that this region of natural reality is our home.

We may, of course, move to another place, another region; but if we have made the reinhabitation leap we now see that new place differently. We now look to see where on this planet we are actually residing. We abandon our older views that we are basically homeless, without any particular place, irresponsible nomads who take and take from specific places but give nothing back. Even if we are a modern nomad who travels widely, we now realize that we travel from region to region of a planet that is our home, and we know that we have no other planet, no other nest of regional homes in which to dwell. Even if we journey into outer space we must take our planetary home with us in order to survive. All this is core wisdom in the bioregional vision.

## 2. Legitimate governance

The current nation states of industrial civilization are illegitimate governance because they do not obey the law. They do not obey the natural law, where “law” means something like gravity and evolution. When such law is not observed, dire consequences follow. On thousands of relevant topics, the planet Earth has its own governing rules built into its very rocks, oceans, atmosphere, life processes, and human interactions. But industrial civilization is built on the premise that humanity can get away with disregarding these “natural laws” – indeed that human well-being depends upon setting up human governance on principles having only to do with concerns like economic growth, the well-being of the biggest and strongest corporations, the competitive advantage of a particular group of people, the cost of living, the development of jobs, and the widespread availability of ever cheaper necessities and luxuries. But a society cannot get away with this indefinitely. Consequences follow. This is why our current industrial nations are illegitimate governance.

The vision of the bioregional movement is rooted in the understanding that there is such a thing as legitimate governance, and that the movement itself needs to practice such governance in its own political life. Bioregionalists don’t wait until the next century to begin practicing legitimate governance; they begin now practicing an alternative form of governance on behalf of leading the established governments of this world on the right path. As we meet together, as we “congress,” we search for the planet-inclusive truth and for the designs of social practice that

obey that truth. This is legitimate governance. Any other governance, however strongly empowered, however large a majority voted for it, however firmly rooted in some constitution or institutional heritage, is illegitimate.

This means that we can with a clear conscience disobey the laws of our governments whenever those laws disregard the laws of nature. We can envision the end of our own nation and its replacement by or transformation into something better. We do all this not as a whim or as a rebellion against all authority, but as an obedience to a higher law, the law of the planet Earth, the violation of which will lead all human institutions to doom. Some have felt uncomfortable using the word "law" in relation to nature, because they rightly view nature as a wild unfoldment that is not reducible to what humans normally mean by "law." But the metaphor "law" has the advantage of carrying the meanings of authority and obedience and good design and well-ordered living. This "law" is an answer to the question: What does nature (and being a part of nature) require of us? Nature does indeed provide us with our master constitution which all human social constitutions and institutions need to obey. Nature does indeed provide us with our basic corpus of regulations which human governing assemblies need to obey. So it is truly appropriate to claim that any human governing is illegitimate to whatever extent it does not take into account these natural regulations.

Some have felt uncomfortable with the word "congressing" because it is too closely associated with the United States government, but the word "congressing" has a more universal meaning – namely "coming together." Lovers congress. Citizens congress. True congressing is in accord with nature. We might give the framers of the U.S. constitution credit for choosing this great word. We may, of course, need to criticize U.S. citizens and politicians severely for not living up to this word. Instead of congressing – that is coming together and cooperating together to find the appropriate truth by which to live – U.S. Congressional sessions are too often win-lose combats between opposing sets of lies. The bioregional movement envisions a better form of congressing governance.

Some have expressed discomfort with the language of "governance," "congressing," and "law." They have absorbed from anarchist thinking the view that all governance is bad, that human beings went wrong in setting up any formal group decision making, legal ordering, police enforcement, judicial process, and the like. But such anarchist extremism has not been the basic bioregional consensus, and it need not become so. Governance, like education, music performance, dancing, nursing, and child rearing, is an essential social process. No human society has ever been without it. And no human society can ever be without it. The issue is not doing away with human governance, but saying clearly what we mean by legitimate governance. Then we can work to see such governance come into being, complete with fair and firm police action that forcefully stops every ecologically illegitimate practice. It will never be enough to ask economic institutions to volunteer to be ecologically good citizens. We will always need governance, legitimate governance, to require this of them. It has been a huge glory of the bioregional movement that we have vowed to congress and to discover in our congressing what legitimate governance means.

### **3. Human scale**

Human scale is a more accurate way of talking about what E. F. Schumacher was saying in his classic book *Small is Beautiful*. Social institutions are not beautiful because they are small. Small institutions can even be ugly because they are too small. A beautiful social institution is beautiful because it fits the human beings for whom it is designed. It is human scale. It is not a huge global machine to which humans are enslaved. It is a servant designed to serve humans and the planet of which humans are members.

The notion of human scale forcefully opposes the notion that bigger is always better. Growth is not always a good thing. Physical growth for a child is quite appropriate. But for an adult further physical growth becomes a disease. It is not human scale to grow to ten feet tall. It is not human scale to grow to 850 pounds. Such growth is clearly counterproductive, indeed sick and destructive of our optimal living. This is also true in the area of economic structures. The notion that an economy can simply grow its way out of every difficulty is bad medicine from a malpracticing social doctor. There are obviously limits to growth in every natural system. If, instead of viewing the whole natural system, we look only at numbers on a corporation spreadsheet, growth may seem to always be good, especially to a stockholder or an executive hoping for a still bigger salary. But growth of human economies within natural environments has limits. For example, for how many cars and trucks do we actually want to provide roads? Paving over more and more of our farmland and filling those highways with coast-to-coast traffic jams eventually places a final limit to automotive growth. Perhaps we already have more cars and trucks than we need. Perhaps growth in these particular industries has already reached its limit. Certainly, the public expense of building roads, of enduring smog, of acidifying forests, and of the effects of global warming express the urgent need to redefine economic progress in some other terms than more and more and more growth.

Natural limits also exist with regard to the optimal functioning of human interactions. The vast machinery of global trade has become a major malfunction of human life on this planet. While money is made in larger and larger quantities on various bottom lines, vast resources are wasted on needless transportation and needless dumping of resources that could be recycled. These and other real costs to natural environments and human communities go unmeasured. Huge food trading companies starve small-scale food producers even to the point of driving them out of the legitimate food growing business. In some places in the world small farmers whose families have grown useful products for centuries are opting to grow heroin or cocaine or some other such crop to make a living. Meanwhile food consumers pay more and more for what the growers are paid less and less. From a narrow but popular point of view all this can be called "growth." It is clearly possible to promote small regional food systems that pay growers more and cost consumers less. For the food business, bigger is better is a quasi-truth that only applies to huge agribusiness owners and some upscale consumers.

In decision making, human scale means that every decision that can be made at a more local level, should be made at the more local level. The larger scopes of governance have a reason for being only insofar as appropriate decisions cannot be constructed at the more local scopes of governance. Some political institutions have grown so big that they are quite beyond human control, even the control of the bureaucrats that head them. The U.S. Defense Department or Pentagon is such a place. It has become a maze of economic power accumulations so involuted that fully auditing them is no longer done. Incredible instances of economic waste and graft take place. Billions of dollars are spent on military systems for which no actual defense need exists. Decades ago Buckminster Fuller humorously suggested that the Pentagon could be divided into three parts, two parts could just send messages to one another, and then the third part would be free to do all the work more efficiently. I don't know if Fuller was exactly right about this, but it is certainly true that political institutions can become so big that they cannot make good decisions. Making good group decisions is the reason why we have political institutions; so these monstrosities violate the essential purpose of political process itself.

I have only touched upon the many meanings of human scale, but perhaps this is enough to indicate why bioregionalism has given a central place to human scale and has spoken so often of the importance of decentralizing political, economic, and cultural power to the various regions and local communities of the planet.

## **4. Humanity as the self-awareness of the planet**

Humans are only one species of life. Bioregionalism like most ecological thought insists that the human be valued not as separate from but as part of the whole life system upon which every species is dependent. Some even argue that the planet could get along without the human species. The slime and the cockroaches, the trees, squirrels, and birds could all continue without any aid from us.

Nevertheless, bioregionalists need not take the view that the human species is valueless. In the human species, the planet has become aware of itself. This gift enriches the planet as well as threatens it. Other species are certainly amazing, conscious, and majestic beings whose presence enriches humanity's consciousness of being alive. But no currently existing species, other than humanity, manifests the human quality of consciousness – this amazing consciousness of consciousness that characterizes our species. It is this consciousness of consciousness, sometimes called awareness or self-awareness, that has resulted in the construction of vast cultural deposits of wisdom that allow us to remember the entire evolution of life on this planet as well as the emergence of our 14-billion-year-old universe as a whole. This entire story is our story only because we are the self-aware portion of nature. We, humanity, are the life form in which this planet has become conscious of itself and of its place in the cosmos. Whether or not there are other self-aware planets we do not know, but we do know that we add this majestic gift to planet Earth.

The bioregional vision includes a dedication to the search for mutually enhancing relations between humanity and all the other life forms of this planet. We do not claim, as some seem to do, that one human being is more valuable than all the spiders on the planet. And we do not deny that humans have the right to protect themselves from the other species that might poison them or devour them. We see humanity as responsible for deciding how this larger body of living forms needs to both enrich our lives and be allowed to pursue its own adventure in living. We need not ask how each species is useful to humanity. Rather, we can simply consent to live among these neighbors as intrinsically beloved in the same way that humanity is beloved by whatever sustains us all. We can learn to be grateful for the wonder that this vast variety of living companions provides for our inner beings.

Indeed, we humans have an opportunity and a responsibility to enrich our lives through our communication with these other species. Let us count it a great blessing that dogs and cats and horses and other species consent to live among us. They can teach us what it means to be a conscious being, to be a feeling being, to be loyal, sympathetic, wild, autonomous, courageous, beautiful, and alive. We can benefit from simply watching the great trees grip the ground in their lasting love of nourishment and place. To enable this mutually enhancing relationship with the entire biological realm, humanity must be the initiator. The other living beings are already prepared to do their part.

## **5. Consensus processing**

Among human beings we also need mutually enhancing relationships. Consensus building in face-to-face groups of people is a big part of what needs to take place in this arena. Bioregionalism has emphasized consensus processing in our congresses. Sitting in a circle and simply listening to one another speak is the foundational process of consensus building. It is a deep honoring of one another to truly listen without flying away into planning what we want to say or what we think or don't think. And it is an honoring of ourselves to truly speak from the heart to those who honor us with their listening. Consensus building includes conflicts and disagreements, but it is different from a debate in which one team wins and another team loses.

Consensus building is a mutually enhancing quest for the truth, the practical truth about what is called for in action by all of us participating in this consensus-building process.

Consensus processing, deeply understood, is more than an alternative means of decision making. Consensus building is a natural process like gravity and evolution. In most human societies, humans have fallen away from consensus processing. They have stopped listening to one another. They stopped being open to truth beyond their own sense of truth. They have crammed their limited truths down other people's throats. They have stopped trusting other people as capable of useful participation in the decision-making process.

But consensus-building congressing has never been entirely suppressed; it is part of the nature of things and cannot be entirely excluded. Though not using this name for it, most ancient tribal societies manifested a great deal of this natural consensus-building congressing. They gathered around and talked things through.

Most civilizations attempted to do away with consensus building through the establishment of royalty who made all the decisions and peasantry and slaves who did what they are ordered. Yet even in the most hierarchical societies, consensus processing kept cropping up. Representative democracy came into being as an attempt to move toward consensus processing once again. This was far from perfect consensus building, but it did demote the kings, or at least replace them with 'wannabe' kings who have had to appeal to voters from time to time. Nevertheless, the natural process of consensus processing still cries out to express itself more fully in every society.

In 1984 this cry manifested in a radical and satisfying manner in the meeting we remember as the First North American Bioregional Congress. Congressing was discussed and practiced at that meeting and some of our lives have never been the same since. We may have had our doubts about the need for this unavoidable and naturally necessary reality of consensus-building congressing. And our doubts are understandable, for consensus-building congressing is a very deep dynamic, not easily understood. Even people who understand it pretty well for small group processing do not see how it applies to large groups, whole regions, whole movements, whole continents, or to the planetary decision making of the entire human species.

Consensus decision making does not mean everybody agreeing on everything. In fact, it embraces vast disagreements, hot passions, deep arguments, and perpetual conflict. But people transcend these things by continued listening and by the willingness to remember that none of us has the whole truth in our pockets.

And we need not claim to have the whole truth about how consensus processing needs to be facilitated. There is no one rigid way to do consensus processing. This becomes apparent when we notice that large groups need different structures for consensus decision making than small groups. In small groups everyone can talk more or less equally. Everyone can sense themselves deciding who to listen to and how to listen and when to speak and how to speak. But in large groups fewer people speak, and that speech must be more ordered. Also, consensus is built through panels and breakout groups and mealtime conversations and facilitation committees and other invented and yet to be invented devices.

On the planetary scale, which involves the whole human species, consensus building becomes even more complex. We need to invent social devices we do not now have. One interesting suggestion in this regard is Jim Rough's idea of Wisdom Councils (See his book *Society's Breakthrough!*). To simplify somewhat, he favors a U.S. constitutional amendment that sets up at each level of governance a random selection of 24 registered voters who are paid to attend week-long policy-making councils whose results are then published for all registered voters in

that area. Rough envisions this structure developing into what amounts to a fourth branch of government along with the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. It would function as another check and balance. It would model and inspire consensus building in the other three branches of government. Whatever we may think of this particular proposal, it illustrates the sort of creative inventiveness that it will take to make consensus-building congressing the political policy of the planet.

Meanwhile, we who are the bioregional movement have the historical assignment, I believe, to keep consensus-building congressing alive and evolving toward its full realization.

## **6. Ecofeminism**

While ecofeminism developed out of many sources besides bioregionalism, it found a deep home in bioregionalism, and bioregionalism would not be the culture it has become without ecofeminism. The style of ecofeminism tends to pervade everything in this movement. It is now a foundational understanding within bioregional culture that male prerogatives need to be set aside and feminine energies in both males and females released.

In our consensus-building meetings we have taken pains to make sure that men did not do all the talking while women sat quietly by. We have had men and women meet separately and explore together what is happening to each of the genders in these times. Even more profoundly, we have understood that the same oppressive patterns that are oppressing women are also the patterns that are oppressing the planet. Just as men have demeaned women by consciously or unconsciously using them as mere resources for their “grand” aims, so human society has demeaned the claims of the natural planet in favor of humanly constructed uses of a natural world.

True feminism is not about the defeat of maleness. It is about the recovery of a dimension of humanness that has been suppressed in both men and women. As the hostility of women toward their oppression became manifest, men tended to either entrench themselves in the old patterns or to join some of the more angry women in a needless hatred of maleness. So there has been a need in the general culture and in the bioregional movement to recover the validity of maleness. But this recovery is something different from reverting to the old styles of male domination and its gross unconsciousness of the importance of the natural processes of emotional and sensual feelings and making vital connections among human beings.

For many people today we still need to say more about these deep and subtle aspects of our inherited cultures. The male within hierarchical civilization has been acculturated to aspire to the following so-called “virtues”: (1) being a firm ruler in some contexts, (2) being a subservient servant in other contexts, and (3) in all contexts seeking to control nature through new techniques and social organizations. These “virtues” seemed necessary to make civilization functional. In being composed of many diverse elements that threatened to fly apart, civilization differed from tribal society. To make a civilization many separate tribal cultures had to be amalgamated. So the hierarchy of civilization was engaged in a continuing conquest of its interior peasant forces and slaves. A functional civilization required a formidable military organization to defend the hierarchy from within as well as to defend the whole civilization from the expansive tendencies of adjacent civilizations. The male was assigned to these tasks of defense and acculturated in the “virtues” these tasks required.

But these so-called “virtues” of the “civilized” male were in tension with the emotional and sexual ebbs and flows of the human body. In order to maintain these “civilized virtues” of the male ego, the male’s inward nature had to be controlled. Being emotional and sexual might be

welcome relaxation from such control, but during the “real life” of social maintenance these natural aspects of the human body were seen as weaknesses that were dangerous to the stability of male “virtue.” So this virtue-aculturated male ego feared being undone by being sucked back into the womb of Mother Nature or being lost in the swamp of a sensitive relationship with a down-to-Earth woman. Therefore, women were in various ways kept at arms-length, sometimes by degrading them, sometimes by idealizing them and then requiring them to live up to these male ideals. While women could be allowed to be emotional with one another if they wished, males (that is, the fragile male ego of civilizational “virtue”) had to be protected from the emotional power of women. Women had to be subservient, obedient, and careful not to undo these “virtues” of the males. These ancient patterns exist to this day.

The issues here are very complex and still deeply controversial. For example, we do not need to claim that men and women are virtually the same except for their genitals. Women have more connecting tissue between the left and right hemispheres of their brains (and thus, between linear language speaking of the left and holistic image making of the right). Therefore, women are more dependent for their empowerment on keeping this balance intact. Men, on the other hand, have less connecting tissue between the two hemispheres which enables them to more easily shut down the right side of their brains (including their emotions and holistic sensibilities) and thus focus for sustained periods of time on linear pursuits like hunting an animal or conducting a war. Thus when a human culture has become imbalanced in favor of the left side of the brain, males are advantaged. So a viable vision for our future entails creating cultures that restore this balance, a balance that gives the natural endowments of both women and men a full honoring and a full use in the conduct of human affairs. Such a culture will not only heal the lives of both men and women and their interpersonal relationships, that culture will also be less blind and more open to the full wonders and mystery of nature as a whole.

Whatever be the full story concerning these deep matters, the bioregional vision includes a full commitment to movement in this direction. Furthermore, this basic direction opens up new depths in our ability to overcome racism, homophobia, and religious bigotries. Our picture of the bioregional vision is incomplete without including these culturally progressive elements.

## **7. Ceremonial companionship**

This theme includes a very long list of things: pageantry, cultural sharings, singing, dancing, poetry readings, poetry composition, animal costumes, circles, simple rituals, sunrise and sunset ceremonies, fireside chats, go rounds, drumming, celebrations, EcoTheater, peer counseling, representation of animal species, sweat lodges, Native American lore, and many other efforts to recover our deep connections with nature.

Why are such ceremonies a core theme of the bioregional movement? None of these individual practices are unique to bioregionalism, nor are all of them practiced by every bioregionalist. Indeed, bioregional congresses have been careful not to foist any particular religious or ceremonial practice onto anyone. Nor have we wished to cheapen by misuse the various practices imported from Native American or other heritages. Nevertheless, it remains clear that a bioregional meeting would not be a bioregional meeting without such ceremonies taking place.

Whenever bioregionalists congress, some of these ceremonies appear along with the people. Why? Because the bioregional movement is a cultural movement first of all, and only secondarily an economic and political force. It is a core aspect of our vision that the transformation called for by the outward sweep of our era is also a profound revolution in the inner beings of those who are responding to these vast challenges.

Specifically, bioregionalists tend to assume that there is more mystery in a spoonful of soil than there is wisdom in all the libraries of humanity. Bioregionalists tend to affirm what our best



scientists realize – namely, that the more we know about nature, the more we know we don't know. Good science is an exploration into the sheer mystery of reality. Good art and good religion is also an exploration into the sheer mystery of reality. Being open to this ever-deepening mystery is part of what it means to bond with nature.

Bioregionalists tend to realize that we can trust in the benevolence of this mysteriousness that is built into the fabrics of the cosmos, that we can therefore respond in love for all of life, other humans, and ourselves. We may express and explore these deep matters in our own ways with the aid of our own chosen heritages, but we can, nevertheless, come together in a common spirit and find it possible to express that spirit in common ceremony.

Furthermore, it is this spirit quality and this cultural quality of the bioregional movement that attracts many people to it and draws them back year after year. Indeed, it has always been true that a social-change movement that is not also a spirit-nurturing movement will not endure long enough to succeed in realizing its vision. Many if not most bioregionalists know this, even though none of us may be entirely clear about it.

Consistent with this piece of bioregional vision is the general truth that massive social transitions begin with spirit awakenings and the cultural expression of that new and deeper consciousness. Then the resulting cultural formation undergirds the political and economic transformation. Embodying this theme is a strength of bioregionalism. It remains one of the themes that draws me to bioregionalism. I would not want to be without it. It will also draw others.

## **II. Misconceptions that Rob the Bioregional Vision of its Power**

The second half of this paper is more controversial than the first half. It is mostly my own thinking rather than a report on generally agreed upon themes. Others in the bioregional movement may have different views. Indeed, I have been changing my own views over twenty years and will likely continue to change them. Nevertheless, the following issues seem very important to me right now, and I feel they should be thoroughly discussed by the whole movement.

### **1. Confusing a pre-civilizational vision with a post-civilizational vision**

Ancient tribal societies were more attuned than agricultural and industrial civilizations to the bioregional topics described above. This has tempted us to talk, at times, as if the bioregional vision were about a return to some new form of tribal society. The truth in this perspective is that tribal societies have much to teach us. The tribal mode of society has characterized more than 90 percent of the entire history of our species. Its discoveries have been foundational for civilizations, and civilizations have suppressed many valid values of tribal society, values that we now need to recover. Our survival depends on this. Members of existing tribal traditions are correct in asking to be the teachers of civilized people.

The first lesson to be learned is that “civilization” is not another word for “good” as in, “That group is not civilized.” Civilization is simply the second master mode of human society with its own positive values and its own serious drawbacks. As has been found to be the case with so many modern medicines, the side effects of civilization have become so destructive that the entire mode of civilization has become bad medicine in spite of its various gifts.

Nevertheless, we cannot return to a tribal mode of society. We cannot even construct an up-to-date version of tribal society. Both tribal society and civilized society are now obsolete modes of human society. They have both been made obsolete by the course of events. We can learn from both, but neither can circumscribe our vision of a viable future. We are living within the second great turning point in the social history of our species. We must move beyond empire, beyond topdown government, beyond social hierarchy, beyond the idolization of human social creations. But we cannot return to the simplicity of parochial, isolated, small-scale, tribal groups and loose tribal federations. However overwhelming this transition may seem, we must boldly invent a third master mode of society that has never existed before. We must invent a future for our species and our planet that has no precedent in the history of our life on Earth.

This unprecedented future, which I will not attempt to fully elaborate here, has many subtle implications. It means that we cannot wait around for industrial civilization to collapse. It will collapse eventually. Everything collapses eventually, and industrial civilization already reveals its clay feet. But people will not be able to simply walk away from civilizations as these collapses occur and take up tribal life in the forests, as the descendants of Mayan civilization apparently did. There will be too few forests, too few arable lands, too few unpolluted water sources, too little time for such a transition to take place. Billions and billions of people will simply die. In such overwhelming chaos, few will have the wisdom, skills, strength, and inward stamina to even survive much less preserve the good elements of the last six thousand years of increased consciousness.

Therefore, we need to bet on the possibility of transforming industrial civilizations step-by-step, sifting the good from the bad as we go. While we live in and adapt to these dying civilizations, we need to move toward our vision of social destiny that is fully post-civilizational. We need to envision deconstructing the old and constructing the new at the same time. We need to envision the expenditure of time and money and the work of millions of very bright human beings pulling together a fresh model that honors and transforms all the wisdom of 6000 years of civilization and 100,000 years of tribal life.

The bioregional vision points toward a radically different future, a future that is even more radical than we can envision. Getting there will require a different path than either abandoning civilization or launching another imperial conquest of the known world. Getting there involves changes in the inner beings of the vast majority of humans, creating new cultural designs, organizing new political structures, and inventing new economic systems.

## **2. Mistaking “human scale” for anarchy**

A second “Misconception that Robs the Bioregional Vision of its Power” is mistaking “human scale” for anarchy. Bioregionalism is committed to the decentralization of economic and political power from its current global vastness to human-scale decision making and enterprise. But this corrective can be overdone and thus drive into the ditch on the opposite side of the road. That ditch I am calling “anarchy.” Much anarchist thinking is valid in its critique of topdown, hierarchical, monarchical, patriarchal social institutions. But when all social institutions bigger than a town meeting are dismissed as oppressive, anarchist logic has been taken too far. This anarchist tendency shows up in a significant amount of decentralist thinking. Whenever we are cheering the brash talk of doing away with all policing, all military defense, all government regulation, all forceful regulation of the economy, all restraints on free-enterprise, we are falling into the ditch of anarchy.

Human scale does not mean individualism – allowing every individual to do whatever whim comes to mind without consideration of the social relationships and ecological relationships in

which every action occurs. Human scale means building social institutions that are compatible with human beings and with the natural systems within which human beings need to become a mutually enhancing member. Social institutions are not inherently bad. Human scale means a new quality of human institution. "Democracy," as a pure concept, is almost another word for "human scale." Decision making that is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people is a human-scale operation.

It is true that a representative democracy has become a mere facade when representatives are responding to their wealthy supporters rather than their constituencies. But our representative democracies can evolve into workable human-scale systems provided that (1) representatives are strictly accountable to their constituencies, (2) those constituencies have reliable information for choosing their representatives, (3) those constituencies participate in consensus-building processes through which they become thoughtful about the actual issues of their region and their planet, and (4) some sort of legal structure of human rights protects minorities from the majority. Even when these conditions prevail, a majority of the citizenry is not always trustworthy, but such majorities are more trustworthy than the wealthy minorities who rule corporations and have insulated themselves from the needs of local people and their natural environments. Human scale does not mean perfection, it means a trust in the capacity of inclusive grassroots discussion to arrive at more adequate practical directions than the topdown rulership by the currently entrenched interests.

Furthermore, it is a misnomer to say that the government that governs least governs best. That is like saying that the basketball referee who referees least referees best. When fights break out on the floor or when fans throw things at players or when players run into the seats to hit spectators, more rather than less refereeing is appropriate. The same is true with regard to restraining crime and regulating an economy. Less regulation is not always better. In fact, it has been the deregulation of corporate behavior that has led to the Enron and Worldcom and other corporate scandals. The New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer has been a hero of human scale values by firmly enforcing the laws that pertain to corporations cheating their investors and deceiving their customers. Legal enforcements by governmental bodies is a necessary part of social life. It is the quality not the quantity of governance that makes it human scale. Less government can be meaningful as a critique of monarchy or of a centralized, socialist state that micromanages economic activity. But it is also true that without firm and fair regulation, a free-enterprise economy becomes dysfunctional. Some libertarians and anarchist decentralists seem not to understand that good government regulation enables freedom and creativity rather than oppresses it.

Some decentralists claim that all police enforcement is inherently oppressive. Such a view is naive. If governmental bodies are indeed democratic, then we can have law and order established by the people for the protection, fairness, and welfare of the people and their environments. Oppressive law enforcement happens when the legal system has become a means by which a few (usually a grossly wealthy few) control the society, especially the wage earners and the poor. But the role of policing does not have to be done in this "context of oppression." Inherently, the vocation of the police-person is as necessary and honorable as that of nurse and school teacher.

Finally, bigger is sometimes better. Human scale does not mean the complete elimination of large-scale governmental bodies. Human scale is best understood as having to do with the appropriateness of the scope of governance. Any governance that can take place locally should take place locally. Larger scopes of governance can be understood as human scale when they are not micromanaging local scopes of governance. If the large scopes of governance are accountable to the more local scopes of governance (rather than the other way around), then continental and planetary agencies of government can be appropriate governance.

Indeed, let us imagine a planetary society made up of thousands of local regions, each of which is largely self supporting and culturally independent. At the same time, the people in each of these regions can embody a sense of responsibility for the well-being of every other region on the planet and manifest that responsibility through governmental agencies of continental and planetary scope. Those broad-scope agencies can have not only relief capabilities and ecological protection policies but military forces ready to restrain genocide and other such emergencies.

Such a planet-wide governmental system is necessary because human beings are invariably capable of succumbing to overreaching greed and unthinkable malice. Such a system is possible because human beings are also capable of feeling impelled to do good. This latter point has its doubters, but its truth is proven by the very existence of bioregional and other social change movements and by the never-ending supply of volunteers for peace-corps-type missions.

Local groups can be fully empowered without disempowering every other scope of governance. It is true that we do not need to have sovereign nations anymore. But it is also true that we do not need to have sovereign local regions. The very idea of sovereignty is already passing from the scene of history. No nation is now fully sovereign on this interrelated planet. Some U.S. politicians are choosing to act like imperial rulers of the world, but if U.S. debt holders across the world decided to withdraw their trillions of dollars of investments in the U.S. economy, it would collapse. The only reason this is not done is that those same debt holders think they need U.S. consumers. Furthermore, no nation is effectively ruling its local regions with an iron hand. Most nations are becoming more and more a semi-confederation of smaller units. Such interdependence is replacing sovereignty, and this is a necessary trend of our times. And this passing of the old view of sovereign units need not mean the end of all authority and power at continental and planetary scopes of governance. We simply need some fresh imagination for making those scopes of governance truly responsive to the needs of locally living humans and their natural places.

All these fresh patterns apply to the polity of the bioregional movement as well as to the new society we envision and want to build. That new society will have continental and planetary scopes of decision making and empowerment. Similarly, we who are the bioregional movement need to develop some balance in our decentralist thinking about our own polity. We need to have power and action and decision making at every scope of geography without any of these scopes ruling over the others. We need to picture our local and our continental organizations as existing on the same level (not in a hierarchical arrangement). They are simply different scopes of responsibility. And the amount of responsibility at each scope of governance is the same: more than we can ever do.

### 3. Confusions about the geographical meaning of “region”

A third area of “Misconception that Robs the Bioregional Vision of its Power” has to do with defining the “region” in “bioregion.” What is a region? So much energy has gone into mapping our regions, and yet, as a movement, we are still unclear about this core concept. We need additional clarity on this to appropriately organize the bioregional movement.

We need some basic definitions concerning the types (or sizes) of bioregions. For example, our master bioregion is called “**Planet Earth.**”

At the smallest end of our bioregional thinking, we each live in our own mini-watershed or gully or some other way of designating our bioregional neighborhood. For purposes of this discussion let’s call these our “**neighborhood bioregions.**” Kirkpatrick Sale, working on this topic, called a bioregion of this size a “morphoregion.”

When we speak of a bioregion as a relatively self-sustaining economic region and a

potentially self-governing unit, we probably mean a piece of geography about 200 miles by 200 miles (somewhat larger in some places, somewhat smaller in others). Let's call these "**operational bioregions.**" Sale called this size of bioregion an "ecoregion." Sale also defined a bioregion intermediate in size between a morphoregion and an ecoregion, which he called a "georegion." I don't believe that any of these terms have caught on, but the thinking Sale was doing behind his language is interesting and worth pursuing further. The language we use is important. I would like for us to build a consensus on language usage for the various sizes of bioregion.

Discovering our own local operational bioregions can be greatly aided by the massive work that has been done by geographers on what they are calling "ecoregions." See this web site: <ftp://ftp.epa.gov/wed/ecoregions/na/naeco3.pdf> This site defines various sizes or levels of ecoregions. I believe we also need to study our local watersheds. See this web site: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm> This site defines various sizes of watersheds. Both of these taken together tell us a lot about the boundaries of our local region, but we need to know more. We need to do our own walking and driving and seeing and talking with people. We have to acquire a certain level of mastery of our own geography in order to discern what might be a viable, relatively self-sustaining, economic region and a potentially self-governing unit. Further, we need to see our own local region in relation to all the other regions of the planet. We have only begun to do this extensive and intensive work.

We also have something that we might call "**area bioregions.**" These would include wide scopes of common features such as the Great Prairies that extend through mid-American from southern Canada to the Mexican border. Perhaps some of the provinces of Canada approximate an area-bioregion.

The bioregional movement has also functioned within what we might call "**continental bioregions.**" Defining the Earth's continents with bioregional criteria is an unfinished task and a task beset with controversy. But here is why such a definition is important. The bioregional movement cannot be built without some sort of working pattern of responsibility at the continental geographical scope of action. The first Continental Bioregional Congress was named "The North American Bioregional Congress." That name was later judged to be flawed because North American was a term too much identified with the United States. But those early intuitions about the proper size of a continental bioregion were, I believe, accurate. We came to call this piece of the Earth's surface "Turtle Island," favoring a name used in some Native American traditions. We included in this "continental bioregion" every land and sea feature from Panama to the Arctic Circle, including Alaska but not Asia, and including Greenland but not Iceland. It also included Cuba, Haiti/Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and other Gulf islands.

When the Mexican members of this continental bioregion began spreading bioregionalism southward into other Spanish and Portuguese speaking nations as well as the Bolivian Highlands and other Native American language speaking places, we enlarged our image of what we meant by a "continental bioregion" to include the whole area from the tip of Chile to the Arctic Circle. I believe we need to return to the notion that we have two sister continental bioregions occupying this vast space. Such a vast scope of land and people can cooperate on some things, but the North and the South also need separate structures, separate patterns of organization, separate offices, separate web sites, and I believe separate congresses. Combining them too closely has the effect of taking the wind out of "Northern" organization. It could also take the wind out of "Southern" organization.

Furthermore, if we are going to view bioregionalism as a planetary movement, we need to define the continents, the bioregional continents of the planet. By "we" I do not mean that the people of this hemisphere need to define the continental bioregions of other continents. By

“we” I mean that bioregionalists everywhere need to decide together what the continental units of this planet are.

This has important, far-reaching implications. Every continent needs its own regularly meeting congress. Every continent needs to be organizing its own area bioregions and operational bioregions. Perhaps every continent needs a bioregional web site in every language spoken on that continent. Perhaps every decade or so we need to have a planetary meetings with a couple of delegates from each continent who plan and promote the emergence of effective planet-wide organization. Very few of us are going to do any planetary organization right away, but just thinking together about it can enrich the quality of what we are doing everywhere.

Before we can assist Europeans, Africans, and Asians with defining and organizing their bioregions, we need to develop the bioregional networks of Turtle Island as a workable model that could be an example for other continents.

In summary, we need to map the planet. We need to decide what mapping the planet bioregionally means. It does not mean looking in our old dictionaries for the meaning of the term “continent.” We need to define “continent” in terms of practically organizing our own bioregional polity. We need to organize our own bioregional polity in a manner similar to the way we wish to see the social fabrics of the planet structured when the basic vision of this movement is fully established.

What has prevented us from having already done this in the last 20 years? I believe one factor has been an inadequate understanding of “decentralization.” Decentralization need not mean individuals doing their own thing in their own way in their own place. Such an image of decentralization has fostered the fragmentation of some regional groups and discouraged the formation of a meaningful bioregional presence. On the continental level it has meant a lack of interregional cooperation, a lack of enduring continental offices and resource centers, and a lack of support for organizing new regions.

If anything I am saying about mapping sounds like a finished model, I need to insist that it is not. These comments are closer to a big question: are we ready to think some of these things through?

#### **4. Mixing up long-range vision with practical strategy**

A fourth “Misconception that Robs the Bioregional Vision of its Power” is mixing up long-range vision with practical strategy. By “vision” I mean our picture of what society can become and needs to become in the coming decades and centuries. When the radical nature of that vision comes into focus, people are tempted to veer away from the pressure of this vision in two opposite directions: (1) they are tempted to give up all hope of ever getting there from here, or (2) they embrace the false hope that the mere truth of this vision will bring us victory and so they begin foisting some small piece of this vision upon the current world-madness. Rather, the whole planetary system now in operation has to be engaged, moderated, stopped, and replaced with a viable manner of doing things.

Furthermore, great damage can be done when our long-range bioregional vision is broken down into short-range moral ideals that we try to impose on the current historical situation. Human social history has to move in entire stages from where it is to where it might hopefully go. Practical strategy is concerned with establishing movement in these appropriate directions. Such practical strategy can seem to some bioregional idealists like making untenable compromises. But strategy need not mean compromising our vision. It means adjusting and

adapting our strategy so that alliances are made and the stages of application are designed that actually build momentum toward our vision.

So, what is the difference between vision and strategy? Vision is like a grand poem that tells us what direction we want to go. Strategy is the how-to program of action that gets us from here to there. Strategy includes knowing the present situation, why it is as it is, its weaknesses, its strengths, its actual possibilities for change. Strategy also includes identifying the real opponents or “enemies” of the massive social changes we are proposing. The preeminent opponent of our vision is the unrestrained power of corporate wealth to move the whole of history in accordance with its grand schemes of world domination or in accordance with some narrow focus on making monetary profits for its investors. A second equally important opponent is the multitude of dumbed-down, misled, misinformed, security-hungry, people who are unclear that their natural foundations are being devastated, that their lives are being oppressed, and who is oppressing them. Among we who are the awakening portions of humanity, the main block to doing effective action is the lack of a clearly articulated vision of a viable future and the lack of a practical, winning, strategic agenda that inspires a wide spectrum of people.

What are some of the things that need to be included in the strategic agenda of the bioregional movement? It seems to me it needs to include at least the following:

**Innovative Local Work**

**Bioregional Education**

**Influencing Current Economic and Political Power with Appropriate Non-Cooperations**

**Building a Green/Progressive Majority of Political Power**

**Decentralizing Decision-Making Power to Regional Configurations**

These five items are not projects that each of us needs to do; they are broad realms of action that only millions of people can do. Furthermore, these five realms of action are not things that only the bioregional movement needs to do. They are realms of action appropriate for every Green/progressive movement. They are the master designs, the doing of which will bring us to the promised land of our bioregional vision. They answer the question, “How do we get there from here?” I will discuss each one briefly:

**Innovative Local Work** means bringing people together to actually achieve practical changes in the protection of fresh water, the restoration of river-breeding fish, the saving of energy, the doing of organic agriculture, the establishment of a local food distribution system, the building of innovations in communal living or working together, and 1001 other possible projects. Innovative local work also includes building local bioregional groups that are ongoing, happy, and effective.

**Bioregional Education** means writing essays, articles, and books; teaching courses; holding events such as congresses and conferences; etc. Such activities can awaken people to the ecological crisis; provide experiences of bioregional community and consensus building; and teach them strategies, tactics, and methods that make a difference. Such education needs to be done on a massive scale; it is the key to all the other strategies. For example, in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, 31 percent of eligible voters opted for Bush, 28 percent for Kerry, 1 percent for someone else, and 40 percent did not vote at all. Within that 69 percent that did not vote for Bush lurks a Green/Progressive majority. Education, the right kind of education, is the key to developing that majority.

**Influencing Economic and Political Power with Appropriate Non-Cooperations** means doing various campaigns, legal actions, legal and illegal protests, clever stunts, and so on, that may stop, impede, or influence the current powers that be. For example, such an action might focus on non-cooperation with the current neocon perpetual war policy for imperial control of

world resources. To be successful in shutting down the Iraqi war and other potential wars, this strategy needs to be massive and enduring and cleverly conceived.

**Building a Green/Progressive Majority of Political Power** means building Green/Progressive political constituencies and alliances that can actually control local, state/provincial, and national governments. Political empowerment is a type of action that cannot be skipped. There can be no long-term solution to any large ecological issue until we can regulate our free-market economies with democratically elected governments that are committed to ecological values. And we cannot passively wait for the current establishments to collapse; we have to deconstruct the old while at the same time we construct the new, and we need to complete this before a general social collapse carries all of us to our doom. When political power is amassed, then the long-term victories can be won for such things as restoring the commons, using land taxes to reorder the economy, curtailing the carbon-fuel addiction, requiring massive energy conservation measures, and other macro-economic alterations. None of these can be fully established and maintained without governmental power.

**Decentralizing Decision-Making Power to Regional Configurations** means creating a fresh pattern of governing arrangements that emphasizes local empowerment. This can only be done by joining together our innovative local work with our capture of overarching political power. Political power can be meaningfully decentralized only when (1) the existing governing bodies are enabling it and (2) local communities are trained and willing to take on these responsibilities. Emphasizing the local only will end in having our local achievements destroyed by defensive national and global forces. Emphasizing only the larger scopes of governance will merely perpetuate the topdown arrangements we are attempting to alter.

These strategies are not five separate things to do. They are components of one overall design. They are intimately related to one another. Each reinforces the other. All must be done to move from where we are to our vision of a viable post-civilizational, bioregional planet. We need to spell out these five strategies in vivid language that can attract millions to their achievement.

To summarize this section, our vision is not our strategy and our strategy is not our vision. Our long-range vision is not what we do: it is where we go. Our strategy is what we do to move toward our vision. And as we move, our vision will improve and our strategy will clarify. Mixing up our long-range vision with our practical strategy is an important misconception that robs the bioregional vision of its power.

In order to be effective in doing strategic thinking we need to foster an ever-deepening use of consensus building methods. We need to learn how to set aside our idealism and rigid ideas; learn to live in the creative chaos of not knowing the answers on exactly what to do next; and learn how to seek practical truth together in an honoring, passionate, fun-loving manner.

Let this be my conclusion for the whole: further thinking is needed on every topic discussed in this essay.

For a bioregional planet,

Gene W. Marshall  
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