

Trumpeter (1995)

ISSN: 0832-6193

A Bioregional Perspective on Planning and Regional Economics

Joel Russ
Trumpeter

Joel Russ is a freelance author and photographer and has most recently worked on organizing expositions of the artifacts and services of those who work with wood.

BIOREGIONALISM IS A TERM THAT REFERS to a perspective or set of conceptual tools. It also refers to a grassroots movement now about twenty years old (though some of its key figures were expressing themselves on pertinent matters in the 1950s). The movement has roots in the environmentalism of the '60s and later. In the mid '70s, Nova Scotia's Institute for Bioregional Research was among the early and influential organizations. Bioregionalism continues to draw sustenance in the contemporary soil of the so-called "new conservation." Today, bioregional organizations and projects function in North, Central, and South America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the Hawaiian Islands.

It can be argued that bioregionalism represents a major step beyond environmental localism, in the sense that while it is a stewardship philosophy, its focus isn't restricted to the immediate neighbourhood or community. There is practical significance to the fact that problems occurring at one place (say, a specific watershed) in a large region may have further ramifications in one or more other parts (i.e., "downstream effects").

The key concept is the "bioregion." The origin of the term is obscure, though some say it was in occasional use in the first half of the twentieth century. A bioregion is a naturally defined region (e.g. defined by physiography, stream flows, weather, or floral and faunal communities), and in this sense has a similarity to the biologist's *biome* or *biogeoclimatic zone*, or the geographer's *drainage basin*. However, unlike field biologists, who may focus on a given area in its function as habitat for certain animals, bioregionalists never lose sight of the fact that *people* live in and interact with the region.

Hence, usually "bioregion" refers to an area in which people draw some necessities of life (water, crops grown in the soil, trees for building or other uses, various raw materials for manufacturing, etc.). Otherwise, terms like *biome* would be equally useful. Many bioregionalists would maintain that, however much the movement is informed by natural and social sciences, the term *bioregion* is meant to remain primarily a layman's term. Bioregionalists may appreciate specialists, may in fact sometimes be specialists themselves, but bioregionalism is intended to be for everybody. The term *bioregion* has already gained much currency.

No one within the bioregional movement pretends that it is a simple matter to draw the boundaries of most bioregions in any final way. Overlay mapping showing major drainage basins, biogeoclimatic zones, and other data can be useful in arriving at provisional bioregional boundaries; political boundaries and highways would have little relevance in the pure bioregional exercise.

Scale is perhaps the most variable and debatable parameter when discussing a bioregion. Still, this can usually be clarified at the outset of any particular discussion or consideration. Just as the word economics can refer to the micro-economics of a household or business or to the macro-economics of a region or nation, the scale of a "bioregion" should be specified at the beginning of a discussion. It would probably be true to say of bioregional thinking that, just as with economics, in a sense we are talking as much about a way of looking at realities as we are about any collection of facts *per se*.

To offer a crude but useful analogy, bioregionalists view "natural regions" of various scales as something like a set of nested boxes: the creekshed, then the watershed, then the valley, then the macro-region (major river drainage basin). It is a physiographic fact that we in the West Kootenay live within the northern reaches of the Columbia River drainage basin. The name "Columbiana" is sometimes used for this region as a whole. Some would say this is our bioregion, unless we use qualifiers to indicate we are thinking of something smaller.

Understandably, people can often more readily identify with a creekshed or local watershed than the macro-region. But the point is: in the bioregional view, political and managerial boundaries are provisional and often artificial, since they don't reflect natural systems, though we must obviously acknowledge them for practical purposes. Bioregionalism urges us to learn to live sustainably within our natural region. And it is interesting to note that the bioregional movement has been using the concept and term *sustainability* since the 1970s, long before the Brundtland Commission popularized it and gave the term their own spin.

Because of its inclusive character, bioregionalism not only embraces ecological concerns but ponders social, cultural, economic, and political issues as well.

A major area of study and discussion within the international bioregional movement involves a scrutiny of modern cultures (and their politics, economics, technology, etc.) in light of the understanding of sociology and cultural anthropology. The usefulness of sociological analysis within modern societies has long been recognized. However, the application of anthropological analysis to modern societies is far less familiar to most of us.

How did bioregionalists become interested in this? For one thing, it was discovered many decades ago that culture areas of, say, Native American societies corresponded fairly well to the floral/faunal zones of the botanist and zoologist. And it is well known by anthropologists that most primal cultures lived sustainably within the ecological limits of their regions, by and large.

Those anthropologists who apply their discipline to the critique of modern culture are looking at valid questions: Is there more to human fulfillment than just material abundance? What is the meaning of community self-responsibility? For that matter, just what is the meaning of "community"? How does nature

support human life in an immediate, local or regional context? Can a society that degrades the natural systems within which it lives long endure?

These are important questions, and bioregionalists appreciate their value. Yet it is crucial to point out that most bioregionalists do not favour an abandonment of our technological advancement, but rather an appropriate use of technology. Bioregionalists don't want to go back to the past but *forward* to a more ecologically sophisticated future that enfolds our accumulated scientific and technical knowledge. Technology and its applications could then be re-evaluated in the light of sustainability.

In this future, some of the attitudes found in the world's primal societies may indeed be relevant and of vital importance. For it is a sign of spiritual and social destitution if we seek fulfillment only in the impressive material things we can own. Besides the development of sensitive, "elegant" new technologies, our attitudes, values, and habits will no doubt have to change if the human species is to survive on this planet.

I'm here offering no new insight if I mention that artists in Western civilization often serve the function of "prophets" concerning emerging possibilities and challenges, as well as concerning problems of the present. In the last decade, if not for longer, the dead-end of secularized industrial civilization (in which nature is viewed as not very sentient, and perhaps actually stupid and disorderly) has been recognized, denounced, and transcended in the thinking of leading-edge art critics. The new direction in art recognizes both the importance of the human *community* (as differentiated from an assortment of individuals and households) and that community's membership in the larger community of nature. Many of the artists representing positive alternatives are creating primarily by way of instinct and intuition, but some are also informed by cultural anthropology.

Bioregionalists are in consensus that our current problems on Planet Earth are in good measure problems of culture. The understanding accumulated by cultural and ecological anthropology can help us to explore and change our attitudes and habits, opening the prospect of tailoring modern cultural possibilities to the needs of specific bioregions.

It should follow from the above that bioregionalism does not take a pure preservationist position with respect to all "public" land; nor does it favour an automatic preservationist response to any particular tract of land that comes up for consideration. Human beings have always made their livings by utilizing the natural world. Of course, preservation of some areas, in a pristine wilderness condition, is necessary and crucial after many decades of resource extraction. Wise use (good stewardship) of some tracts of land within any bioregion is also necessary and reasonable. Protection of the health of consumptive-use watersheds, even when there is no issue of old-growth trees involved, is also necessary. Since we non-Natives in North America are not guided by age-old traditions with respect to our home place, we must be guided by science, the ideas of fellow

residents, local history, and a regard for downstream responsibilities.

While statistics may tell us that North Americans change their place of residence every four or five years, on average, bioregionalists honour the idea of putting down roots. It has been noted within the bioregional dialogue that, in many areas of industrialized North America, we non-Natives tend to live like invaders, not like true inhabitants. Bioregionalists wish to move away from the situation in which we look at land as either "real estate" or a mere resource base.

Bioregionalists speak of "re-inhabitation," which is the process of profoundly integrating with the specific places in which we've taken up residence. Further, bioregionalists believe that modern society as a whole can become more cognizant of the ecological realities within which all members live in effect, that society can learn to "live more lightly on the land." Rather than envisioning the result of this as a return to unending and backbreaking toil, we can envision it as an opportunity for the integration of all sorts of appropriate technologies, from ultra-modern to traditional.

It isn't possible to discuss land stewardship without considering the economic realities that represent "givens" in the lives of people within a region. Because of their strong interest in "home," bioregionalists roundly support local control of the economic means of production. This advocacy is in keeping with the model of concentric circles of economic self-responsibility: community, micro-regional, and macro-regional. Thus, bioregionalists tend to favour the so-called "third force" or "third stream" in economics (with political implications), a view from a standpoint beyond the old left/right options offered by socialism and capitalism, a philosophy free to borrow useful ideas from both.

If investment and profits were generally local, and the local economy were well diversified, would it not be more likely community forces (in the form of new land-management institutions) could deem when a greater level of care should be afforded our resource land? (We realize this presupposes greater access to relevant information and to expertise for processing this information than was true in, say, Newfoundland in the case of the Atlantic cod fishery.)

Most of us living in the West Kootenay are glad that the 49th parallel partitions Canada from the U.S. However, the West Kootenay (with its separation from the East Kootenay and its southern limit at the border) cannot be considered a true natural macro-region. This qualm may be more professionally meaningful to field biologists than to politicians or administrators (but not to say more personally meaningful). It is based on the fact that the watersheds of the West Kootenay are integral parts of the Columbia River drainage system. The Kootenay and Slocan, along with other rivers, feed into the Columbia.

This of course is more than an academic observation. What occurs in the West Kootenay, ecologically, may indeed influence other areas in the Columbia River drainage region. The concept of "downstream effects" whether geographic,

within "creeksheds" or watersheds, or the bioregion as a whole, or time-wise, in terms of the future may prove to be the most useful key to open the door to a holistic view of our regional realities.

Insightful criticism of industrial impacts on nature in North America goes back to the 1950s, 1940s and earlier. Recommendations for pragmatic change became abundant after 1970. In the light of current considerations, we can discern an interestingly changing economic picture in our region.

Many in the Kootenays, especially in the rural areas, live a lifestyle that involves a significant degree of economic self-reliance or "home production." But some would argue that this is an individual lifestyle choice, and should not be expected of our populace as a whole.

However, in our region as elsewhere there is probably a large expanse of common ground recognized by economic third-force thinkers, broad enough to include a real spectrum of personal lifestyle choices, some more self-reliant than others. From this community-oriented economic viewpoint, we can see that in the Kootenays we are still living with some outdated economic configurations, regardless of the admirably wide spectrum of lifestyle choices for individuals.

We submit that there would be benefit in a gradual phase-out of resource utilization by absentee-owned processors and the phase-in of utilization by locally owned operations, particularly value-adding ones. In harmony with the ongoing entrepreneurial process, this might occur through a combination of: 1. attrition (as old corporate operations fold, which is occurring), and 2. venture-capital, or government-assisted business incubators.

In terms of government social services, the idea is to gradually replace external "aid" inputs with a greater measure of regional self-support, emphatically not to suggest yet greater burden for the federal or provincial budgets (and thus tax payers). In this strategy, some regional producers would serve the regional community primarily, while some would bring in needed dollars from markets outside the region.

Already, over the last decade and more, we have seen a diversification of the regional economy, which is mostly taking the form of small businesses, home-based businesses, proprietorships, and partnerships of many sorts. Small to medium-scale resource processors (whether corporations or cooperatives), already present to some degree, would be desirable as replacements for some of the large corporate operations now in the region.

Thomas Power, head of the economics department at the University of Montana, has put together a cogent case concerning emerging regional economic options in his book *The Economic Pursuit of Quality*. Power argues against the old industrial-era paradigm of "economic base" thinking, in which one or two key industries are viewed as the only realistic basis for a healthy local or regional

economy. Power notes many options for a patchwork diversified economy at the local level, and cites environmental health as one of the quality of life factors that lead people to choose to live in (or remain living in) a particular place.

While the case of Montana offers interesting parallels, one specific dimension of the Kootenay's "new-economy" vision may need mention, this being the functions of agriculture. Currently, we are accustomed to two categories of farms: official-status farms that function as productive businesses, and "hobby farms" that require rather than provide support to their owners. I'd like to suggest that there is a third form, call it the contemporary homestead. This type of place anywhere from a few acres to 20, 30 or more provides a homesite (and possibly home-based-business space) plus subsistence economic support in the form of produce: vegetables and fruit, dairy products, eggs, meat. If the homestead has a private woodlot, it may also provide fuel wood and building materials. That the returns from such a homestead may not be completely monetized (may not all be *dollars* income) doesn't exclude it from "economy" if we use the ethnographer's broad definition of this term, rather than the conventional economist's much narrower one.

Silver mining initiated a great influx of Europeans into the West Kootenay, starting in the 1880s. This economy was the basis of the region's first towns, many of which still exist here; but silver mining peaked in most parts of the region in about a quarter century. It must have been difficult from within the boom years to imagine an economy on a different footing. But later the production of primary and secondary wood products dominated the economy here for decades. Secondary wood products gradually dwindled, especially after the Second World's War. Perhaps, for many reasons, the primary wood-products sector of the monetized economy is now moving into a smaller, though still important, role alongside other sorts of economic activity. Tourism, light manufacturing, education, information services, niche agriculture, and the arts, are likely to be important. In fact, one should link the new possibilities, regarding the uses of wood, to "art and design," since the creative element can at times add ten-fold or even much more to the value of the milled wood itself in some wares. It is particularly apt in the Kootenays to note that, according to the B.C. provincial government, jobs in the "cultural industries" are being created at twice the rate of jobs in general.

In parallel with the economic considerations outlined is the matter of political structure and process. It seems we have reached a point in history where, for ecological and other reasons, "democracy" must have an expanded regional manifestation. Political realities should be brought into greater correspondence with bioregional realities through research, public dialogue, and effective mechanisms of direct input from residents. Until now, the "input" has been "advisory," at best. However, it now seems appropriate that elected representatives from the regional and local publics be given at least a sizable share of decision-making power.

Many points have been touched on here, but among the most important are: cognizance of the realities of the natural region; concern for downstream effects; intra-regional economic elaboration; local ownership of production facilities; and administrative decentralization and democratization.

Notes

1 According to Peter Berg *et al* of Planet Drum Foundation, San Francisco, as published in their journal *Raise the Stakes*.

2 Sale, K; Berg, P. (1983)

3 See Aberley, D. *The Boundaries of Home* for a sustained discussion on this matter.

4 Sale, K.

5 Rappaport, R.; Bodley, J.; Reader, J.

6 Berg, P.

7 Leopold, A., and many others

8 "KDRMD" (1991); Johnson, L.

9 Power, T. (1988).

10 Russ, J., ed. (1994)

11 "KDRMD" (1991)

Bibliography

Aberley, Doug *Boundaries of Home*. Philadelphia: New Society Press, 1994.

Bates, Marston *Man in Nature*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Berg, Peter "Bioregions," in *Resurgence*, no. 98, UK, May/June 1983.

Berg, Peter and Stephanie Mills, editors. "Bioregions" issue, *CoEvolution Quarterly*, no. 32, Sausalito, CA, 1981.

Bodley, John *Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1985.

CASE Study, various issues, Vancouver, 1992-94.

Coates, Gary "Biotechnology and Regional Integration," in Gary Coates, ed. *Resettling America*. Andover, MA: Brick House, 1981.

Columbiana magazine, various issues, Chewela, WA: Columbia River Bioregional Education Project, 1980s/90s.

Daly, Herman and Clifford Cobb *For the Common Good*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

Dasmann, Raymond *The Last Horizon*. New York: Collier, 1963.

. *System for Defining and Classifying Natural Regions for the Purposes of Conservation*. Paper 7, Morges, Switzerland: IUCN, 1973.

"Biogeographical Provinces," in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, no. 11, Sausalito, Fall 1976.

Drucker, Peter *The New Realities*. London: Mandarin, 1990.

Farley, A. L. *Atlas of British Columbia*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1976.

Gablik, Suzi *Has Modernism Failed?* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Harcourt, Mike (premier of British Columbia), soundbite on CBC Radio News, Vancouver, May 29, 1995.

Harris, Judith and Donald Alexander *Beyond Capitalism and Socialism: the Communitarian Alternative*, in *Environments*, no. 21, Waterloo, 1991.

Harris, Marvin *Culture, People and Nature*. New York: Crowell, 1975.

Hess, Karl *Community Technology*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1979.

Hill, Brian *Bioregional Economic Development* (looseleaf bulletins). Petaluma, CA: Institute for Cultural Ecology, 1992-94.

Hopwood, Doug *Principles and Practices of New Forestry*, Land Management Report Number 71. Victoria: B.C. Ministry of Forests, 1991.

Johnson, Lorraine *Economic Strategy Report*. Nelson: Nelson & Area Economic Development Commission, 1987.

Executive Summary: Nelson and Area E.D.C.'s Economic Strategy for the 90's Survey. Nelson: Nelson & Area Economic Development Commission, 1990.

Kootenay Business Magazine, various issues, Cranbrook, 1993 and earlier.

"KDRMD" *Kootenay Development Region Manufacturer's Directory*. Victoria: B.C. Ministry of Finance, 1991.

Leopold, Aldo . *Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine, 1949/1970.

- Meeker-Lowry, Susan *Economics as if the Earth Really Mattered*. Philadelphia: New Society, 1988.
- Meidinger, Del and Jim Pojar *Ecosystems of British Columbia*. Victoria: B.C. Ministry of Forests, 1991.
- Meyer, Christine and Faith Moosang, eds. *Living with the Land*. Gabriola Island: New Society, 1992.
- Mollner, Terry and R. L. Schwartz, "The Mondragon Cooperatives," in *The Tarrytown Letter*, Tarrytown, NY, August 1984.
- Naisbitt, John *Megatrends*. New York: Warner, 1982.
- Pilarski, Michael, editor, *Restoration Forestry*. Durango: Kivaki, 1994.
- Plant, Christopher and Judith Plant, eds. *Putting Power in its Place*. Gabriola Island: New Society, 1992.
- Turtle Talk*. Gabriola Island: New Society, 1990.
- Power, Thomas *The Economic Pursuit of Quality*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1988.
- Rappaport, Roy *Sanctity and adaptation*, in *Io: Oecology Issue*, v.10, no. 1., 1970.
- Raise the Stakes*, various issues, San Francisco, 1979-94.
- Reader, John *Man on Earth*. Austin: University of Texas, 1988.
- Russ, Joel Transition and Translation in the Greening Process, in *The Trumpeter*, v.9, no. 1, Victoria, 1992.
- editor, . *Life in the Woods: Oral Histories from the West Kootenay Forest* vols. 2 & 3. Nelson, B.C.: Kootenay Museum Society, 1994.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick *Dwellers in the Land*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1985.
- Small Towns*, various issues, Ellensburg, WA, 1984-94.
- Snyder, Gary "Choosing Your Place and Making a Stand," *Mother Earth News*, no. 89, September/October 1984.
- "Gary Snyder" (interview) in *City Miner*, v. 4, no. 1, Berkeley, 1979.
- (Round-table participant) "Changes," *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 7, San Francisco, 1967.
- Taylor, Paul *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1986.

Citation Format

Russ, Joel (1995) *A Bioregional Perspective on Planning and Regional Economics Trumpeter*:
12, 3. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.12.3.4>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details