

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

man ceases to be man. When the Pleiades and the wind in the grass are no longer a part of the human spirit, a part of very flesh and bone, man becomes, as it were, a kind of cosmic outlaw, having neither the completeness and integrity of the animal nor the birthright of a true humanity (1971: vi).

Stephen R. Kellert

Further Reading

- Beston, Henry. *The Outermost House*. New York: Ballantine, 1971.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
- Kellert, Stephen R. *Kinship to Mastery: Biophilia in Human Evolution and Development*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997.
- Kellert, Stephen R. and E.O. Wilson, eds. *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
- Leopold, Aldo. *Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Wilson, E.O. *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

See also: Biodiversity and Religion in Equatorial Africa; Carson, Rachel; Conservation Biology; Environmental Ethics; Geophilia; Leopold, Aldo; Restoration Ecology and Ritual; Wilson, Edward O.

P Bioregionalism

Human beings cannot avoid interacting with and being affected by their specific location, place or bioregion. Despite modern technologies, we are not insulated from the natural world. Bioregionalism is both a philosophy and social activism that favors a small-scale, decentralized, and place-based approach to life. As a diverse movement, bioregionalism celebrates the organic interconnectedness of Earth systems – from wetland to creek, from creek to watershed, from watershed to river basin. Bioregionalism has also been influenced by a diversity of voices in social and ecological movements that support the spiritual, sacramental, psychological, and biophysical connections between human beings, the human awareness of place and community, and the understanding of nature as part of a larger circle of animals, plants, and insects.

Contemporary bioregional thinkers include Peter Berg, Gary Snyder, Freeman House, David Simpson, Doug Aberley, Jim Dodge, David Haenke, Stephanie Mills, Kirkpatrick Sale, Daniel Kemmis, among others. It is important to note that the movement is not limited to a circle of intellectuals, academics or visionaries. The movement is first and foremost a call for action or activism in support of a renewal of civic responsibility and ecological stewardship with

respect to communities of place. There are scientists, poets, nature writings and community activists who support place-based economic and political relationships. Imaginative works of all kinds have emerged that focus on the importance of place, the region, and community in human relationships that shape political, economic, and religious practice. One's region of nearness, the ecosystems and social institutions that we depend on for survival and well-being, can be understood as a bioregion whose boundaries are defined by a combination of ecological and cultural factors. A bioregion is often reflected in indigenous or aboriginal religious practice, such as the celebration of the return of *totem* salmon in dance and story, the language spoken and songs of important places and landmarks, or in the form of mimetic rituals of animism or nature writing.

As a lifestyle, bioregionalism stands in stark contrast to the command-and-control structures that we have placed on the landscapes. Political, economic, and administrative structures of the state or county do not often reflect the ecology of organic systems of relationships, such as the ecosystemic relationships between native species, their habitats, the transboundary nature of pollution transported by the currents or winds, and the changing of the seasons. Instead, bioregionalism focuses on the emerging and organic forms of human relatedness, ecological design and the patterns and interdependencies of living systems, and the need for regional economies that support place-based inhabitation.

Critics of bioregional theory often point to the heavy emphasis in natural laws and the general reductionist approach to political power in human society. Critics charge that bioregional thinkers are ecological determinists who put too much faith in the laws of nature to change social institutions. Political power, for example, is not defined in terms of the limits of nature or the boundaries of place and community. War and other human realities rarely take into account the importance of diverse places to people or the general ecology of violence over a region's resources.

Yet, critics often fail to understand the diversity of the movement – the movement is as much a sensibility as it is a science. It combines spiritual practice with ecological understanding and local knowledge of places, animals and watersheds. To be bioregional means to respect and care for the natural world that exists in a place, such as a watershed or mountain range or river basin. Bioregionalism is not a new idea but can be traced to the aboriginal, primal and native inhabitants of the landscape. Long before bioregionalism entered the mainstream political and social lexicon, indigenous peoples practiced many of its tenets. The place-based lifestyle of bioregionalists is first and foremost found in the ancient and native traditions that embrace the poetry, storytelling, mythmaking and religious practice of a sacred bond and common

heritage that human beings share with specific landscapes, seascapes, and regions. In indigenous practice, the region of nearness, which is the place inhabited, includes a broader circle of animals and plants that are part of the language spoken, religious and cultural practice, and local or regional knowledge of ecosystems. This knowledge of the ecology of a place is passed on from one generation to another by various mimetic practices or oral traditions. Indigenous culture is a result of a system of primordial connections with others.

The significance of place and the region is found in the voice of the sacred landscape, which is culturally manifested in a totem, song, dance, or ceremony of earthly renewal and the human homecoming. There is no separate life; we must learn from the other inhabitants of our distinct places and communities.

Unfortunately, this early bioregional knowledge is threatened today. Nearly 90 percent of the indigenous languages and knowledge systems will be lost by 2020. The stories of place, the local knowledge of plants and animals, the sacred and spiritual dances and songs of a region that have been practices for thousands of years may be lost soon. It is the hope of contemporary bioregionalism that social justice will prevail, and that the bioregional ecology, biodiversity, and local knowledge of the present will not be lost or forgotten.

In the industrial age, the gathering of food, raising a family, and the development of a community have become functions of various nation-states and other large-scale institutions and bureaucracies. Contemporary bioregionalism has emerged as a diverse movement that opposes industrialism and globalism. As both a place-based ecological philosophy and a regionally oriented social movement, bioregionalism is a response to the dramatic ecological and cultural decline that is caused by the prevailing modes of consumption and production in large-scale industrial society. It is important to note, however, that bioregional activism is as diverse as the landscapes we inhabit; the voices of bioregional theory and practice are diverse.

As an ecological philosophy, bioregionalists support local economies of scale, place-based activism, native species protection, social and environmental justice, and rejoice in the interconnections and interdependencies between human beings and the circle of animals, plants, and insects that define a more than human community or home.

As a diverse movement, bioregional activists defend the natural values that are carried by ecosystems, and the relationships, links, and connections between native species that are supported by these ecosystems. For example, the proliferation of watershed-oriented groups in the United States is a reflection of a new movement and ecological identification.

Bioregionalists stress the importance of becoming

“native” to the place. Becoming native to a place requires an act of “reinhabitation” to support the self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-governing and self-fulfilling qualities of living-in-place. A self-organizing community is composed of biotic and abiotic entities, such as a common watershed, biota, landform and biogeography. The boundaries of a community are based on the relationship, interaction and connection between human beings, the soils, waters, plants and animals.

The word “community” provides a convenient way of approaching questions of local economy and bioregional ecology. The word community derives from the Latin “munus,” which has an extremely interesting range of meanings, including service or duty; gift; and sacrifice. The word community, in other words, is a metaphor for the practice of the exchange of services. As individuals, we are bound by a community-based relationship that supports mutual obligation and the exchange of gifts.

The goal of bioregionalism is to reimpose the practices of human community (religion, art, theatre, institutional building) within the bioregions that provide their material support. In this sense, bioregionalism is as much a movement that can be found in rural lands as urban centers. It is a performative, community-based activity based on social learning and cooperation, and can be a therapeutic strategy to expose ourselves viscerally to local ecosystem processes, such as the nature of the watershed or the path of a neighborhood creek, and to foster a human homecoming with other life forms.

Michael Vincent McGinnis

Further Reading

- Aberley, Doug., ed. *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1993.
- Alexander, Donald. “Bioregionalism: Science or Sensibility?” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990), 161–73.
- House, Freeman. *Totem Salmon*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- Kemmis, Daniel. *Community and the Politics of Place*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.
- McGinnis, Michael V., ed. *Bioregionalism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick. *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985.
- Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.
- See also: Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Radical Environmentalism; Schumacher, Ernest Friedrich; Snyder, Gary.