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Bioregions: The Context for Reinhabiting the Earth

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The universe expresses itself in the blazing radiance of the stars and in the vast reaches of the galactic systems. Its most intimate expression of itself, however, is in this tiny planet: a planet that could not exist in its present form except in a universe such as this one, in which it has emerged and from which it has received its life energies. The planet presents itself to us, not as a uniform global reality, but as a complex of highly differentiated regions caught up in the comprehensive unity of the planet itself. There are arctic and tropical, coastal and inland regions, mountains and plains, river valleys and deserts. Each of these regions has its distinctive geological formation, climatic conditions, and living forms. Together these constitute the wide variety of life communities that may be referred to as bioregions. Each is coherent within itself and intimately

related to the others. Together they express the wonder and splendor of this garden planet of the universe.

The human species has emerged within this complex of life communities; it has survived and developed through participation in the functioning of these communities at their most basic level. Out of this interaction have come our distinctive human cultures. But while at an early period we were aware of our dependence on the integral functioning of these surrounding communities, this awareness faded as we learned, through our scientific and technological skills, to manipulate the community functioning to our own advantage. This manipulation has brought about a disruption of the entire complex of life systems. The florescence that distinguished these communities in the past is now severely diminished. A degradation of the natural world has taken place.

Even though humans as well as the other species are in a stressful situation, few of us are aware of the order of magnitude of what is happening. Fewer still have any adequate understanding of its causes or the capacity to initiate any effective program for the revitalization of these life systems upon which everything depends. Disruption of the life process has led to a severe disruption of the human community itself. If social turmoil and international rivalries have evoked significant concern, the disruption of earth's life systems remains only a vague awareness in the human mind. This is strange indeed when we consider that the disruption of our biological communities is leading to a poisoning of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil and the seas that provide our food. We seek to remedy our social ills with industrial processes that lead only to further ecological devastation. Indeed our sensitivity to human conflict over the sharing of earth's resources has distracted us from the imperiled condition of these resources themselves, a peril associated with the loss of topsoil, the destruction of forests, the desertification of fruitful areas, the elimination of wetlands and spawning areas, the exhaustion of aquifers, the salinization of irrigated areas, the damaging of coral reefs.

The urgency of a remedy for this situation is such that all social groups and all nations are called upon to reassess the human-earth situation. As was indicated by Edward Schumacher, we must rethink our industrial approach to "development." This rethinking involves appropriate technologies, but also appropriate lifestyles, and, beyond those, appropriate human-earth relations.

The most difficult transition to make is from an anthropocentric to a biocentric norm of progress. If there is to be any true progress, then the entire life community must progress. Any progress of the human at the expense of the larger life community must ultimately lead to a diminishment of human life itself. A degraded habitat will produce degraded humans. An enhanced habitat supports an elevated mode of the human. This is evident not only in the economic order, but also throughout the entire range of human affairs. The splendor of earth is in the variety of its land and its seas, its life forms and its atmospheric phenomena; these constitute in color and sound and movement that great symphonic context which has inspired our sense of the divine, given us our emotional and imaginative powers, and evoked from us those entrancing insights that have governed our more sublime moments.

This context not only activates our interior faculties; it also provides our physical nourishment. The air and water and soil and seeds that provide our basic sustenance, the sunshine that pours its energies over the landscape—these are integral with the functioning of the fruitful earth. Physically and spiritually we are woven into this living process. As long as the integrity of the process is preserved, we have air to breathe and water to drink and nourishing food to eat.

The difficulty has come from our subversion of this integral life community, supposedly for our own advantage. In the process we have torn apart the life system itself. Our technologies do not function in harmony with earth technologies. With chemicals we force the soil to produce beyond its natural rhythms. Having lost our ability to invoke natural forces, we seek by violence to impose

mechanistic patterns on life processes. In consequence of such actions, we now live in a world of declining fertility, a wasted world, a world in which its purity and life-giving qualities have been dissipated.

The solution is simply for us as humans to join the earth community as participating members, to foster the progress and perpetuity of the bioregional communities to which we belong. A bioregion is an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems that is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. The full diversity of life functions is carried out, not as individuals or as species, or even as organic beings, but as a community that includes the physical as well as the organic components of the region. Such a bioregion is a self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, and self-fulfilling community. Each of the component life systems must integrate its own functioning within this community to survive in any effective manner.

The first function, self-propagation, requires that we recognize the rights of each species to its habitat, to its migratory routes, to its place in the community. The bioregion is the domestic setting of the community just as the home is the domestic setting of the family. The community continues itself through successive generations precisely as a community. Both in terms of species and in terms of numbers, a certain balance must be maintained within the community. For humans to assume rights to occupy land by excluding other lifeforms from their needed habitat is to offend the community in its deepest structure. Further, it is even to declare a state of warfare, which humans cannot win since they themselves are ultimately dependent on those very lifeforms that they are destroying.

The second bioregional function, self-nourishment, requires that the members of the community sustain one another in the established patterns of the natural world for the well-being of the entire community and each of its members. Within this pattern the

expansion of each species is limited by opposed lifeforms or conditions so that no one lifeform or group of lifeforms should overwhelm the others. In this function of the community we include, for humans, the entire world of food gathering, of agriculture, of commerce, and of economics. The various bioregional communities of the natural world can be considered as commercial ventures as well as biological processes. Even in the natural world there is a constant interchange of values, the laying up of capital, the quest for more economic ways of doing things. The earth is our best model for any commercial venture. It carries out its operations with an economy and a productivity far beyond that of human institutions. It also runs its system with a minimum of entropy. There is in nature none of that sterile or toxic waste or nondecomposing litter such as is made by humans.

The third function of a bioregion is its self-education through physical, chemical, biological, and cultural patterning. Each of these requires the others for its existence and fulfillment. The entire evolutionary process can be considered as a most remarkable feat of self-education on the part of planet Earth and of its distinctive bioregional units. An important aspect of this self-educational process is the experiential mode of its procedures. The earth, and each of its bioregions, has performed unnumbered billions of experiments in designing the existing life system. Thus the self-educational processes observed in the natural world form a model for the human. There is presently no other way for humans to educate themselves for survival and fulfillment than through the instruction available through the natural world.

The fourth function of a bioregion is self-governance. An integral functional order exists within every regional life community. This order is not an extrinsic imposition, but an interior bonding of the community that enables each of its members to participate in the governance and to achieve that fullness of life expression that is proper to each. This governance is presided over in much of the world by the seasonal sequence of life expression. It provides the

order in which florescence and exuberant renewal of life takes place. Humans have traditionally inserted themselves into this community process through their ritual celebrations. These are not simply human activities, but expressions of the entire participating community. In human deliberations each of the various members of the community should be represented.

The fifth function of the bioregional community is self-healing. The community carries within itself not only the nourishing energies that are needed by each member of the community; it also contains within itself the special powers of regeneration. This takes place, for example, when forests are damaged by the great storms or when periods of drought wither the fields or when locusts swarm over a region and leave it desolate. In all these instances the life community adjusts itself, reaches deeper into its recuperative powers, and brings about a healing. The healing occurs whether the damage is to a single individual or to an entire area of the community. Humans, too, find that their healing takes place through submission to the discipline of the community and acceptance of its nourishing and healing powers.

The sixth function of the bioregional community is found in its self-fulfilling activities. The community is fulfilled in each of its components: in the flowering fields, in the great oak trees, in the flight of the sparrow, in the surfacing whale, and in any of the other expressions of the natural world. Also there are the seasonal modes of community fulfillment, such as the mysterious springtime renewal. In conscious celebration of the numinous mystery of the universe expressed in the unique qualities of each regional community, the human fulfills its own special role. This is expressed in religious liturgies, in market festivals, in the solemnities of political assembly, in all manner of play, in music and dance, in all the visual and performing arts. From these come the cultural identity of the bioregion.

The future of the human lies in acceptance and fulfillment of the human role in all six of these community functions. The change

indicated is the change from an exploitive anthropocentrism to a participative biocentrism. The change requires something beyond environmentalism, which remains anthropocentric while trying to limit the deleterious effects of human presence on the environment.

We have limited our discussion so far to the inner functioning of the regional communities because these provide the most immediate basis of survival. If these communities do not fulfill their most essential functions, then the larger complex of bioregions cannot fulfill its role. Each of these bioregions is, as we have noted, *relatively* self-sustaining. None is fully self-sustaining since air and water flow across the entire planet, across all its regions. So it is with the animals. Some of them range widely from one end of a continent to the other. Birds cross multiple bioregional, and even continental, boundaries. Eventually all bioregions are interdependent. This interdependence is presently accentuated by the toxic waste poured into the environment by our industrial society. Such toxic materials are borne across entire continents and even across the entire planet by water and air. Such an extensive continental problem would not exist, of course, if each of the various bioregions functioned properly within its own context.

The larger functioning of bioregions leads to a consideration that the earth be viewed primarily as an interrelated system of bioregions, and only secondarily as a community of nations. The massive bureaucratic nations of the world have lost their inner vitality because they can no longer respond to the particular functioning of the various bioregions within their borders. A second difficulty within these large nations is the exploitation of some bioregions for the advantage of others. A third difficulty is the threatened devastation of the entire planet by the conflict between bureaucratic nations, with their weaponry capable of continental, and even planetary, devastation. To break these nations down into their appropriate bioregional communities could be a possible way to peace.

The bioregional mode of thinking and acting is presently one

of the most vigorous movements taking place on the North American continent. Its comprehensive concern is leading toward a reordering of all our existing establishments: political-legal, commercial-industrial, communications, educational, and religious. At present all of these establishments are involved in the devastating impact of industrial society on the natural world. The human arrogance they manifest toward the other natural members of the life communities remains only slightly affected by the foreboding concerning the future expressed by professional biologists and by others who have recognized that the imminent peril to the planet is not exactly the nuclear bomb, but the plundering processes that are extinguishing those very life systems on which we depend.

Yet the numbers of those speaking and acting and leading others in programs of reinhabiting the earth in a more benign relationship with the other members of these natural communities are growing constantly. This movement, often referred to as the Green movement, is fostering an ecological or bioregional context for every aspect of life, for education, economics, government, healing, and religion. So far, the movement remains a pervasive and growing mode of consciousness that is groping toward a more precise articulation of its own ideals, its institutional form, and its most effective programs of action.

Of primary importance in North America is identifying the various bioregions. To do that requires a sensitivity akin to that of the shamanic personality of tribal peoples. While bioregions have certain geographic boundaries, they also have certain mythic and historical modes of self-identification. This identification depends on ourselves as we participate in this process, which only now we begin to understand or appreciate.