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Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress

Bioregionalism is a green political philosophy which can be considered a branch of Radical Environmentalism. Rather than stressing or prioritizing direct action resistance to environmental degradation, bioregionalism stresses the development of environmentally sustainable lifestyles and local political action and the development of new, political structures within particular ecoregions. Bioregionalism traces its roots to (1) ecological understandings of different regional types; (2) anthropological studies of the different lifeways that have evolved in such places which show that humans can live together without repressing either each other or nonhuman life forms; and (3) diverse religious perceptions and traditions believed to be environmentally friendly, especially indigenous ones and those originating in Asia.

Although bioregional ideas began to gather into a social force in the late 1960s, fueled by the publication of Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* (1969) and a series of articles by Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, it was not until 1984, when David Haenke organized the first "North American Bioregional Congress," that a national, institutional form emerged. This initial congress was held in Missouri, with subsequent ones following every two years. Its preamble provides a good sense of this emerging subculture:

Bioregionalism recognizes, nurtures, sustains and celebrates our local connections with: land; plants and animals; rivers, lakes and oceans; air; families, friends and neighbors; community; native traditions; and systems of production and trade. It is taking the time to learn the possibilities of place. It is mindfulness of local environment, history and community aspirations that can lead to a future of safe and sustainable life. It is reliance on well-understood and widely-used sources of food, power and waste disposal. It is secure employment based on supplying a rich diversity of services within the community and prudent surpluses to other regions. Bioregionalism is working to satisfy basic needs through local control in schools, health centers, and governments. The bioregional movement seeks to re-create a widely-shared sense of regional identity founded upon a renewed critical awareness of and respect for the integrity of our natural ecological communities (Davis 1986: 12).

From the beginning these congresses expressed affinity with deep ecology spirituality, formally adopting the deep ecology principles of Arne Naess "almost intact," according to John Davis, then an editor of the *Earth First!* journal. Davis's attendance and enthusiastic report shows

the natural affinity between bioregionalism and radical environmentalism. Davis noted a similar affinity between bioregionalism and ecofeminism, citing as evidence feminist author Judith Plant's assertion at this first congress that deep ecology and ecofeminism were fully compatible. Plant would soon edit or co-edit a number of books fusing bioregional, deep ecological, and ecofeminist ideas.

During the second NABC, held in northern Michigan in July 1986, a proposal from MAGIC, "the Committee for . . . Mischief, Animism, Geomancy, and Interspecies Communication" was adopted by consensus. It was drafted primarily by David Abram who would later write the influential animism-promoting book, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). At that time Abram also wrote periodically for *Earth First!* The proposal was to have nonhuman representatives at the next Congress: "one for the four-legged and crawling things, one for the flying people, one for our swimming people, one for our swimming cousins, and one (very sensitive soul) for the myriad plant beings." The statement affirmed, in a way that underscores the belief in interspecies communication shared by some prominent bioregionalists:

It is a very delicate, mysterious process whereby these representatives are recognized . . . we hope that the four representatives will be chosen not just by human consensus but by non-human consensus (Abram, Hannon, and Wells 1986: 9).

Abram also asserted, further illustrating the mystical perceptions animating some involved in this movement, that

Bioregionalism is inevitably, unavoidably, involved in magic processes. Many individuals . . . are beginning to feel strange sensations, sudden bursts of awareness, communications from other dimensions, [indeed,] The body itself [is] waking up [and these] communications from other embodied forms of sensitivity and awareness [have been] too long ignored by human civilization (Abram, Hannon, and Wells 1986: 9).

The Third NABC was held in British Columbia, Canada, in 1988. It began with ceremonies drawn from Native American cultures (a friendship dance) and the wiccan/pagan tradition (a spiral dance, which had been popularized and on this occasion was led by Starhawk). Abram, who previously was the driving force behind the resolution to recognize four participants representing our "non-human cousins," afterward described how this process went leading up to the 1988 Congress: "Several of the intermediaries had prepared for months beforehand," he wrote, "through both study and empathy, to begin to identify with other species, at least to the point of being

able to keep faith with these other modes of awareness while still listening ... to the human bioregionalists" (Abram 1988: 12). During the meeting, he recalled,

... standing, or crouching, in each of the four directions, these individuals acted as potent witnesses ... when the needs of their fellow species were violated. At one strong moment, a woman speaking eloquently ... for fluid beings angrily interrupted a compromising proposal by the water committee, startling the assembled circle into momentary silence, and moving us all toward deeper mindfulness (Abram 1988: 12).

This kind of process resembled the Council of All Beings, which was itself influenced by Buddhism, and which by 1988 had been spreading widely around the country, mostly sponsored by radical environmentalists. Indeed, the third bioregional congress ended as these newly invented rituals sometimes do when, "The gathering culminated with a rollicking masquerade dance, an 'all species ball,' under the full moon on the last night ... in a full moon ritual [with] chanting" (Abram 1988: 12). Abram also noted "creative friction" as Native Americans and their ceremonies "collided and then jived with wiccan and pagan" ones. This understated but hinted at the tensions that oftentimes result from the divergent ritual practices found among practitioners of nature-based religions.

Indeed, despite enthusiasm for the presence of non-human intermediaries and newly created ritual processes designed to summon them, during NABC II and III, a spirituality committee could not agree on bioregional spirituality. David Haenke, for example, after the second Congress, complained about the "contrived" character of some of the ceremonies and of the "tendency for some to impose pagan pomp" upon others. He expressed worry that such insensitivity could hinder "bioregionalism's ability to reach out beyond its hippie and back-to-the-lander base" (in Zuckerman 1989: 7). Such concerns intensified after the 1996 "Turtle Island Bioregional Congress" in Mexico (the acronym had changed temporarily from the NABC to the TIBC). Haenke and Phil Ferraro, who had invented an "Institute for Bioregional Studies" in Canada, both agreed in an email discussion group devoted to bioregionalism that the biocentric and practical ecological lifestyle issues central to it were in danger of being overwhelmed by pagan, "rainbow," and New Age spirituality and ritualizing, as well as by a naive belief that such ceremonies could themselves effect Earth healing. Ferraro, who had studied Social Ecology with Murray Bookchin in Vermont, then expressed an additional criticism obviously influenced by Bookchin's understanding of deep ecology:

This is something that has always concerned me with bioregionalism's ready acceptance/allegiance

to deep ecology, which is a self-described religion, highly anti-intellectual, that relies more on intuition than history and more on ritual than political action (in Taylor 2000: 68–9).

While many who consider themselves social ecologists share neither Ferraro's simplistic caricature of deep ecology and still others embrace its overtly spiritual forms, these reactions show the contested nature and difficulties inherent in constructing new forms of earthen spirituality and politics. This is to be expected given the plural religious and social milieu from which these forms both emerge as well as struggle to find suitable habitat.

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Further Reading

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- See also: Bioregionalism; Council of All Beings; Deep Ecology; Depth Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ecopsychology; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Left Biocentrism; Magic, Animism, and the Shaman's Craft; Radical Environmentalism; Rainbow Family; Social Ecology; Snyder, Gary.

Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites

Many of the most special places on our planet enjoy the status of UNESCO-listed world heritage sites or biosphere reserves. (Established in 1946 to promote global educational and scientific cooperation, UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.) While neither international system of protected areas systematically employs the religious dimensions of these places as criteria for their designation, positive steps are being taken to recognize and protect the sacred places valued by indigenous and traditional peoples that lie within their boundaries. Unfortunately, the dominant interpretative framework assumed by the national and international agencies responsible for administering the world heritage and biosphere reserve networks neglects their more contemporary religious meanings. This suggests that a fertile field of research awaits practitioners of religious studies and the humanities with more critical and symbolic approaches to the relations between nature and religion.

We owe the biosphere reserve and world heritage systems of protected areas to the creativity with which UNESCO, and other United Nations agencies and member organizations set about the task of addressing the global ecological crisis in preparation for the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.

UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program,

launched in 1971, early decided to make one of its major themes an international network of "biosphere reserves" that would "conserve for the present and future use the diversity and integrity of biotic communities of plants and animals within natural and semi-natural ecosystems, and to safeguard the genetic diversity of species on which their continuing evolution depends." A creative aspect of the new system was the decision not to use conventional methods of segregated landscape protection, but to pursue preservation, scientific research and education in close cooperation with local communities so that they might have a constructive role in environmental protection and in return grow in their capacity for regional sustainable development. The ideal biosphere reserve is organized by a pattern of three concentric zones: a strongly protected core area, consisting of minimally disturbed and freely evolving ecosystems characteristic of one of the world's terrestrial or coastal/marine regions; a buffer zone surrounding the core in which traditional land use, recreation and research activities can take place; and an outermost transition area where the work of the biosphere reserve can be related to the needs and resources of local communities. As of December 2001, there were 411 biosphere reserves in 94 countries. Many of the world's great national parks, such as Amboseli in Kenya, have been incorporated into biosphere reserves in order to facilitate more sustainable relationships with their surrounding human communities. The biosphere-reserve concept is dynamic and continues to evolve. Recently it has been suggested that the world's first "urban" biosphere reserve be established in Chicago with a reversal of the typical pattern of concentric zones – the highly urbanized central core would be encircled by envelopes of natural and restored environments.

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, generally known as the World Heritage Convention, was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. It established an international system of protection for architectural and other cultural artifacts, physical and biological formations, and natural habitats of "outstanding universal value" from the point of view of history, art, science, or conservation. Thirty years later the Convention had 167 States Parties, and 730 properties (563 cultural, 144 natural, and 23 mixed) from a total of 125 countries inscribed on the World Heritage List. World Heritage sites include such outstanding historic and natural areas as the center of Florence, Italy, Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, and Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes. As in the case of the Galapagos Islands, where international concern made a decisive difference in Ecuador's determination to sustainably manage the park, World Heritage listing aspires to be not only "words on paper" but also a useful instrument for action by international and local agencies to preserve threatened sites and species.