

Bioregion chic comes to town

Cracking the pavement with airborne seeds

Ann Japenga
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LOS ANGELES — Radical environmental politics has a certain cachet in the city. If you work in a skyscraper, far removed from the earth, what could be cooler than to flaunt the Earth First! monkey wrench decal on your word processor, or to discuss over lunch the Gaia theory — which maintains that the planet is a living organism.

So for those who are looking to pump up their portfolios with the next big thing in Green politics, it's here: "bioregionalism," the movement that preaches "'tis nobler to stay home than to land a better job in another city."

Bioregionalists are flourishing in the northernmost reaches of California, the high plains of Wyoming, the Missouri Ozarks, Arizona's Sonoran desert and other areas where pavement hasn't erased the landscape.

Kirkpatrick Sale, a leading bioregional theorist, describes a bioregion (it means "life region") as an area "governed by nature, not legislature." By getting to know their immediate bioregions. Sale said, bioregionalists come to understand environmental problems on a personal scale.

He asserts that people who stay close to home ultimately protect the environment because it behooves them to do so.

There are more than 100 bioregional groups and publications around the country, according to Peter Berg, who operates a bioregional clearinghouse in San Francisco. The philosophy has even matured enough to have spawned detractors. "A bioregionalist is someone who travels around the world telling people to stay home," is one bit of criticism in circulation.

Saving the Earth may sound like old-fashioned environmentalism to some, but Berg said bioregionalism encompasses far more than environmentalism.

Sale, who lives for part of the year in New York City, agrees: "What we're talking about here is not environmentalists tinkering with this or that to save a species; we're talking about a fundamental reorganization of American society so that the values of nature become paramount. For bioregionalism to be established, the political and economic institutions of the country would have to be entirely altered."

The first bioregional theorists began speaking out about 1977. The concept has since taken hold mostly in rural and semi-rural areas; but bioregionalists believe there's room for the concept in the city, too.

In San Francisco, Berg has been busy tearing out the sidewalk outside his office and sowing plants, "so the seeds can blow down the street and crack open all the sidewalks with native plants."

He's trying, where possible, to restore the habitat that once existed where his office is today. For instance, under his building is an old creek bed that comes to life in the rainy season, filling the basement with water. Instead of stopping the leak, Berg is considering opening up the basement floor so the creek can reclaim its rightful bed.

In Berg's vision, departments of bioregions will some day replace state governments. Existing borders will be disregarded because they interfere with natural bioregions. The Great Lakes Bioregional Conference already ignores the U.S.-Canada border, Berg said.

To determine a bioregion, one simply identifies the natural features that define the home or neighborhood. The features might be hills or gullies, watershed demarcations, a special plant or animal species, or even a dominant psychological or social influence such as a great mountain peak or a body of water. An imaginary line around the area delineated by natural features establishes a bioregion.

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