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Bioregionalism Comes to Japan: An Interview with Peter Berg

Richard Evanoff

The term "bioregionalism" was first popularized in the 1970s by the ecologist Raymond Dasmann and activist Peter Berg. Berg was in Japan this past winter investigating, together with Japanese activist Kimiharu To, the ecological damage caused by the Nagano Olympics. *The Japan Times* ("Ecology of Nagano seen coming in last," February 12, 1998) quoted Berg's reference to the event as the "greatest ecological disaster in Nagano's bioregional history." To criticized the games for being run in the interests of multinational corporations, television broadcasters, and developers with no citizen input, despite the fact that it is citizens "who must pay for a four-lane highway and airport they don't need." Farmers will also suffer from pollution of their rice paddies and the native species of Nagano will be damaged.

The Planet Drum Foundation, founded by Berg and others in 1973 to advance bioregional ideas, publishes the biannual journal Raise the Stakes, sponsors educational and cultural activities on bioregional themes, and provides networking services for bioregional activists, including a directory listing 250 bioregional groups around the world. The organization has helped to develop the Bioregional Association of the Northern Americas and sponsors a biannual continental gathering of bioregionalists. Its publications include A Green City Program for the San Francisco Bay Area and Beyond, Reinhabiting a Separate Country, and Discovering Your Life-Place: A First Bioregional Workbook. For more information on publications and membership contact: Planet Drum Foundation, P.O. Box 31251, San Francisco, California 94131, Shasta Bioregion, U.S.A. Email: planetdrum@igc.apc.org

The following interview was conducted in Tokyo and introduces readers to some of the key ideas of bioregionalism.

EVANOFF: What exactly is bioregionalism?

BERG: A bioregion is a geographic area defined by natural characteristics, including watersheds, landforms, soils, geological qualities, native plants and animals, climate, and weather. These characteristics are continuous; in other words, when there are changes in these characteristics you've gone from one bioregion to another. Obviously these borders are soft and wide, as opposed to linear and sharp in the present geopolitical sense of "boundary."Bioregionalism includes human beings as a species in the interplay of these natural characteristics. It promotes an inhabitory attitude by which humans adapt themselves to the natural characteristics of a bioregion in an appropriate way. At this point in history such an attitude exists only among so-called primitive people or as a matter of historical record. For most people on the planet today it would be necessary to become a reinhabitant in order to fit into the natural characteristics of the bioregions they occupy. A bioregion is a geographic terrain and a terrain of consciousness. It is a cultural idea based on characteristics usually associated with the natural sciences. Put simply, a bioregion is a "life-place," the natural place around you that's alive and contains your life as well as the lives of other species.

EVANOFF: There seems to be a perception, at least among some, that the environmental movement is about preserving pristine wilderness areas with little or no human interference. You seem to be working, however, towards a harmonization of nature and culture.

BERG: Bioregionalism is proactive. It is carrying the concept of a life-place into the activities and goals of human society, as opposed to protest.Environmentalism has been a protest-oriented activity based on attempting to deal with a destructive industrial society. On the one hand, it tries to preserve pristine wilderness areas for their own sake and, on the other, to keep water and air clean for the sake of humans. Bioregionalism goes beyond both of these. In a bioregion there are different zones of human interface with natural systems: urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness. And each of these has a different appropriate reinhabitory approach.

EVANOFF: What kind of changes in lifestyle will be necessary if people want to live in harmony with bioregions?

BERG: The bioregional idea at first seems to be a nature or outdoors-oriented view. In fact, it is a fairly profound philosophical perspective because it addresses basic civilization questions: who am I, what I am, and what am I going to do? In the context of the biosphere, a person as a member of the human species interacting with other species is a fundamental premise of bioregionalism. So what you do is to reconceptualize your relationship with the elements of the planetary biosphere, other people, society, and the exigencies of contemporary life. Carrying out a bioregional lifestyle is to apply reinhabitory directions to the basic necessities of life. Where does my food come from? What's my relationship to the water that I use? What's my relationship to the soil? What's my relationship to native ecosystems? Am I using materials that are from the bioregion where I live for house construction and the fabrication of products? Am I learning about the life-systems of the place where I live and about how my own life ultimately depends on them? Am I learning how to live in a place in a long-term, sustainable way with bioregional self-reliance as a guide? There are a lot of ways to apply the bioregional idea.

EVANOFF: A lot of the things we consume these days are not locally produced but imported via the global market, and it's sometimes difficult to trace out the connections. What kind of critique does bioregionalism offer of global trade?

BERG: The connections are actually fairly easy to trace out. It's the combination of them that's hard to keep up with. I know that the coffee I drink could come from several different places on the planet, that it's harvested in a certain way, and I know that ships carry it. What makes it difficult are the eco-energetics of the cups, of the heating source used to make the coffee, of the water that goes into it. All of those eco-energetics become extremely complicated. Right now, these eco-energy inputs cost more than we know because the ecological damage hasn't been assessed. The bioregional worth of things as opposed to the negative ecological footprint simply hasn't been investigated. It hasn't been one of those things that a big R&D project has been designed to find out— and it should be! What people can do about it in a practical way is to try tofind out what the local products are, what the costs are, and to make decisions about what they consume and what they get involved with based on that. It's possible to do this with joy rather than puritanical morality. In fact, when I walk down the street in the Shasta Bioregion in San Francisco and see a native plant or tree, it's quite exciting. It's thrilling!

EVANOFF: How far do you want to go with self-sufficiency? Should communities become entirely self-sufficient? Would that preclude any possibility of international trade?

BERG: We're talking about a direction here, not a dictum—as much self-reliance as possible and as much of a real cost analysis of exports and imports as possible. For example, when you export agriculture, you export soil and water, as well as some species of domestic plant. You transport it using some energy source and you package it. All of these things have real costs that aren't reflected in the price.

EVANOFF: One aspect of bioregionalism seems to be the transformation of consciousness on a very personal level.

BERG: We often assume that we're capable of divining models that somehow will be or should be employed by the general public to initiate some sort of enormous change based on a critical evaluation of the present situation. And we often feel that these models can have efficacy in some grand historical and socially progressive way. But I'm not sure this is true. I believe that most people are in a trance, a deep trance having to do with the nature and requirements of industrial society. You get up in the morning in an essentially disinhabitory environment. You deal with the requirements of getting your body and mind together in ways that are completely dissociated from their origins in nature -- you only see water coming out of a tap. You get out on the street with people you've learned to be wary of and adopt an anonymous identity. You get on some means of public transportation about which you know nothing. The subway is rattling through the geology of the city, but it's not geology you see, it's advertisements. Then you get off, and you're dealing with these other people on the basis of relationships that are dictated by power and command. You fulfill your role in the operation, using a lot of mechanical signals. You get through all that, go back home, watch television, and go to bed. Now, if you haven't been in a deep trance, where exactly have you been? We're talking about at least 50% of the population. They take respite by going to foreign places where they absolutely destroy the landscapes without even knowing it. To escape from this trance, they go mess up Hawaii. That's what we're dealing with. This is the famous, average, normal, reasonable human being that we assume is out there. So why do we pretend to have models that might be useful to these people and believe that it's possible to create some sort of social movement based on something like the Paris Commune? Where do we get this crap? What hope do we have? How should we go about it? As an activist-thinker in a situation such as talking to a university class or a group of businessmen or public policy people, I simply try to create a mental condition that will have the effect of an explosion in their brain. I could talk paradigm-talk all day, and it would bore me. I try to set off a large-scale explosion in the mind of the person or audience I'm dealing with. If I'm lucky and the explosion does occur, I don't know where the pieces are going to settle. The reason I'm doing this is because I feel as though I'm an agent provocateur who is pursuing his own survival in a trance-driven society that wants to deprive me of any of the little measly human-natural interactive possibilities that I can experience. That really is where I'm at.

EVANOFF: How exactly do you go about shocking people?

BERG: One way to shock people is to say that they aren't going to do anything to save

the earth if they aren't doing something around them right now. The earth isn't just the rainforest or the Amazon jungle or the whales or the hole in the ozone layer alone. The earth is also where you are. To so-called primitive people the world is local-cosmological, not planetary. The direction of our present civilization is to turn the earth into a garbage dump and then abandon it, to turn it into an uninhabitable smoggy sewer and then leave it. To a large extent what we're doing is committing suicide as a species. Another shocking thing is for people to realize how impoverished they are in spite of the illusion of material success, that their relationships with others are often bad and that they can't depend on very many people. In the U.S., the majority of the population is just two paychecks away from homelessness. That should send a shiver of fear through anyone! Everyone is extremely close to that edge, which includes insanity, neurosis, unhappiness, and bad health. I think most people are aware that they're committing a sort of soft-shoe planet-murder simply through their lives.

EVANOFF: Some people criticize the environmental movement for emphasizing changes in lifestyles rather than changes in political structure.

BERG: That's a false opposition. You can't change the political structures without changing the description of the person and what their anticipations and intentions are. During the French Revolution, most people had no idea what freedom was. What they were saying was that freedom was the direction they wanted to go in. They simply wanted the situation to be something other than what it was then, but they had no idea what it was going to be. In the same way a life of identifying with the human species, of an eco-centered basis of decision-making and public policy, of identifying with wild nature in a planetary context is something we have no idea of. A person now in late industrial society can say there is a possible world to go to, not utopia, but relieving the oppression and suffering of the present. It's a process, and it involves different relationships and activities, as well as disavowing certain political and economic structures and putting faith in others, or at least saying that I'll put my faith in trying to make this alternative work rather than put my faith in hoping that this present dominant structure continues.

EVANOFF: Is there in fact a utopian element in bioregionalism?

BERG: I think there's a utopian element in human consciousness. I think there was a utopian element in the Stone Age. People have always dreamt together of a resolution of problems and difficulties. Medicine is utopian—that a cure is possible for disease. Magic is utopian—that a miraculous outcome can occur. Art is utopian, that you can produce something that others will be inspired by aesthetically.

EVANOFF: How do you assess the current state of the environmental movement?

BERG: The environmental movement is over. I actually believe it ended on Earth Day in 1972, and in fact historians will probably say that. Environmentalism had always been the handmaiden of late industrial society. It was a way to preserve the material benefits of industrial products and processes while mitigating the effect of developing those products and carrying out those processes. Clean water and clean air were the epitome of the environmental movement. We had rivers that caught fire and air that was causing cancer. Even ordinary environments were visibly affected by industrial processes. It's not surprising to me that a lot of old-line environmentalists have felt assailed by the deep-

ecology, bioregional, whole-systems perspective because single-issue environmentalism was a way to get through the day. It was a way to deal with that soft-shoe planet-murder. You could take a bath in your environmentalism and feel good. Environmentalism simply won't be a twenty-first century consideration.

EVANOFF: So where's it going?

BERG: There are two major activities that will replace environmentalism. One is restoration ecology -- not in the academic sense, but as practiced by residents: urban people, suburban people, and rural people. Ecological restoration projects are much more comprehensive human activities than first imagined. When people first hear of ecological restoration, they think, oh, some nature project that I do on weekends. But in fact, restoring an urban creek is a major undertaking and is an essential activity for a reinhabitory perspective in a city, and has multiple implications. The other direction is urban sustainability. We have become an urban species. More than half of us live in cities. So we have to become renaturalized as urban residents. In other words, we have to regain our species perspective and expand it, even while living in dense multistoried areas. Urban sustainability is not just a watchword. At present most municipal governments put urban sustainability below the top ten issues that they're involved with. But within a very short time it will rise to the top three or so, and I believe eventually become the central issue for decision-making and policy directions regarding employment, health, education, welfare, transportation, energy, and so on. The central component of all these concerns is sustainability.

EVANOFF: What is the Green City Project?

BERG: We're trying to raise consciousness and help people get involved. We connect volunteers with 450 groups in the Bay Area. We publish a calendar of events that has activities for every day of the year. The idea is that school children, the elderly, working people, people of all classes and ethnicities, can become involved in some aspect of urban sustainability, such as tree planting, neighborhood empowerment, appropriate transportation, celebrations, and culture. Culture is particularly important: art and murals depicting native species, libraries, public sculptures, and events connected with watching natural phenomena, such as the rising of the sun at the equinox or solstice. I tell people that the future mayor of San Francisco will one day walk onto the Golden Gate Bridge, with all the traffic stopped, to lead the Salmon Welcoming Celebration on the day in fall when salmon return to spawn from the North Pacific into San Francisco Bay and up the Sacramento River, with thousands of people dancing and making music, wearing salmon costumes, eating smoked salmon, and saying "Welcome back brothers and sisters!"

EVANOFF: Those kinds of cultural activities seem so rich compared to most of the pastimes that dominate modern life.

BERG: The appreciation of culture inherent in the bioregional perspective involves the very values that are mostprized by art and antique collectors. They are unique, diverse, participatory, personal. They are the most highly valued things, yet people are unaware of the potential of ordinary everyday experience, and think of it as somehow going back to wearing a loincloth.

EVANOFF: How do you see public participation in terms of the political decision-

making process? On the one hand, bioregionalism advocates local participation, but on the other, so many decisions about what's going on in the world are made by multinational corporations and international organizations such as the World Trade Organization. The local and the global are often in conflict with each other. Decisions might be made by a multinational to close down a factory in a particular community, for example, and the community can be devastated by that. Do you see the two coexisting side by side?

BERG: There are many possibilities for effecting change. The variety that I'm most fond of and I think is the most authentic is when people undertake through their mutual decision-making to create a situation which they feel is desirable or beneficial and fits in with their idea of bioregional reinhabitation. When they do this, all kinds of interaction will occur with the dominant society. To give an example, when residents of the Shasta Bioregion tried to carry out a salmon restoration project on their own, using their own backyards as the site for water tanks for eggs to hatch so that salmon could be put back into the creeks where they had become extinct, they were prevented from getting eggs from female salmon by the California Department of Fish and Game, who had no way to see that activity except as poaching! Isn't that a wonderful contradiction? It really exposes the conflict.

EVANOFF: What about globalization?

BERG: Protest is necessary because as globalization increases there are inroads into things like personal privacy and community cohesion that are extremely destructive. So protesting, regulating, and defending against globalization is extremely important.

EVANOFF: Do you see bioregionalism as something that's going to disrupt the dominant society?

BERG: The dominant globalist society believes that it has ultimate dominion over anything that it chooses to have dominion over. That's the situation at present. If you put together the heads of major multinational corporations and gave them a list of possibilities for getting involved with communities, or individual and social behavior, they would be able to go through the list and think of ways in which they could dominate any of those situations. Public relations and advertising people already do that. They ask themselves, is there a way that we can get into the bedroom of every married couple so that they all use a particular product, do a particular thing, stop doing something else. That's their present perspective. And the reason that they've had such extraordinary success is because they've just blasted communities, blasted human taste, befuddled people, cast illusions so dense that people just don't know what's going on -- their mouths are open. Bioregional activities run against this, and they're not the only ones that run against this. Native economies and cooperative endeavors do as well. I've been to globalization forums where there have been literally hundreds of representatives with a tremendous range of reaction to globalist imposition. As bioregionalist solutions are counterposed to industrial solutions, they by necessity run against globalist imposition.

EVANOFF: Can the bioregional sentiment prevail against it?

BERG: Here we're dealing with values. If we can establish activities that have values associated with them that people don't want to lose, or that they feel they've contributed

in establishing, then we can establish some ground. I believe there is an essential, dichotomous conflict between eco-localism in general, of which bioregionalism is a form, and the globalist multinational corporate push. In the twenty-first century we'll see that conflict. I hate to use the word "war" but we're already seeing it. The Zapatista rebellion in the Chiapas region of Mexico is completely formulated around resistance to globalist imposition on the part of eco-local social groups. But I've also seen it in what could be called suburban situations in Mexico, for example in the town of Tepoztlan in an event that's called the "Golf War," where citizens resisted the building of a resort and golf course that would use communal water. The plan had been approved illegally by the state and national governments and rights were given to multinational corporations which the governments did not have the authority to give. I was there a year ago and there were still roadblocks to prevent the army trucks from coming into town. Local people resisted the project to the point that they ousted their bribed city councilmen. They now call themselves the Free, Autonomous and Democratic Municipality of Tepoztlan. You can also see the trend towards localization in the falling apart of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and the realignment of social groups in Africa and Asia.

EVANOFF: It seems that the people who advocate globalization get a lot of political mileage out of the rhetoric that we're "bringing the world together" and creating a global society based on peace and harmony. At the same time criticisms are sometimes made against eco-localism on the grounds that it's going to promote insularity, ethnic exclusiveness, religious fundamentalism, and the creation of cultural enclaves in which people are going to be isolated from each other. In the media and so forth all of this makes globalism seem appealing while making something like bioregionalism look insular.

BERG: The dominant oppressive group can always do extraordinary things to divide, conquer, and corrupt authentic, viable local structures. There probably isn't anything that globalism offers that shouldn't be questioned or negotiated from a bioregional point of view. Some areas of global cooperation may be more acceptable than others. The hole in the ozone layer, for example, is the kind of problem that has to be solved by people occupying various places on the planet. There are potential benefits from global cooperation in areas such as these. It's extremely hypocritical, though, for multinational corporations to pretend to be bringing the world together.

EVANOFF: How about the charge that bioregionalism encourages people to go off into their own little communities and not become cosmopolitan?

BERG: The richness and authenticity that is the reward of bioregionalism requires exactly that kind of going into the place where you live. I can walk down a country lane and be thinking about the world tennis matches or I can be looking at the particular native trees that are right in front of me. It doesn't matter where the world tennis matches are being held but the trees being there does matter. They can't be anywhere else. They have to be there. This is where they evolved. So there's information selection that is in fact insular or that isolates you from other information. Now, does that necessarily breed parochialism? I've heard people say that parochialism and xenophobia may not be that bad, but I personally think that they are. I believe that they are restrictive. So I look for a meta-level of bioregional identification: the bioregion
is my window on the planetary biosphere and the means for participating in it. So, yes, this stream that comes through the area that I'm standing in is unique to this place, but

that water is joining up with the water of the whole biosphere by mingling with other watersheds, by going to the ocean, through evaporating as clouds and coming back as rain. Just the idea that every molecule of water on the planet has been used and reused again and again is a marvelous cosmos-establishing experience. So, the "joys" of chauvinism are easily replaced by the magic of larger biospheric and cosmological participation.

EVANOFF: So we're connected both geographically with people and life in other bioregions and historically with the past and future.

BERG: Exactly.

EVANOFF: Despite what seems to me to be a lot of unnecessary ideological conflict between the various schools of environmental philosophy—deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism, and the like—people in each of these groups seem to be attracted to at least some aspects of bioregionalism. Deep ecology, for example, is big on promoting a change in cultural attitudes and personal consciousness, while social ecology emphasizes decentralized municipal decision- making. Do you see bioregionalism as being a mediating force that might be able to unify or bring together some of these disparate theoretical perspectives?

BERG: One reason why these new ecological, philosophical formulations have been attracted to and have subsequently incorporated a bioregional perspective is because bioregionalism offers an authenticating foundation for the whole ecological premise. People these days are putting the word "eco" in front of everything precisely because they don't want to be identified with the old power and resource manipulating ethos. Reinhabitation as a practical activity does have a fluidity that is unifying. A person can have an ecological perspective but for that person to be able to do something with others and have a social relationship based on an ecological perspective, there must be a social understanding (not an academic or technical understanding) about what our mutual territory is, where we are, and what we relate to each other about. The bioregion comes in as a common vista—this is what we can talk about! Let's talk about the restoration of the natural systems that we live in as a long-term goal, with all of these various perspectives—the social perspective, the gender perspective, the diet perspective, the cosmological perspective—having something to contribute. Words such as "bioregion" and "reinhabitation" shouldn't be seen as the property of some narrow theoretical perspective but as public language.

EVANOFF: What's your interest in Japan?

BERG: The Sacramento River goes into San Francisco Bay and into the California Current and the North Pacific. Salmon which swim in our rivers also swim past Hokkaido Island. We're on the same latitudinal lines as Japan. So it's no longer possible for me to have a "United Statesian" identity. I have to have both a Shasta Bioregion identity and a North Pacific Rim identity in planetary terms. On the one hand, I can say that I'm a citizen of the city of San Francisco, in the county of San Francisco, in the state of California, in the United States of America, in the so-called "free world." Or I can say that I live in the Islais Creek Watershed, of the San Francisco Bay Estuary, of the Shasta Bioregion, of the North Pacific Rim, of the Pacific Basin, in the planetary biosphere of the universe. In this latter way of thinking, which I much prefer, Japan and America are

transpacific relatives.

EVANOFF: How would bioregionalism apply to Japan?

BERG: Well, historically Japan has this great nature philosophy that I can be inspired by. But since the war Japan has had a productivist, modern, competitive system that functions only at the cost of personal freedom, ecological damage, and a really nasty attitude outside the boundaries of the country towards other people's resources and bioregions. There are many segments of Japanese society, however, that are aware of this on numerous levels—of the need for greater personal freedom, greater ecological responsibility, and a harmonious interaction with other people on the planet. Attitudes about peace, nonviolence, and spirituality among the Japanese people are extremely strong. I gave a bioregional tour of Hakuba Valley to local residents and we stood up on a cliff about a thousand feet high looking down on the whole watershed. We had just seen the springs and were observing native plants vs. exotic, water coming into the rice fields, the damage of the Olympics construction, and the power of the watershed. It's a very steep valley, you know. You could tell what the forces are by looking at the flood plain of the river. It's ten times the width of the river on both sides and it's pure rock and gravel. That means that when the snow melts, the water is just roaring through there because of the gravitational pull. That's one of the reasons why Hakuba Valley is so delicate—all the water ends up in the river. There's no place for it to go, no seepage. So here is the natural template of this watershed that was given by natural forces and that people adapted to, and now we're looking at a phenomenon—the Nagano Olympics—that will rewrite the ecological history of this area. This is the historic episode, the modern history-making event of that area. After the Olympics leaves, people will count the future in terms of this event. We can either live harmoniously with this natural area or we can allow it to be degraded and destroyed. It really is a spiritual question. After the tour a woman came up to me and said that she was a teacher but had lost her purpose in teaching. Now, however, she had something to believe in and something to teach the children. "In everything I do I'm going to make this a part of their life," she said. Japanese people have this spiritual dimension which I find absolutely astonishing.

EVANOFF: What exactly do you hope to achieve with respect to the Olympics?

BERG: We're going to try to assess the damage using socio-cultural rather than natural-scientific tools. What I'm hoping personally is that some basis for reparations can be established. The upshot is that this kind of large-scale sporting spectacle promotes a "society of the spectacle" that lasts for a very short time but has a devastating effect on the long-term prospects of natural landscapes. This can't go on. This is an important instance of globalism vs. bioregional sustainability and it has to be opposed.