

A Nature State of Mind

Systemic problems call for systemic solutions, which bioregions are best at delivering **BY SPENCER B. BEEBE & IAN GILL**

IN 2009, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT is taking important steps to restore both nature and the economy. Congress is developing global warming and energy legislation. President Barack Obama is prioritizing green projects in the nation's economic recovery plan. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says that greenhouse gases may endanger public health and welfare.

Yet true restoration—environmental and economic—will not come from congressional legislation, top-down stimulus money, or EPA rulings. Instead, restoration will come from a shift in the relationships between people and their ecologies, as well as from the businesses, policies, and cultural changes that will arise from this shift.

Today, people everywhere face a convergence of economic, energy, social, and environmental crises on a scale and immediacy never before imagined. And people in many places can use capital, technology, and policy to stabilize the economy, tighten energy security, alleviate poverty, and improve environmental conditions. But reliable peace and prosperity will elude humankind unless we change our relations with each other and the environment.

A good first step toward this lofty goal is to start thinking at the scale of “nature states.” Also called bioregions, nature states are defined by their social and geographic coherence, rather than by state or national borders. People organize themselves by nature states, such as the Pacific Northwest, the Mississippi Delta, and the Chesapeake Bay.

By recognizing each nature state's distinctive environmental and geographic characteristics, its citizens can preserve those qualities while building businesses and organizations that take advantage of them. This nature state thinking has the potential to fuel more bottom-up local and regional innovations, which will in turn produce more of what our country really needs, not just more of what we think we want.

Nature states also provide a good scale at which to work. Only systemic solutions solve systemic problems. Cities, counties, and even most states are often too small for systemic solutions, and the world is almost always too big.

This article's coauthor, Spencer Beebe, first learned about regional thinking in Central and South America while running the Nature Conservancy's International Program, and later while founding Conservation International. It was here that he observed intact, ancient wilderness supporting regional economies—for example, regions of Costa Rica prioritized the smaller, long-term economic returns of sustainable forestry over the big,



short-term profits of large-scale environmental destruction. Beebe then brought the thinking back to the West Coast, where he has refined it over the last 20 years at Ecotrust, a Portland, Ore.-based organization that helps local communities achieve what author Jane Jacobs called a more “reliable prosperity.” Bringing together public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations, Ecotrust both develops and executes new solutions to poverty and environmental problems.

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The idea of nature states is not new. Even the EPA talks about them, and organizations such as the Natural Step and the Resilience Alliance promote them as part of the larger idea that the more diverse and intimate the connections between nature, economy, and community, the more resilient all three might be.

What is new is the current opportunity to use nature state thinking. Down econo-

mies need fresh thinking to reinvigorate the market. Innovators who are bound together by a shared affinity for place may more readily supply the systemic solutions to the many challenges that all people now face.

THE NORTHWEST EXPERIMENT

Our nature state—an area comprising the temperate rainforest coasts of Northern California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska—has proven to be a fertile ground for regional business and cultural experimentation. Among Ecotrust’s innovations, for instance, is ShoreBank Pacific, a regional bank that prioritizes community building and stewardship of the environment in its lending. The bank, with \$200 million in assets, remains resilient in the downturn.

In our nature state, entrepreneurs who respect nature and adopt a get-rich-slow approach are thriving, even now. One example is New Seasons Market, a chain of grocery stores in Portland that caters to the region’s reputation for friendliness and delicious locally grown food. The chain carefully chooses its employees, using a lone PhD to interview and hire each person. By understanding the region’s psychology and ecology, the business has developed an almost cultlike following.

New Seasons is not alone. Carbon sequestration businesses tied to our nature state’s forests, clean energy companies connected to our diverse climate, and green construction companies reliant on our abundant natural resources are prospering here. Even politicians and financiers are getting on board with bioregional innovation: A select group led by the governor of Oregon and calling itself “The Oregon Way” is promoting regional, nature-based innovation to leaders in Washington, D.C., with the very real result of green stimulus dollars coming back to Oregon.

THE NATURE STATE RULES

Although people are still writing the rules of nature state thinking, certain guidelines have emerged. One is to measure success in nature’s indicators, not dollars. The singular natural event that has defined the Northwest for thousands of years, for instance, is the return of the salmon—millions and millions of them. People and salmon codeveloped here, together with the forests and grasslands. Salmon decline tells us that our farming, fishing, forestry, transportation, and energy systems are eroding our ecosystems. When 15,000 to 30,000 big, healthy Chinook salmon die within days of entering the Klamath River, as they did three years ago, we know our shepherding of the region is failing.

A second known nature state rule is to build compact cities and towns based on “smart growth” principles and living buildings. Smart growth is an idea that first grew among architects and planners of the 1970s, and it is now a worldwide movement that promotes an ethos of quality housing for people of all income levels, distinct and walkable neighborhoods, compact building design, energy-efficient buildings, and open spaces. Many city governments have adopted smart growth principles and successfully reinvigorated their cities. Portland is a great example: The local government implemented smart growth more than two decades

ago, and now Portland is booming. It is considered to be one of the most livable cities in the nation.

The third nature state guideline is to develop local sources of energy through major investments in a renewable, efficient, diverse, and distributed energy system. Our region—famous for hydropower—is also making major investments in wind, solar, and wave energy. Wind companies are filling Portland’s new-business docket, and wind towers are appearing on farms and open spaces throughout the region. Oregon now generates 20 percent of its energy from wind, with a plan to generate 50 percent by 2025. In addition, regional entrepreneurs and universities are aggressively

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pursuing wave energy to take advantage of the powerful ocean tides of the Pacific Northwest.

A final nature state rule is to restore entire landscapes and watersheds—not just pieces of them. Organizations such as the EPA and the U.S. Forest Service are now funding the restoration of entire marine and land habitats. Some of this land—particularly land that is close to cities—must also be restored or earmarked for organic and local farming. This will promote the rise of businesses that bring healthy food and products to market—particularly new online companies that matchmake farmers with restaurants, grocery stores, and individuals.

PEOPLE IN PLACE

In the midst of the current economic crisis, businesses and individuals who are embracing nature state thinking in our region are testing their own persistence and resilience. Growth for organizations such as New Seasons was modest in 2008. But at a time when the S&P 500 lost more than one-third of its value, any growth is a sign of health.

We know that nature state thinking is not a model for everyone, but it can be profitable, better for the Earth, and better for local communities everywhere. Regional thinking, when matched with regional action, can be more powerful than data, science, money, and technology.

The goal today must be to participate—to innovate, invest, and inspire—in the redesign of regional economy and society. In the years and decades ahead, those communities that have a reliable water supply and access to local, cheap building materials; that encourage dense development within urban growth boundaries surrounded by open space, healthy forests, and productive farms; and that develop diverse, locally distributed sources of energy are the ones that will flourish.

But first, each nature state must release the energy of people in place. That happens through the words of interesting individuals and the rise of original organizations. Even the slightest nod of encouragement will help deploy regional solutions to regional problems. Failure to do so promises only more destruction. ■