

A stylized landscape illustration in shades of green and yellow. The background features a large, rounded mountain peak. Below the mountain is a dense forest of various tree shapes, including tall, thin evergreens and shorter, rounded deciduous trees. The foreground shows rolling green hills with small, leafy plants. The sky is a pale yellow-green with several soft, rounded clouds.

# Planning With The Land

## A Manifesto for Bioregional Thinking

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## Acknowledgements

This manifesto draws from years of professional reflection and the generous contributions of many thinkers, practitioners, and collaborators working at the intersection of planning, impact assessment, and ecological stewardship. Special thanks to the Bioregional Learning Centre, the IAIA community, and the many quiet bioregionalists helping to reshape the future in practice.

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## Author's Note

*On confidence, caution, and the courage to reimagine*

I am not a planner - not in the formal sense, at least. I haven't trained in urban design, land allocation, or zoning policy. My professional background is in environmental assessment: the discipline that asks how proposed developments might affect people, nature, and place. It's a field that has taught me a great deal about thresholds, trade-offs, and the long arc of unintended consequences.

But over the years, I found myself circling around a single, disquieting question: *What are we measuring all of this against?*

Too often, the assessments we conduct are rigorous in method but shallow in context. We analyse impacts, recommend mitigations, and produce documents that satisfy procedural requirements - but the vision behind the project, the plan, or even the policy is unclear, inadequate, or absent. It's as if we're steering the ship with increasing precision, but without any real sense of direction.

That's when I began exploring bioregional thinking - not as a theory to admire from afar, but as a practical response to this recurring gap between intent and impact. The more I read, listened, and reflected, the more I came to see that many of our systems of planning and decision-making are out of step with the ecological and cultural realities of the places they affect. I also came to understand that many of the tools we already have - including impact assessment - could become more powerful if reoriented around place.

This short manifesto is not a technical guide or policy report. It is a provocation - a way of thinking aloud about what it might mean to plan with the land rather than simply around it. It is written from a place of curiosity and commitment. Curiosity, because I know I don't have all the answers. Commitment, because I believe this shift - toward bioregional ways of seeing, planning, and acting - is not only possible, but necessary.

This edition was written to coincide with the Bioregional Workshop at the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) 2025 Conference in Bologna.

IAIA is a global gathering place for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers working at the intersection of development and environment. It is where the future of impact assessment is actively shaped - and where new ways of thinking can take root and spread. Launching this manifesto in that space is both a statement of intent and an invitation to collaborate.

My hope is that you will read this manifesto not as a conclusion, but as a beginning. A starting point for deeper engagement, more courageous conversations, and more meaningful work - in whatever field you find yourself.

Let us move forward together, with humility, with urgency, and with care.

*Rufus Aubrey Howard*

*Bologna, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2025*

## Chapter 1: Why Planning Is the Real Problem

*From mitigation to imagination: how our systems lost sight of place*

We live in a time of urgent transition. The climate is changing. Ecosystems are collapsing. Communities are under increasing pressure. And yet, despite this sense of emergency, our systems for planning and development remain curiously out of step with the reality we face. In theory, planning is the means by which we shape the future of our shared places. But in practice, most planning systems have become tethered to outdated models of growth that are reactive, short-term, and extractive. They tell us where we can build, but rarely help us ask how we should live. They reduce living landscapes to zoning codes and spatial allocations, abstracting away the cultural, ecological, and emotional texture of place.

Over the last two decades, working in environmental impact assessment (EIA), I've seen how these disjointed systems ripple downstream. What was originally designed as a safeguard - an honest reckoning of how development might affect nature and society - has too often become procedural,

toothless, or misaligned. We conduct assessments that measure impacts against shallow, outdated policies. We identify effects, suggest mitigations, tick the boxes, and move on, even when the fundamental vision guiding the project is weak or incoherent. This isn't the fault of individual practitioners. The problem is structural.

Impact assessment, by its very nature, is reactive. It doesn't generate a vision; it responds to one. And herein lies the rub: if we are not collectively articulating what a thriving, sustainable, and just future looks like for each place, then what exactly are we measuring impacts against? Increasingly, EIA (or ESIA internationally) becomes an exercise in evaluating whether a proposal is marginally acceptable, rather than whether it is truly appropriate, regenerative, or aligned with place-based values.

This points to a deeper omission in how we govern land and development: *we are not planning in alignment with the land and their inhabitants*. We speak of sustainability, resilience, and net gain, but we rarely begin with the question of what a specific place actually needs to thrive. Instead of designing policy



and assessment frameworks around the living character of place and its inhabitants, we force development through the sieve of efficiency, political compromise, and administrative convenience. It is no wonder then that assessments can feel ineffectual or developers are surprised by local opposition, it's often because the deeper patterns of land and life were never acknowledged in the first place.

This is where bioregional thinking enters the conversation. At its core, it is a call to plan with the land, not just on it. It urges us to shift our starting point - from lines on a map to watersheds, ecosystems, histories, and communities. It asks us to move from managing land as an abstract resource to understanding it as a co-creator of life. In doing so, it reframes planning not as a mechanism of control but as an act of stewardship.

Bioregional planning offers a different approach - one that does not separate people from nature, policy from place, or knowledge from belonging. It begins by asking: What makes this place distinct? What ecosystems and communities depend on it? What are its capacities and limits? What stories have shaped it - and what futures are possible here?

Rather than top-down imposition, it calls for collaborative visioning, where ecologists, community leaders, indigenous knowledge holders, planners, and developers come together to imagine a shared future. In this vision, planning becomes not a static document but a living agreement between people and place.

Most planning systems, especially in the West, evolved in the shadow of industrial modernity. Their purpose was to order and regulate expansion, not to foster regeneration. They follow political boundaries rather than ecological ones, prioritise economic growth over ecosystem health, and standardise land use instead of reflecting landscape character. Consequently, they are often ill-equipped to address the cascading crises of climate, biodiversity loss, and social inequality.

When we attempt to insert environmental assessments into these shallow frameworks, we are asking too much of a tool that was never meant to carry such weight. EIA cannot deliver transformative outcomes if the vision it measures against is narrow or misaligned. This is why bioregional planning must come first. Only when we have a shared, ecologically

grounded vision of what a place is - and could be - can impact assessment become a tool of integrity and accountability.

This is not an argument for abandoning assessment. On the contrary, I believe it is one of our most powerful tools. But to serve its purpose, it must evolve in concert with a planning system that is itself aligned with life. When assessment is grounded in a bioregional plan, it no longer asks simply how much harm a project will cause, but whether that project contributes to the flourishing of the place. If it doesn't, the answer must be: change it, or don't build it at all.

And yet, too often, we find ourselves measuring impacts not against meaningful goals, but against mediocrity. That is not how transformation happens. You cannot assess your way into better futures without first imagining them.

This, then, is the heart of the issue: our tools are not broken - they are simply being used within systems that no longer serve. What we need is not more data, but better questions. Not faster assessment, but

deeper reflection. Not incremental mitigation, but bold, place-rooted visions.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore how bioregional thinking can reshape not only planning and policy, but the entire cascade of development decisions - from vision, to project, to impact. If you remember nothing else from this chapter, remember this:

*Impact assessment will never be transformational until planning is.*

## Chapter 2: What Is Bioregional Thinking?

*Learning to see - and plan - with living systems*

Most of us have grown up with a certain map of the world in mind. It is a map drawn in lines - administrative borders, parish, counties, electoral districts, city limits and regions. These lines suggest that land can be neatly divided, categorised, and managed from above. They reflect the logic of governance, not of ecosystems. Water doesn't recognise district boundaries. Birds don't stop at planning zones. Soil health doesn't follow property lines.

This inherited way of seeing has shaped how we plan, assess, and manage the land. It has also shaped our assumptions about where knowledge comes from and how decisions should be made. Bioregional thinking begins by challenging that inherited view. It invites us to look again - at land not as a neutral backdrop to human activity, but as a dynamic, living system with its own identity, rhythms, and needs. In doing so, it shifts planning from control to care, from abstraction to relationship.

At its simplest, a bioregion is a place defined not by political convenience, but by ecological coherence. It may follow a watershed, a mountain range, a river valley, or a stretch of coastline. A bioregion is shaped by shared climate, geology, plant and animal life, and often a common cultural or historical identity. It is a place where natural systems and human stories intersect - and where people can begin to recognise their role as stewards, not just users.

But bioregional thinking is more than the naming of places. It is a way of seeing, a philosophy of responsibility, and increasingly, a practice of governance. Where conventional systems divide, bioregional thinking connects. Where planning tends to treat land as inert and interchangeable, bioregionalism reminds us that land is alive, unique, and deeply interconnected. Where assessment often treats impacts as isolated events, bioregionalism reveals cascading effects across systems and generations.

This perspective has evolved over time. Early bioregionalism, as developed by figures like Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann in the 1970s, focused on mapping life territories - using topography,

climate, and ecology to identify regions suited for local governance and self-reliance. These early visions were often idealistic, rooted in countercultural movements and a desire to reinhabit the Earth more ethically. Over time, this foundational idea has been enriched by more critical and pluralistic voices.

Recent scholarship (*see Hubbard et al 2023*) distinguishes between three tendencies in bioregional thought. The first is ontological: treating bioregions as objectively existing, naturally bounded units. This view is powerful for ecological planning but can risk rigidity. The second is critical, which challenges the essentialism of the first and asks us to account for history, inequality, and global interconnections. It reminds us that no place is fully autonomous - that even the most local system is shaped by global flows of capital, labour, and culture. The third is processual - what some now call *bioregioning*. This is not about fixed boundaries, but about ongoing work: forming relationships, building knowledge, and designing systems in dialogue with place.

This last view is especially resonant for professionals. It treats bioregionalism not as a destination, but as a

direction of travel. It frames planning not as a final answer, but as a continuous inquiry into what this place needs and what role we might play in its flourishing. It also offers a pragmatic response to complexity. We don't need to wait for perfect maps or fully defined bioregions. We can begin where we are - by engaging with the systems and communities around us, and asking better questions.

In practical terms, bioregional thinking involves several shifts. It means starting with ecology, not efficiency. It means attending to natural patterns - watersheds, soil systems, species migrations - and using those patterns to guide human activity. It means designing in nested scales: neighbourhoods within towns, within regions, within ecosystems. It means valuing local and indigenous knowledge not as anecdotal, but as essential. It means recognising that sustainable futures cannot be manufactured - they must be co-created, in place.

This thinking is already taking root. Across the UK, for instance, groups like the Bioregional Learning Centre in South Devon are experimenting with new models of place-based planning and stewardship. These initiatives prioritise natural boundaries over



administrative ones, encourage systems literacy among citizens, and develop policy ideas that work with the grain of the land. Internationally, bioregional approaches are being explored in contexts as diverse as tropical forest conservation in Costa Rica and coastal resilience planning in Scotland. What unites them is not a fixed template, but a shared ethic: to ground human systems in the integrity of place.

There is also a deeper psychological dimension to this work. Bioregionalism calls us to *reinhabit* the places we live. That means more than moving to the countryside or growing our own food. It means developing a conscious, sustained relationship with the ecological and cultural life of the land. It means knowing where your water comes from, what species live nearby, what fires or floods have shaped the landscape. It means recognising that we are not separate from nature, but participants in its unfolding.

This has profound implications for planning, policy, and assessment. If we accept that every place is unique, then generic development strategies make little sense. If we believe that flourishing must be

defined locally, then top-down targets lose credibility. If we recognise that every impact is relational, then assessment must be rooted in a deeper story of place.

Bioregional thinking does not give us easy answers. But it gives us a better set of questions. What are the boundaries that matter here - not just legal, but ecological? What stories do people tell about this land? What are its gifts and limits? What would it mean to develop in a way that deepens relationship, rather than eroding it?

These are not abstract reflections. They are the foundation for the kind of planning we now need: responsive, participatory, systems-based, and grounded in care. In the next chapter, we will explore how this way of thinking can be translated into governance and decision-making - through a framework I call the '*Bioregional Cascade*'. It's a way of understanding how values flow into policy, projects, and assessments, and how we might design systems that honour place at every level.

## Chapter 3: The Bioregional Cascade

*Turning vision into action through nested systems of planning and assessment*

It is one thing to talk about seeing the land differently. It is another thing entirely to change how decisions are made, how projects are approved, and how the future takes shape. The challenge for professionals working in planning, policy, or assessment is not a lack of ideas - it is a lack of connection between ideas and action. Bioregional thinking, however powerful, risks becoming aspirational rhetoric unless it can be embedded in the actual systems through which change occurs.

This is where the concept of the bioregional cascade becomes vital. It is not a rigid model, nor a set of instructions. It is a way of understanding how a shared vision of place can cascade through different levels of decision-making - informing planning, shaping policy, guiding development, and ultimately transforming how we evaluate impact. It recognises that transformation does not happen all at once. It happens through alignment - across scales, across disciplines, and across time.

At the top of the cascade is the bioregional vision—a co-created understanding of what a specific place needs to thrive. This vision is not a slogan or a branding exercise. It is a synthesis of ecological patterns, cultural knowledge, and community priorities. It may be articulated through a charter, a landscape framework, or a set of agreed principles. But at its core, it expresses a shared ethic: this is what matters here, and this is what we are working toward.

That vision, to be effective, must find its way into planning and policy. It must be translated into spatial strategies, development plans, land use designations, and resource management rules that reflect the specific identity and limits of the bioregion. Crucially, these policies must follow the logic of the land. They must honour watersheds, soil types, habitat corridors, and cultural landscapes - not simply administrative boundaries. They must be designed not for convenience, but for coherence.

From there, the cascade moves into projects and proposals - the real-world interventions that most directly shape what the future looks like on the ground. These could be housing developments,

transport links, renewable energy schemes, or habitat restoration programmes. In a conventional system, such projects are often shaped primarily by market forces, technical feasibility, or political priorities. In a bio regional system, they are instead asked to demonstrate alignment: How does this proposal reflect the bio regional vision? In what ways does it support resilience, regeneration, or justice?

At the base of the cascade is impact assessment. Here, decisions are tested - not only for compliance, but for integrity. Rather than asking only whether a project will cause harm, assessment in a bio regional context asks whether it contributes to the values and needs that have been articulated upstream. It becomes not just a procedural hurdle, but a mechanism for feedback, learning, and accountability.

This four-part structure - vision, policy, projects, assessment - is not a strict sequence. It is a living system. Each part shapes and is shaped by the others. A visionary assessment might surface gaps in policy. A bold project might catalyse new forms of planning. A shifting climate might require us to revisit the vision itself. The cascade is recursive, not

linear. It invites iteration, adaptation, and co-evolution.

Importantly, the cascade also reveals where breakdowns occur. In many current systems, the vision is vague or absent. Policies are fragmented, abstract, or politically compromised. Projects are reactive, disconnected from context. Assessments are procedural, rushed, and focused on box-ticking rather than meaning. The result is a cascade that fails to flow - where each level becomes a site of friction, not of coherence.

To restore flow, we need to realign our systems from the ground up. That means reimagining each level—not in isolation, but in dialogue. A strong bioregional vision must be place-specific, created with those who live and work in the landscape. Policy must then serve that vision, not dilute it. Projects should be required to demonstrate not just minimal harm, but positive contribution. And assessment must be reframed as a way of upholding collective values - not merely a technical hurdle.

None of this is hypothetical. Across the world, we are seeing early forms of this cascade in action. In

South Devon, the Bioregional Learning Centre has helped shape regional strategy by engaging citizens in systems mapping. In parts of Latin America, indigenous-led plans for biocultural landscapes are influencing conservation finance. In parts of Scotland and the north of England, new governance frameworks are emerging around watersheds and regional land partnerships.

What these examples share is a willingness to think in nested systems. To recognise that every policy exists within a place, every project within a landscape, and every assessment within a larger story. They remind us that transformation does not come from any one tool, but from how tools are used together - in alignment with life.

The cascade also reminds us that everyone has a place in the system. Whether you are a politician or advocate calling for a new vision, a civil servant shaping policy frameworks, a developer designing proposals, a consultant preparing assessments, or a citizen contributing local knowledge, your actions influence the integrity of the whole. The question is not just: *What can I do?* It is: *Where am I in the cascade? And how can I help it flow more meaningfully?*

## Chapter 4: What Bioregional Planning Might Look Like

*Real change begins with alignment. Alignment begins by asking what truly matters, now and in the future.*

If bioregional thinking helps us see the world differently, then bioregional planning is where we start to act differently. It is the bridge between vision and implementation - the space where we translate ecological insight and community wisdom into spatial strategies, land use decisions, and long-term priorities. But this is not simply about better development plans or more inclusive engagement. It is about fundamentally reimagining what planning is for, who it serves, and how it works.

For most of the twentieth century, planning systems in the global north were shaped by a logic of control. Their purpose was to manage growth, regulate land uses, and support economic development through spatial organisation. Even when planning expanded to include environmental and social concerns, the underlying assumptions often remained technocratic and top-down. Land was treated as a resource to be allocated. Communities were often treated as



consultees rather than co-designers. Nature, if considered at all, was relegated to discrete compartments - green belts, buffer zones, mitigation sites - rather than integrated into the whole.

Bioregional planning begins from a different premise. It assumes that land is alive, that people are part of nature, and that planning is not about managing space, but about stewarding place. Its purpose is not simply to direct development, but to sustain the ecological and cultural integrity of a landscape over time. It asks what each bioregion needs to flourish - not only economically, but ecologically, socially, and spiritually - and then seeks to align governance, investment, and infrastructure accordingly.

This approach is not a theoretical abstraction. Around the world, we are seeing early forms of bioregional planning emerge. In New Zealand, spatial planning is being informed by Māori knowledge systems that emphasise ancestral connections to land and water. In parts of the UK, regional land partnerships are experimenting with governance models that follow ecological boundaries rather than county lines. In places like South Devon,

citizens are mapping systems - food, water, energy, soil - and using these insights to shape local strategies. What unites these efforts is a commitment to planning *with* the land, not simply around it.

So what might this look like in practical terms? While every bioregion is unique, certain principles can guide the process.

First, start with the land itself. This means understanding the biophysical characteristics of the region: geology, hydrology, biodiversity, soil health, climate patterns. But it also means attending to cultural landscapes, place names, oral histories, and the stories that give meaning to place. Planning must begin with listening - not just to data, but to experience, memory, and pattern.

Second, plan within ecological boundaries. This means letting watersheds, habitat corridors, and landscape character guide the spatial frame - not just legacy administrative zones. It doesn't require the wholesale replacement of existing governance structures, but it does call for nested, layered approaches that honour the grain of the land.

Third, centre communities as co-creators. This goes beyond consultation to genuine collaboration. It means recognising that local people - the inhabitants - carry knowledge essential to resilience and justice. It also means creating spaces where diverse voices - including indigenous, marginalised, and youth perspectives - are not only heard but integrated.

Fourth, design for regeneration, not just mitigation. Planning must no longer be about managing decline or slowing damage. It must actively restore degraded systems, rebuild ecological function, and support community healing. This includes nature-based solutions, circular economies, and land use strategies that enhance biodiversity, carbon storage, and climate adaptation.

Fifth, align development with place-based goals. Bioregional planning sets clear priorities - whether for housing, transport, food systems, or industry - and ensures that all new proposals are tested against those goals. Development becomes not just permissible, but purposeful.

And sixth, treat planning as a living, adaptive process. A bioregion is never static. Climate change,

migration, ecological shifts - all require planning systems that can evolve. This means building in feedback loops, monitoring indicators that matter to the place, and allowing plans to be adjusted through learning.

Importantly, bioregional planning does not reject existing tools. It reframes them. Strategic environmental assessments, spatial development frameworks, neighbourhood plans, landscape character assessments - all can be repurposed through a bioregional lens. What changes is the intent behind them: from compliance to care, from growth management to place stewardship.

Let us imagine, for a moment, what a bioregional plan might include. It might begin with a landscape narrative - describing the character, dynamics, and stories of the place. It would map key systems - water catchments, soil types, biodiversity corridors, food and energy flows. It would articulate shared values and goals - such as equitable access to nature, climate resilience, or local economic sufficiency. It would set spatial priorities - where to restore, where to protect, where to build, and how. It would identify the governance mechanisms needed to hold

the plan in place, including who is responsible, how decisions are made, and how progress is reviewed.

Such a plan would not be a fixed product, but a platform for ongoing conversation and coordination. It would be rooted in the place it serves and shaped by the people who care for it.

This may sound ambitious, and it is. But it is also necessary. The planning systems we inherited were not designed for the challenges we now face. They were built for a world of stability, not disruption; of separation, not interconnection. If we are to respond effectively to climate breakdown, biodiversity collapse, and social fragmentation, we need tools that reflect the complexity of the living systems we inhabit.

Bioregional planning offers one such tool. It does not promise simplicity or control. But it offers something better: a framework for navigating uncertainty with integrity, creativity, and care.

In the next chapter, we turn our attention to impact assessment - the domain where many of these questions become urgent and contested.

## Chapter 5: The Role of Bioregional Impact Assessment

*From compliance to contribution—rethinking what we assess and why*

How can we evolve assessment practices to serve bioregional goals? What does it mean to evaluate a project not only in terms of harm, but in terms of contribution? And how can professionals begin to shift their practice now, even within existing systems?

Let us go there together.

For those of us who work in environmental impact assessment, the frustrations are familiar. We spend months gathering data, coordinating consultants, engaging with stakeholders, writing and reviewing reports. And yet, too often, by the time the assessment is underway, the decisions that matter have already been made. The project has momentum. The timeline is set. The space for influence has narrowed to the margins. What remains is less a question of *should we do this?*, and more a question of *how can we get through this?*

Impact assessment, as it currently exists in many jurisdictions, has been hollowed out by the very systems it was meant to hold accountable. Originally conceived as a tool for transparency, participation, and environmental protection, it has too often become procedural - a checklist to satisfy regulations, a defensive strategy to avoid legal challenge, or a bureaucratic hoop to jump through before construction begins. It is widely criticised by politicians, developers, local authorities, and often the communities when they don't agree with its findings.

Yet, even after 20 years of practice and critique, I still believe in the potential of impact assessment. The same politicians, developers, local authorities and communities that bemoan EIAs are just as quick to champion the importance of an EIA - when it aligns with their existing views and values.

At its best, it is one of the few formal tools we have that asks difficult questions about what we are doing to the world. It can expose hidden costs, amplify community concerns, surface long-term risks, and create moments of pause in an otherwise relentless development pipeline. But for it to fulfil this

potential, it needs to be re-grounded in something deeper—a meaningful, place-based vision of what matters.

This is where *bioregional impact assessment* begins. Not with methods or matrices, but with purpose. The central question is not: Have all the required steps been followed? but: Does this proposal align with the identity, integrity, and future of this place?

To answer that question, we need a different foundation. Conventional assessment frameworks are built on generic assumptions about significance, thresholds, and mitigation. They rely heavily on baseline conditions and standardised criteria. But if we acknowledge that every place is ecologically, socially, and culturally unique, then our assessments must reflect that uniqueness. We must begin not with the project, but with the bioregion.

A bioregional impact assessment starts by understanding the living system in which the project is proposed. This includes ecological features like habitats, species, soils, and watersheds - but also cultural dimensions: land use traditions, indigenous rights, community narratives, local economies. The



assessment becomes an act of storytelling as much as analysis: What is this place? What matters here? What is at risk - and what might be possible?

From there, we evaluate not just potential harm, but potential contribution. Does this project support or undermine the bioregional goals that have been co-created through local planning? Is it aligned with efforts to regenerate ecosystems, build resilience, or enhance community wellbeing? Does it help reinhabit the place, or does it reinforce extractive patterns of disconnection?

This reframing of purpose has implications for every aspect of assessment practice. Scoping becomes more meaningful, because it is rooted in a shared understanding of what matters. Alternatives are taken seriously, because the baseline is not inertia, but the region's vision for its future. Significance is defined relationally, not just quantitatively. And mitigation is no longer a technical fix, but a question of design integrity: how can this proposal be reworked to deepen its alignment with place?

Bioregional impact assessment also requires us to think across systems and scales. A project cannot be

assessed in isolation. Its upstream drivers and downstream effects must be considered—its carbon footprint, its impact on hydrological cycles, its influence on housing markets, food systems, or social equity. In a bioregional frame, assessment becomes a tool for systemic literacy - revealing how a single intervention fits into a broader web of relationships and pressures.

Equally important is the role of participation. Communities must be engaged not as consultees, but as co-assessors. Their lived knowledge, place-based insight, and values are not peripheral - they are essential. A bioregional assessment process creates space for diverse voices to articulate what they see, feel, and know about their region. This makes the process more democratic, more insightful, and ultimately more robust.

Of course, this kind of practice challenges current norms. It requires more time, deeper collaboration, and a shift in mindset - from procedural defensiveness to genuine inquiry. But it also leads to better outcomes. Projects that emerge from this process are more likely to be supported, more likely to succeed, and more likely to endure. Because they

belong to the place, and to the people who care for it.

Let us be clear: bioregional impact assessment is not a wholesale rejection of existing frameworks. It is an evolution. It takes what is good about assessment - its structure, its rigor, its potential for transparency - and roots it more firmly in context. It asks professionals to become not just technicians, but translators - helping proposals speak the language of the land.

In practical terms, a bioregional assessment process might include the following:

- Review the project in comparison to the bioregional profile set out in the bioregional plan and vision: mapping ecological systems, cultural landscapes, community priorities, and governance arrangements.
- Align scoping with potential impacts and contributions to bioregional goals: ensure assessments ask questions that matter to the region's future.

- Evaluate contribution, not just impact: ask whether the proposal advances resilience, regeneration, and justice.
- Co-create assessment criteria with local actors: ensure that significance is defined in terms of local values.
- Use the process as a moment of learning: reflect, adapt, and revise in partnership with community and ecological indicators.

This is not a utopian vision. It is a necessary adaptation. The world is changing, and our tools must change with it. Climate instability, ecological degradation, and social fragmentation demand assessments that are responsive, relational, and resilient.

In the final chapter, we will return to the bigger picture. What does it take to embed bioregional thinking into our institutions, our professions, and our everyday practices? How can we move from isolated experiments to a widespread culture of planning with the land?

## Chapter 6: A Call to Action

*Planning with the land starts where you are*

Bioregional thinking, for all its complexity, begins with something simple: a sense of place. It reminds us that change does not begin in policy or technology or theory - it begins in relationship. Relationship begins wherever we are, right now, rooted in the living systems that sustain us. That is the heart of bioregionalism - not an abstract ideology, but an invitation to see, feel, and act differently within the landscapes we inhabit.

Across the world, this invitation is already being accepted. In Devon, watershed partnerships are redrawing planning conversations around rivers, not roads. In Kent, the ancient woodlands of the Blean are being re-wilded using locally extinct species re-introduced into their historic ranges, helping restore missing key stone species and revitalising degraded ecosystems. In Costa Rica, conservationists and communities are co-managing forest systems by respecting biocultural landscapes. These efforts are not waiting for perfect legislation. They are doing the

work now - building tools, institutions, and cultures that honour place.

What they share is not uniformity, but orientation. They point in the same direction: towards life. They recognise that the systems we inherited - designed for control, speed, and scale - are no longer fit for the conditions we face. In their place, they are cultivating systems built on responsiveness, participation, and resilience. This is not about returning to some imagined past. It is about facing the future with our eyes open, and our feet firmly in the soil of the places we belong to.

That work can take many forms. If you are a planner, you can begin by mapping differently - looking at catchments, habitats, soils, and storylines. Ask: What if our plans were shaped by the character and capacity of this landscape, rather than the logic of bureaucracy? You can convene across boundaries, drawing together people who do not normally sit at the same table: landowners and conservationists, councils and communities, engineers and educators. You can design policies that make sense ecologically, not just administratively.

If you are a policymaker, you can support frameworks that decentralise knowledge and power. Create space for collaborative planning at landscape scale. Enable communities to shape their own futures through shared stewardship. Recognise that good policy does not command from above, but enables from below.

If you are an impact assessor, you can frame your work in terms of alignment, not just avoidance. Begin with a vision of what this bioregion needs to thrive - and ask whether the proposal enhances or undermines that vision. Don't just describe impacts; explore contributions. Don't just study effects; ask about purpose. Make your baseline a story, not just a spreadsheet.

If you are a developer or funder, ask more of your projects. Fund assessments that go beyond compliance. Support proposals that contribute to regenerative systems. Embed place-based goals into your due diligence. The return on investment is not only economic - it's ecological, cultural, and intergenerational.

If you are a citizen - of a place, a profession, or a community - you have agency too. Learn the shape of your watershed. Join or start a conversation about what your region needs to flourish. Ask your local council: What are we planning for? and who is it really serving?

This is not easy work. It involves unlearning habits, challenging norms, and sitting with complexity. It requires humility, collaboration, and patience. But it also offers something rare in our time: coherence. A chance to align what we know with what we do. A chance to move beyond the fatigue of crisis management and into the clarity of systems change.

Throughout this manifesto, I have tried to show that bioregionalism is not a utopia. It is already happening - in pieces, in practice, in networks and experiments. The task now is to build on that momentum, connect the dots, and deepen the work.

Bioregional planning is not a silver bullet. It won't solve every conflict or prevent every loss. But it gives us a better compass. It helps us navigate the overlapping demands of ecology, equity, and development with greater honesty and care. It allows



us to ask - not just what each individual or company can get away with - but what we owe to each other, and to the land.

The real power of bioregionalism is that it does not belong to any one profession, sector, or ideology. It is a framework that anyone can enter, and that everyone can shape. It belongs to the planner and the poet, the farmer and the facilitator, the policymaker and the activist. It invites us to do our work differently - wherever we are, and whoever we are.

So let this be your invitation.

If you've made it this far, then perhaps you are already part of the shift. The shift from managing impacts to cultivating care. From zoning land to stewarding place. From planning around the environment to planning with it.

There is no one way forward, but there is a shared direction: towards responsibility, towards relationship, and towards regeneration. Start there.

## Appendix A: Bioregional Planning Principles

*A working compass for designing with the land*

This set of principles is not a map, but it can be a compass for practice:

1. **Plan with the land, not just on it**  
Begin with the ecological and cultural identity of the place. Let topography, water systems, habitats, and histories shape the planning frame.
2. **Recognise each place as unique**  
Avoid generic policies and one-size-fits-all solutions. Let local knowledge, traditions, and relationships guide decision-making.
3. **Design for long-term stewardship, not short-term gain**  
Prioritise resilience, regeneration, and intergenerational equity over expedience and efficiency.
4. **Align projects with shared visions of thriving**  
Assess proposals based on their contribution to a collectively defined bioregional vision - not just their ability to meet regulatory thresholds.

5. **Decentralise knowledge and decision-making**

Create space for participatory governance, peer learning, and community-led planning. Respect the legitimacy of lived and ancestral knowledge.

6. **Start with relationships, not regulations**

Planning is not just about land - it is about people, power, and trust. Build the social infrastructure that allows good decisions to emerge.

7. **See planning as a living system**

Treat plans and assessments as iterative, adaptive processes. Embed learning, feedback, and flexibility from the outset.

8. **Hold space for beauty, justice, and belonging**

Don't lose sight of the emotional and ethical dimensions of place. Planning should help people feel at home - in their landscapes, and in their lives.

## Further Reading and Inspiration

The following texts and authors have helped shape the thinking behind this manifesto. Some explore bioregionalism directly; others offer poetic, philosophical, or practical perspectives on place, planning, and belonging. These works are recommended not as a syllabus, but as a starting point for readers, inspiration for the journey into bioregional thinking.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

Arne Naess, *The Ecology of Wisdom* (2008)

Bill Devall & George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (1985)

Claire Williams, *Negotiating Bioregional Citizenship*, *Futures*, 38(6), 747–757 (2006)

Doug Aberley, *Futures by Design* (1994)

Ella Hubbard, Samuel Wearne, Krisztina Jónás, Jonny Norton & Maria Wilke, *Where are you at? Re-engaging bioregional ideas and what they offer geography*, *Geography Compass*, 17(10), e12722 (2023)

James Rebanks, *English Pastoral* (2020)

Masanobu Fukuoka, *The Dragonfly Will Be the Messiah* (2021)

Molly Scott Cato, *The Bioregional Economy* (2012)

Peter Berg & Raymond Dasmann, *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Framework for Living* (1977)

Robert J. Johnston et al., *Practical Bioregionalism: A Philosophy for a Sustainable Future*, *Futures*, 38(6), 686–696 (2006)

## Planning With The Land

Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty & Karla Armbruster (eds.), *The Bioregional Imagination* (2012)

Various Authors, *The Schumacher Briefings* (2000–2010)

*Rekindling Community*

*Sustainable Education*

*Creating Sustainable Cities*

*Bioregional Solutions*

*Small is Beautiful in the 21st Century*

*The Biochar Debate*

*The Natural Step*

*The Ecology of Money*

*Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability*

Various Authors, *The Bioregional Series*, published by The New Catalyst (1985–2005)

*Home!: A Bioregional Reader*

*Bioregionalism: The Bioregional Vision*

*Crossing the Rubicon*

*The Biosphere and the Bioregion: (a collection of Peter Berg's writings)*

*Our Ecological Footprint*

*Reinhabiting Cities and Towns*

*Mobilizing the Green Imagination*

*My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*

*The Better World Handbook*

William E. Rees, *The Future of Bioregions and Bioregional Planning*, *Futures*, 38(6), 713–722 (2006)

## About the Author

Dr. Rufus A. Howard is an environmental consultant, educator, and advocate for systems-based sustainability. A Chartered Environmentalist with over two decades of experience in environmental impact assessment, planning, and policy, he leads Greenfriars - a UK-based consultancy focused on ethics-driven, place-based advisory work. Rufus is a Fellow of IEMA, a registered Environmental Auditor, and registered Principal Environmental Impact Assessment Practitioner. He is passionate about aligning environmental decision-making with ecological realities, and about the power of bioregional thinking to reshape how we plan, assess, and inhabit the future. He lives and works between rivers and ridgelines, welcoming the return of the bison to the Blean, and is learning - still - to listen to the land.

## About Bison Books

Bison Books is an independent imprint of Greenfriars Publishing, dedicated to exploring place-based ideas for ecological and cultural renewal. Based in the UK, the imprint will focus on publishing works in The Bioregional Series - a growing collection of manifestos, reflections, and tools for reinhabiting our world with greater care and connection.

To learn more, or to connect with the project, visit:

[www.bioregion.uk](http://www.bioregion.uk)

Rufus Aubrey Howard is an environmental practitioner and wayfinder, raised on the Isle of Wight and now rooted in the ancient forest of the Blean near Canterbury, Kent. His work moves between policy, practice, and place - seeking ways to live more attentively with the land. *Planning with the Land* is his first book under Bison Books.



*“What we need is not more data, but better questions. Not faster assessments, but deeper reflection. Not incremental mitigation, but bold, place-rooted visions.”*

*Planning with the Land* is a manifesto for a new kind of environmental decision-making - one rooted not just in regulation, but in relationship. Drawing on bioregional thinking, systems science, and lived experience, Rufus invites planners, assessors, policymakers, and citizens to imagine how we might work with the land, rather than simply upon it. Short, provocative, and deeply grounded, this book is both a reflection and a call to reinhabit the world differently.



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