

# Where We Live

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As members of the diverse eco-systems that make up the delicate, intricately interwoven mantle of earth we call the biosphere, we have the opportunity to participate in its fibers, its functions, and its fate. Humans, for as long we've been around, have always played a significant role within these communities. Perhaps at first this was only because we were relatively high on the food chain. But today the ecological impacts of industrial forest "management" and the "war on terror," amongst other activities, are glaringly devastating. Some where along our co-evolution with the regions we know as home, we took off on a discordant trajectory.

Ethno-botanical accounts of the cultures indigenous to North America illustrate the use of over a thousand plant species for food. Today, we incorporate only a couple of dozen species into our regular diets, and just a handful account for the majority of global caloric intake. Daily interaction with the landscape, required of a culture dependent on hundreds of species of local plants, animals, and fungi, necessitates a deep understanding of the members, habits, and characteristics, of the inhabited eco-system. Today our food travels an average of 1,500 miles before arriving on our plates while fertile farmland and remnant wildlife habitat are paved over for strip-malls. As a result, our understanding and connection to the landscape suffer.

If we as a species desire to be included in the further evolution of this remarkable, spinning ball of dust we call home, we need to regain intimacy with the landscape. We have access to the collective wisdom that would allow us to become co-creators with the landscape. With enough committed effort and hard work, a sustainable future based on ecological principles and rooted in social justice can manifest in a variety of ways, depending on the character of the region. Foundational to this future is the strengthening of community - from an interpersonal to an eco-system level. Implicit in this is the knowledge of where we live. Sustainable answers to many of our problems will begin at home and will tend towards the vernacular.

The rediscovery of a vernacular culture, a culture that reconnects with the idiosyncrasies of our bioregions is a long, yet necessary journey we humans must make. Overcoming the perceived human-nature duality of our culture begins at home. From the foods we eat to how we treat our diseases, and from what we eat out of to how we build our houses, our daily choices have an impact whether intended or not on the other species we share the biosphere with. For eons, humans have sought their sustenance close at hand. Whether the use of the cedar tree for buildings, clothes, tools, baskets, and medicine by the indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest, or the apple eaten from the tree in Central Park, there is an understanding that the plants around us will support us.

Because so much of the environmental destruction perpetuated in the name of creature comforts goes on behind the “idiot strip\*,” we have no impetus to modify our behavior. If we have a personal relationship with the sources that supply our needs and our wants, we may pay more attention to making them re-sources. Whenever I take Oregon Grape (*Berberis nervosa*) tincture, for the onset of a cold, or topically for the fungus between my toes, I can’t help but think of the brutal clear-cuts just over the ridge from where I harvested it. At the same time, re-planting the tops as I harvest the rhizomes makes me an active participant in the renewal of this plant -an important ally in this climate characterized by six soggy months a year. Knowing this puts a spring in my step while traipsing through the old-growth forest eating huckleberries.

There is evidence to show that the cultures indigenous to our region were gardeners stewarding the abundance of the mountains and valleys around them. One needs look no further afield than the Willamette Valley to see examples of the way traditional gathering cultures manipulated their environments. Pre-European-settlement, the valley was characterized as a savanna of sparsely scattered oaks that provided acorns and wildlife habitat. This open landscape, maintained by regular burning by the indigenous inhabitants, encouraged an abundance of species that provided the major food resources of Camas and Tarweed (*Madia spp.*) amongst others.

A sustainable culture - a culture that takes its lessons from the landscape, as opposed to a culture that imposes its every whim on the land - is possible. Through careful observation and integrated design, we have the possibility of providing for our needs in a manner that not only does not infringe on the health of our community, but actually benefits the whole.

Catching the rain from my roof, to provide water for cooking and cleaning, and using a composting toilet, free me from the modern sewer system and put me in touch with both my resource use and my “waste.” By the same token, the salad mix carpeting parts of my yard, provides nutritious greens year-round, without using extra energy trucking lettuce north from California. Fall-harvested garlic and the seasonally available veggies and herbs should keep me healthy. If this fails, there are a number of powerful, native, and introduced, wild, medicinals that will counter any pathology.

The resources for bioregional self-reliance are abundant. Stewarded in a way that makes room for all of their inhabitants, the ecosystems we live in will continue to support us well into the future. A different manner of interacting with our surroundings may require a reassessment of our “standards of living,” yet at the same time it could greatly increase our quality of life. Our future depends on the choice between manufactured standards of living and life itself. All we need to do is plant the seeds and pay attention.

*\*[“idiot strip” is a reference to the belt of trees along Oregon’s highways, hiding the clear-cuts from the traveling public]*