THE Tarrytown LETTER

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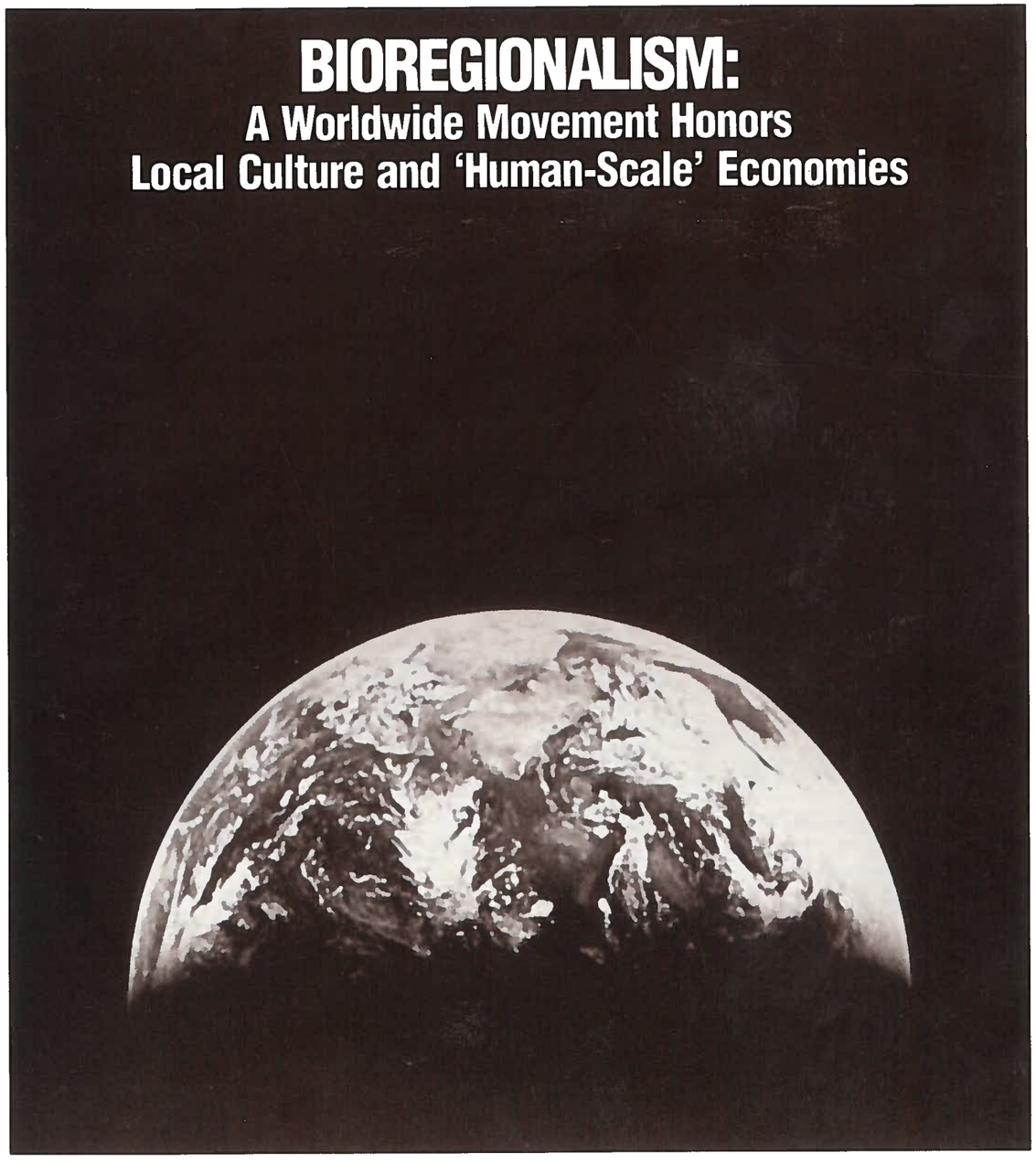
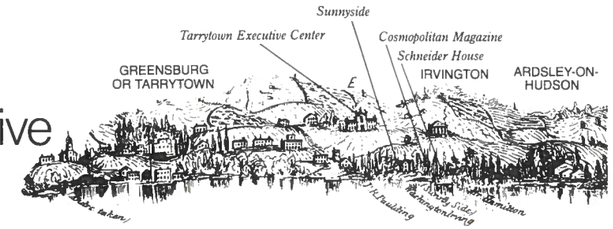
BIOREGIONALISM:
A Worldwide Movement Honors Local Culture and 'Human-Scale' Economies



Bioregionalism:
A Better Way to Understand Where You Live



Thomas Berry is an educator, environmentalist, activist and priest. He authored the United Nations' World Charter for Nature and is a historian of the Hudson River Valley and creator of the Center for Earth Studies in Riverdale, New York. A founding father of the bioregional movement in the U.S.—and a worldwide advocate of small, self-sustaining systems—Berry recently talked with The Tarrytown Letter about the widespread effects of this new philosophy. Most radical is his belief that people don't need nations at all—that bioregional groups, organized around geographical areas that have a sense of natural completeness, would make human settlements not only more livable but less vulnerable to war and power politics. Here is what he said:

Tarrytown: Bioregionalism is a new word for some—and an awkward one. Can you tell us what it means?

Berry: A bioregion is simply an identifiable geographic area whose life systems are self-contained, self-sustaining and self-renewing.

Tarrytown: Why is it important for us to recognize these systems?

Berry: First of all, we must start to look at the way the entire planet functions. It's not limitless, and it's not homogeneous. The planet expresses itself in scores of varied living systems. We have to be able to grasp these units of life. A bioregion, you might say, is a basic unit within the natural system of the earth.

Tarrytown: How can you identify a bioregion?

Berry: By its chief natural resource. You have rain forest systems, arctic systems, plains systems, coastal systems, mountain systems. Another way to define a bioregion is in terms of watersheds. Take the Lower Hudson River basin from Troy to New York City; this is a "megasystem" with a large number of sub-systems, all bound together by the river.

Tarrytown: What's unique about the Hudson River Valley as a bioregion?

Berry: For one thing, it's a place where many systems meet. For instance, the Canadian vegetation meets with what's called the Carolingian type. The River Valley is also one of the great migration

The Hudson as a developing bioregion.

paths. It's a place of meeting, integration, interaction.

It's also unique because the Hudson is dominantly an estuary or a drowned river. It was once known as the river that flows both ways. The greater volume of the lower Hudson is really incoming sea water. Further north, it's dominated by the fresh water current from above. On the whole, it's rather short—there are something like 90 rivers in this country that are longer. Yet it's special because it's something of a fjord.

Tarrytown: How has the Hudson Valley bioregion changed through the course of history?

Berry: From the start it was extremely important in the settling of America. New York City grew importantly because of the Erie Canal. It enabled the river basin to be in contact with the center of the continent. But it also enabled the Hudson Valley to live by tapping other regions.

Central New York was once a grain-producing area up into the Mohawk Valley. But then the grain-growing sections moved out to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois because we could bring grains into the Atlantic trading system through the Hudson waterways. It was a gain in some ways, but it was also a loss of bioregional integrity because people no longer felt the discipline of self-sufficiency.

The situation now is that every bioregion on the planet is faced with problems of survival. We can no longer tolerate the plundering of one region for the sake of another. It's true that communication and mutual exchange need to take place between bioregions, yet each bioregion needs to articulate its own existence from its own resources. Otherwise it fails to achieve its proper identity.

Some areas do have unique resources. Yet this "single-crop" dependence tends to end up as exploitation. What we're realizing, belatedly, is that the whole colonial process is no longer tenable.

Tarrytown: Colonialism, imperialism and market theory grew from the same philosophical spirit—and at the same time. All are based on the assumption of unlimited markets: "If we can't get it here, we can get it somewhere else." Now the lessons of bioregionalism tell us we're running out of "somewhere else."

Berry: That's right. It's why I talk about the human imperative. Bioregions must develop human populations that accord with their natural context. It means that there's something basic about the balance between the humans and the other life forces in a region. The human is not exempt from being part of the basic inventory in a bioregion.

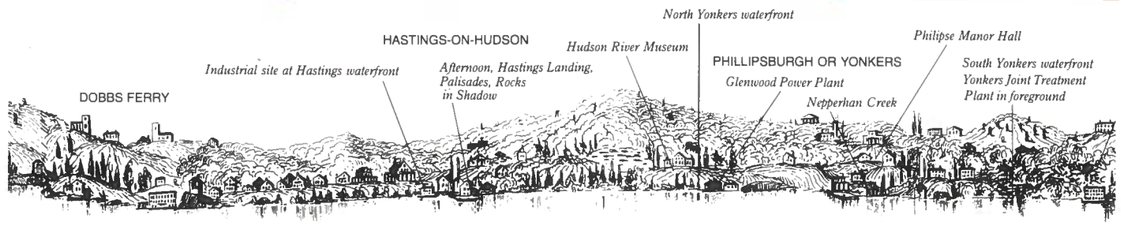
Tarrytown: How has the U.S. become one of many industrial countries exploiting other regions of the world?

Berry: One example of this is what's currently happening in the Philippines. There the pineapple industry is buying up land and making an agrarian society into a labor-intensive system.

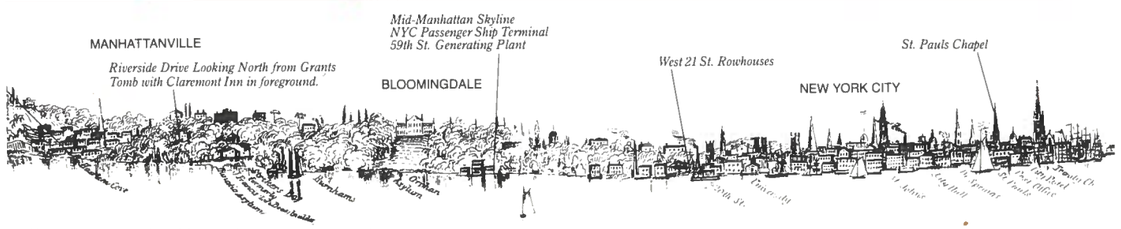
The Philippines—and I've witnessed it—are in a desperate situation. One of the worst offenders is Dole Pineapple. Tens of thousands of acres have been taken over for pineapple growing. This leaves the land just desolate. Yet the local people have no way of protesting. One of the worst enemies of bioregionalism is this kind of absentee ownership—there's no direct feedback, no response.

Tarrytown: There is increasing violence in the regions near Mindinao where relatively wealthy immigrants meet the rural people who are newly dispossessed. How can you prevent this kind of conflict?

Berry: A group of engineers was asked to set up a program of modernization in Mindinao—they recommended the build-



William Wade's "Panorama of the Hudson" was published as a tour guide for steamboat passengers. It is not scrupulously accurate. Some important landmarks were overlooked, others were incorrectly sited. It provides an excellent overview of the river, but not exact documentation.



ing of infrastructures, of energy systems, the damming of the rivers, the building of ranches, the fostering of limited entrepreneurial programs in order to produce a modern development. Being engineers, they had no idea this produces a disempowered, landless peasantry! What they should do is empower the people by teaching them (1) how to keep their land, (2) how to develop their land and (3) how to develop their own culture in a way in which they can provide for themselves and not become serfs who are the beholders to a distant owner.

The thing to do in the Philippines is to identify the bioregional components of the island system and monitor the health of the islands—putting that even before the health of the people. You can't save the health of the people unless you save the health of the area.

Tarrytown: Are there programs that can take these bioregional insights into account?

Berry: Yes, I'm currently working with tribal people from Mindinao who are moving from a hunter-gatherer phase into more settled agriculture. The idea is to move them into small businesses based on tribal crafts—with substinence agriculture as a base—so they don't repeat the errors of industrial nations.

The difficulty is when you get a landless people you get a drifting people. But when people have a relationship with the land, they continue their basic cultural traditions. If they become dependent on a wage, their whole psychology of existence is changed.

It's no longer a question of interacting creatively with natural forces: it's a case of adjusting to money markets. While some *developers* benefit from "modernization," the majority of locals lose, and their culture then disintegrates.

Tarrytown: The basic tenet of ecology is that a healthy ecosystem is based on diversity. Yet we humans have created a monoculture wherever we go, forcing different regions to specialize in order to serve our particular tastes and needs. On a world level, we're enforcing this specialization on other cultures. How can a region be healthy if it's stripped of its diversity?

It's not bad people who are ruining the earth. It's good people. I'm including the total religious, humanistic tradition of the Western world!

Berry: That's one of the most important things addressed by bioregionalism. To the extent that we destroy a culture or a species, or tamper with the balance of life in a given region, we're cutting ourselves off from important knowledge—every culture and every species contains tremendous information.

The great hope is that human sensitivity—with really competent insight into the biosphere—should help us to foster a renewal of life—and heal the natural world.

Tarrytown: How can we educate people to have this kind of sensitivity?

Berry: The difficulty is in the choice—are we going to primarily integrate the human with the rhythms of the natural world, or are we going to primarily integrate the human being into a technological and manipulative world?

We have to ask, *Why* do we educate people? Currently we educate people for survival in the technological world—and this world is presently in a phase of self-destruction.

It astounds me that the educational establishment hasn't the slightest idea of what's happening on the planet. There is no education for regional self-sufficiency or, for that matter, into values or life systems. I recently spoke to a group of scientists at the University of North Carolina. My question to them was, "How can you educate scientists and produce people with engineering capacities who are capable of destroying or extensively degrading the planet through chemical or electronic processes—and give them no reflexive understanding of what their knowledge *means*?"

Educational institutions just assume that technology is benevolent. What's happening is this: it's not bad people who are ruining the earth. It's good people. Good people become the most destructive when their paradigm of what is good becomes dysfunctional: that's the terror of it.

When I talk about good people, I'm including the total religious, humanistic tradition of the Western world! Not only the belief in progress, but the whole biblical, classical tradition itself. Unfortunately, none of our spiritual or humanistic disciplines offer any support for the renewal of the earth.

That's why bioregionalism is such an important corrective.

Tarrytown: You talk about our Western tradition but what about the way the East—China, for example—has handled the earth?

Berry: Even the Chinese, who had what I consider the best cosmological, philosphic orientation, destroyed their land. I guess I'm questioning the whole "civilization" venture. That's why I think we have to re-invent the human at the species level. None of the cultures give us a sufficient survival capacity in practice.

Tarrytown: Still, the problem is we look at the land as infinitely adaptive—and feel it will accommodate itself to a human presence no matter what we do.

Berry: That's true. Yet, unfortunately, our technological processes are irreversible: we're losing 4 billion tons of topsoil every year—and you can't replace this by any scientific process!

The good news, however, is that there are some very positive approaches being taken, particularly the innovative work being done at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York with their bioshelter, their urban renewal project, their relationship with Native American traditions. This is a powerful center for interpreting the earth and interacting with the environment. Some of the best things in bioregionalism are happening there.

They've already had speakers like Rene Dubos, Lewis Thomas, Robert Muller from the UN, John and Nancy Todd from the New Alchemy Institute. Now they've started a new series of talks on our contemporary approaches to the Earth and new paths into the future.

Most of the nation's growth centers talk too-much psychology and consciousness. They're not grounded in earth processes. It's time to move into the Earth Potential Movement.

Tarrytown: Another key issue is respect for the feminine—for values like receiving and nurturing. These virtues are important for the survival of the earth's bioregions. Our technological systems must be in dialogue with the feminine principle to survive.

Berry: Yes, the philosopher and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin *(Hymn of the Universe, The Phenomenon of Man)* acknowledged this. Teilhard said he never had a great development of his thought unless some feminine eye was fixed upon him.

I also think the recent bioregional meetings that are taking place are evidence of a new appreciation of the feminine. This year alone, we had the first North American Bioregional Congress, a meeting of the Bioregional Association of New England, and now the first Hudson-Ontario Bioregional Congress.

Tarrytown: What were some of the more important things that came out of these meetings?

Berry: The First North American Congress was difficult because there were so many people from so many regions, but it was historical—that we can even begin to think this way is important. The second thing that emerged was a proposal for a new regional currency called Green Dollars. It's really a new accounting method that allows people to exchange goods and services via a credit system that bypasses banks and traditional capital exchange routes.

Tarrytown: You've said over-capitalization of goods and services has taken away regional autonomy. You also believe it's impossible for us to reindustrialize, to rebuild our decaying infrastructure—to re-create our roads and highways. You suggest we no longer have the psychic energy to produce these on the same level we once did.

I'm questioning the whole "civilization" venture. I think we have to re-invent the human at the species level.

Berry: I think the unsustainability of the industrial infrastructure is crucial. I suggested to some groups that it's financial slavery to try and keep up all the existing bridges, for example. If we really wanted to cross the river, just think how nice it would be to take a ferry ride to the Battery every morning. We would be best off activating small-scale human solutions like trolleys, light rails and ferries (see page 12).

Tarrytown: We seem to have developed a transportation infrastructure that helps us destroy our bioregions—and then requires us to exploit other bioregions for food and raw materials. Our finances can no longer keep up with the infrastructure we've created.

Berry: Imagine being $200 billion overspent in a single year! In 1928, do you know what the total debt of this country was? $8 billion dollars. That's less than 60 years ago.

Part of the problem, too, is that consumerism has reached an unbelievable volume and intensity.

Tarrytown: The major belief after World War II was that the more we consumed, the faster our economy would grow. And so consumerism became tied to nationalism.

Berry: A very interesting thing politically is the way bioregionalism *breaks down* nationalism. The nation state is one of the key difficulties we face in modern times. I sense that an answer to international antagonism is not in seeking better relations between states, but in breaking down into self-contained bioregions. If this happens, then the nation-state will not be so controlling in the lives of individuals.

Further, it would be virtually impossible to conquer a bioregionalized American continent by nuclear weapons. You can immobilize a nation but you cannot attack a complex association of bioregional entities because each of these would be relatively self-sufficient.

So one of the answers to the nuclear threat is to de-centralize. The more centralized you are, the more vulnerable you are to nuclear attack.

Tarrytown: What about those great areas of centralization—cities?

Berry: We need a certain number of centralized cities—but do we need great metropolitan centers? At some point does a city become more destructive than creative?

And what do we *mean* by cities? Is Los Angeles a city—or is it just an amorphous collection of confusion? Could its economic value be duplicated more effectively without involving such urban sprawling?

On the other hand, we have to realize that some ventures are *appropriately* centralized. Take the enormous American scientific space probes: they require a level of capitalization and human effort that can only be achieved through a vast corporate organization that brings tens of thousands of people together. To what extent do these monolithic structures limit our understanding of the universe in which we live? We have to ask, has the destruction of the earth which has been involved in large scale ventures been a good bargain, considering that the debt is something that all future generations will have to deal with?

Tarrytown: Bioregionalism asks these questions—and suggests that, on a human scale, projects can't get too big, too immoral, or too unwieldy.

Berry: Exactly. It's time for us to wake up and realize that our regional identity is the most important survival issue of our time.