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Nourishing the Bioregional Economy: Essential Resources

In a recent article I summarized arguments for reversing the trend toward globalization of economies and cultures, aiming instead for the flourishing of communities rooted in their bioregions (i.e., regions defined by characteristics of the natural environment rather than human-imposed borders). For readers receptive to those arguments, the fundamental follow-up question is, "How?"

In this piece, I provide a brief overview of what people can do, and are doing, to nourish bioregional economies. There are plenty of examples—far more than can be named here, and certainly more than I'm aware of (I'm just sharing what I've personally found valuable; if you know of an important resource that I've missed, please add it in the comments). After I mention a few general resources, I'll focus on some of the more relevant publications and organizations in each of six broad and essential areas: food, money, energy, communication, culture, and governance. This overview will be mostly US-centric, though bioregioning efforts are taking place all over the world, including those supported by the Global Tapestry of Alternatives and the Bioregional Weaving Labs Collaborative.

General Resources

My bookshelves groan under the weight of accumulating tomes on subjects relevant to building a sustainable bioregional economy. This article is not the place for a full index of titles. However, it may be helpful to start by mentioning just four books that, in addition to ones listed in my previous article, have been helpful for my understanding of the rationale and overall direction of re-localization efforts (I'll cite other books later that explore specific pathways toward a bioregional future):

- *The Community Resilience Reader* (2017), edited by Daniel Lerch of Post Carbon Institute, brings together articles by leaders in community resilience—a field of practice distinct from, but closely allied with, bioregionalism.
- *Ancient Futures*, by Helena Norberg Hodge (1992), describes the author's ongoing personal experience with an intact traditional Himalayan culture undergoing modernization and globalization. She

learns in a thousand ways that "modern" isn't always "better." If you haven't gotten around to reading this one yet, you owe it to yourself.
- *Surviving the Future*, by David Fleming (2016), imagines a sustainably scaled post-growth future in lucid prose that's informed by keen research into anthropology and economic history.
- *Think Like a Commoner*, by David Bollier (second ed., 2025), explores the web of social trust and cooperation that enabled traditional bioregional societies to thrive and explores ways to reweave that web in your own life and community.

It's also helpful to know about three organizations that have led the way in localist thinking and activism:

- Local Futures (founded and led by *Ancient Futures* author Helena Norberg-Hodge) is a mostly educational nonprofit that sees the forces of economic globalization, corporate power, and conventional notions of technological "progress" as drivers of human and environmental crisis. As a solution, Local Futures promotes economic localization and other locally based alternatives.
- Schumacher Center for New Economics, founded to spread the ideas of *Small Is Beautiful* author E. F. Schumacher, promotes projects in decentralism, local currencies, land trusts, and restoring the commons.
- The Transition Network coordinates and inspires hundreds of localization efforts across many countries. Important books generated by the network include *The Transition Handbook* (2008), *The Transition Companion* (2011), and *The Power of Just Doing Stuff* (2013), all by Rob Hopkins, and *The Regeneration Handbook* (2025) by Don Hall.

Local Food

We all eat, and most of us can join in food production and distribution efforts. That's why so many bioregional nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses tend to focus primarily on nourishment of the most basic sort.

A great place to start re-localizing your food system is to support farmers in your region. Shop at farmers markets and take note of the origin of foods you buy at stores. Once you develop the habit of buying local food, it's easy to adapt that habit to other types of purchases as well: always look for a local option first. Diving deeper into local food may entail getting to know some farmers who live close by and inquiring about the issues that affect them, which may include labor costs and availability, input costs, competition with distant mega-growers, changing climate, environmental regulations, and soaring land prices.

Sadly, the average age of American farmers is 58 years, which means that most will be retiring soon. We need more young farmers, but it's a hard profession in which to get started. Three organizations that seek to smooth the way are Greenhorns, the National Young Farmers Coalition, and WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

One of the biggest obstacles for young people wishing to farm locally and regeneratively is access to land. Real estate is expensive, and banks often don't want to loan to prospective young farmers. One solution is farmland

trusts, run by nonprofits that protect agricultural land from development, ensuring it stays in farming through tools like conservation easements. Farmland that legally can't be sold for development is more likely to remain affordable to young farmers.

Food systems also include wholesalers and retailers. If your community has a food co-op or worker-owned organic food store, support it; if not, consider working with neighbors to start a co-op.

You can grow more of your own food, even if you live in an apartment. Take a permaculture course, join a local Master Gardener program, and join (or start) a community seed bank.

A couple of useful general book resources for local food activists are *Financing Our Foodshed* (2013) by Carol Peppe Hewitt and *Rebuilding the Foodshed* (2013) by Philip Ackerman-Leist.

For the ultimate bioregional food experience, learn to sustainably forage and prepare local wild foods. There may be classes available in your area to help you get started. Indigenous people are likely to be your best guides.

Local Money

When many of us see the word "economy" we think "money." Most Indigenous economies functioned for millennia without money, but in today's world money has become essential to personal and community survival. Money has one big downside: inequality. Money enables the accumulation—sometimes to absurd and dangerous levels—of wealth and social power. How can we keep money from undermining community reciprocity and conviviality, while performing currently essential functions? How can we keep distant financial centers from controlling and preying upon local enterprises? Those are tough questions; fortunately, smart people have been thinking about them and have answers.

First, take charge of the creation of money. This can be done in a couple of ways. Since banks have the power to create money, banks should be set up to serve the public good rather than rich investors. Ellen Brown has founded the Public Banking Institute and authored *The Public Bank Solution* (2013), advocating for community-owned banks to keep money local, fund public projects, and counter private bank power. Another approach: credit unions, which are nonprofit local banks; find one near you at America's Credit Unions.

A second strategy for taking charge of money creation is to start a local currency. Some of these have proven durable and useful (see BerkShares), though many local currency experiments have faltered. If this path beckons you, check out **Peter North**'s *Local Money* (2010) for case studies, **Bernard Lietaer**'s *People Money* (2012) for theory and practice, and **Thomas Greco's** *The End of Money* (2024) for inspiration and guidance.

Moving your community away from reliance on money means rebuilding the commons—a project that is the focus of several organizations (see Michel Rauchs's article, "Tools for Growing the Commons"). Other slightly trendier but sometimes misleading names for the commons are "the sharing economy" and "the gift economy."

Some of the most important new thinking about bioregional economics is expressed in "Relationalized Finance for Generative Living Systems and Bioregions" by David Bollier & Natasha Hulst, which proposes an entirely new theory of value, founded in the integrity of the living world, as a basis for community investment. Relationalized finance bypasses "the core premises of conventional finance—value-extraction, private power, economic growth, hierarchical, top-down management," using an array of strategies including mutual credits systems (like time-banking), import replacement, and bounded market structures.

Even if your community has a public bank, a credit union, and a local currency, social health will require further efforts to spread wealth around, lest it pool and lead to increasing inequality. Most remedies require government action (and therefore citizen-led organizing). Examples include the establishment of a living wage or a universal basic income (UBI—see Annie Lowrey's *Give People Money*), and ordinances to restrain disruptive technologies ranging from gasoline-burning leaf blowers to AI data centers. Government-mediated approaches to defeating intergenerational inequality include a wealth tax (or "billionaire tax") and steep inheritance taxes; see Chuck Collins's *Born on Third Base* (2016) for a first-hand account of how intergenerational wealth can cripple families, and how generosity can heal.

If government isn't doing these things, community wellbeing may depend upon charity—the nonprofit sector. Support people-supporters, placing the local ones first on your list. Ken Stern's *With Charity for All* offers history and context, and for an Indigenous perspective, check out Edgar Villanueva's *Decolonizing Wealth*.

Local Energy

More so than money, energy is the basic enabler of all economic activity. Fossil fuels are the world's main current sources of energy, but they are being depleted and causing climate change. They are also extracted, transported, traded, and burned as part of an immense (and immensely complex) global network of corporations and nations. Most alternative energy sources produce electricity, which can be transported easily over long distances and can be used to meet lots of critical needs, such as data processing and the powering of households and businesses. Solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal installations can generate energy locally (although they depend upon national or global supply chains for materials). Therefore, bioregional energy efforts typically focus on four strategies: electrify more energy usage, shift away from fossil fuels and toward renewables, localize electricity generation and control, and find ways to use less energy overall (conserve).

Often, those four strategies converge. For example, my local provider, Sonoma Clean Power, incentivizes its customers to shift to all-electric living—electric vehicles, heat pumps, and induction stoves. It also incentivizes energy conservation measures. At the same time, SCP buys its power almost entirely from providers of renewable energy (fortunately we have the nation's biggest geothermal generation plant close by).

The battle for public control of electricity generation and distribution began at the start of the industry in the late 19th century and continues today. Sandeep Vaheesan's *Democracy in Power: A History of U.S.*

Electrification (2024) is an essential resource for understanding that struggle. If you want to take an active part, add these two phrases to your vocabulary: public (or municipal) power and community choice aggregation. For guidance and inspiration, check out Greg Pahl's *Power from the People* (2012), though it is somewhat dated.

Thinking Locally

Communication tools channel information much the way a power grid channels electricity, and information nourishes minds as food nourishes bodies. So, a healthy bioregional economy requires free sharing of accurate information, especially information that's relevant to the history and sustenance of the bioregion.

That seems a far cry from current reality in most places. Today, most information is produced via giant media conglomerates and distributed via algorithm-driven apps and devices to which many of us are glued for hours each day. The result is a nationalized and globalized babble of voices that are polarized and often bubbling with disinformation. The solution: localize the ways information is produced, distributed, and processed. Think local.

Until recently, most communities had at least one locally produced newspaper. Now, city papers are dying or being swallowed up by conglomerates run by vulture capitalists. The consequence: news deserts. Subscribe, people! When my wife Janet and I make our twice-weekly pilgrimages to our favorite locally owned coffee shop, we always take today's local paper with us so we can sit and read it in plain view. This was once common behavior; these days we never notice anyone else with a paper—only phones. News flash: your smartphone does not hire local reporters. Whoever thought reading a newspaper in public could become a form of activism?

The same goes for radio and TV. Local broadcast media are being devoured by mega-corporations, often ones with far-right political agendas. If you have an NPR or PBS station in your region, become a member. Newspaper subscriptions and NPR station memberships cost money, whereas a lot of the information on your smartphone is seemingly free—but it's "free" only if you don't add in the cost to communities of having little or no local news.

Locally owned Internet providers can offer excellent service (as my provider does). But don't look to any internet or cell signal company to discourage screen addiction. That requires behavioral and cultural shifts rooted in homes and schools.

Schools, at their best, teach not just general knowledge and skills, but how to sort and prioritize knowledge—critical thinking. Since a healthy bioregional economy requires thoughtful, informed people, local schools have a big role to play in nourishing the bioregional economy. Unfortunately, many American school boards have lately been taken over by angry people soaked in disinformation and hate delivered to them via national media. Local teachers—from grade school through university—need to know that their community values them, and that it also values the pursuit of free thinking based on verifiable data, and the pursuit, above all, of ecological wisdom.

Libraries and museums likewise have important roles to play in the healthy

development of local knowledge. Again, these institutions are under assault. Use your library, visit local museums, and encourage others to do so. And encourage these institutions' efforts to showcase the bad as well as the good of regional history—history that tells the stories of everyone, not just wealthy male settlers.

The most important information for nourishing bioregional economies is knowledge of local ecosystems. Although universities, libraries, museums, schools, and governmental and nonprofit organizations can play important roles, Indigenous peoples, with millennia of experience, often know much more. Support efforts to record and perpetuate Indigenous knowledge and languages and support the people themselves in any ways you can.

Nourishing Local Culture

What would Portland be without its bookstores? Sedalia, Missouri, without its Ragtime Festival? Or New Mexico without green chili? Local creative culture gives regions a unique flavor, inspiring regional identity and pride. Cuisine, art, music, dance, poetry, comedy, and theater nourish bioregions across generations of time.

If you like music, attend local performance venues. If you like art, visit your town's museums and galleries. Buy CDs (yes, they still exist) of local performers, and art from local painters and photographers.

Every region benefits from annual festivals—from the French Quarter Festival in New Orleans to the Calaveras County Fair & Jumping Frog Jubilee (Angels Camp, CA). Seasonal celebratory events get people out of their houses, away from their screens, and into the streets, where they can meet one another, listen, sing, dance, eat together, and realize what a great community they share.

Religion is a key component of culture in all societies. Whether you're a believer or not, you can still appreciate the services that houses of worship provide in getting people together for non-commercial and non-political purposes, and the tangible help they often give disadvantaged people in their communities.

Local organized competitive sports? I suppose I could give the subject lip service (re: community pride and solidarity), but it's not really my thing.

Governing Locally

Local government is easy to take for granted. City council meetings can be long and boring, so most people understandably skip them. But city and county governments oversee a wide range of essential functions, including law enforcement, disaster management, education, water delivery, wastewater treatment, road construction and maintenance, trash pickup, building regulations, and environmental protection. So, it's in your interest to pay attention and get involved, at least to some degree. If you have projects in mind for your local government, consult this activist handbook.

Local communities can be overtaken by tyrannical leaders, just as national governments and empires can. (The difference? In the former case the scale of injury is typically far smaller.) So, it's essential for citizens to maintain democratic norms, laws, and other mechanisms that limit the power of

leaders. Never simply trust that the people in charge are competent or benevolent (though, thankfully, they often are).

At the same time, local governments, especially in the US, may increasingly be tasked with defending local laws and people against an onslaught from the federal government. Federal troops are being deployed in the streets of US cities, and members of the community are being swept up and deported or imprisoned without due process. Federal legislation is criminalizing local protests and preempting efforts to responsibly manage energy usage and prevent environmental damage. These are grim and challenging times to be a local leader.

A core part of our response to national political dysfunction must be to strengthen regional governance that puts people and nature first—and bioregional organizations like Regenerate Cascadia are leading the way. For those interested in getting involved in bioregional organizing, r3-0.org (Redesign for Resilience and Regeneration) has been building a knowledge commons and hosting webinars. For those involved in bioregional organizing efforts wanting to connect with others, there's the Turtle Island Bioregional Congress taking place in September 2026.

Bioregional economics and governance are no longer merely the stuff of dystopian/utopian fiction. Necessity is driving a groundswell of interest and experimentation that can hardly be captured in a short article like this. Accounts of the latest global economic outrage or stories about the most recent environmental travesty (hopefully reported in your local newspaper) make it clearer with each passing day: local action is the antidote to national and global unraveling.