Environmental Pragmatism and Bioregionalism

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Bioregionalism can strengthen environmental pragmatism by making it more critical of the status quo and even more environmental, without abandoning pragmatism’s democratic aims. It thus answers important objections to pragmatism raised by Robyn Eckersley. Despite some apparent differences, bioregionalism is a form of environmental pragmatism, as it incorporates practical ethics and is committed to pluralism and democratic community. Bryan Norton’s environmental pragmatism is already close to a bioregional view. After answering Eckersley, the paper concludes by raising the question of whether environmental pragmatists should be bioregionalists.

Robin Eckersley criticizes environmental pragmatism for not being sufficiently radical or even sufficiently environmental. This is due, she says, to its role as a mediator rather than an advocate in environmental issues, a role that weakens environmental pragmatism’s democratic credentials because it fails to empower marginalized groups and interests. Eckersley’s criticisms should not be ignored. On the other hand, bioregionalism, or a bioregional environmental pragmatism, is not limited in the ways that Eckersley identifies. It can take a stronger environmentalist position while maintaining a commitment to pragmatism’s mediator role. Despite bioregionalism’s and environmental pragmatism’s different histories – one a grass roots movement, the other a more academic movement – they have several important things in common. Both emphasize practical rather than theoretical concerns, and see theory as a tool for accomplishing concrete ends; both focus on local action by local communities; both value pluralism. Admittedly, bioregionalists do not usually refer to themselves as pragmatists, and many hold some non-naturalist views at odds with pragmatic naturalism. Nonetheless, I will argue that in terms of its core values, bioregionalism is actually a form of environmental pragmatism. More to the point, I will argue that bioregionalism can address Eckersley’s criticisms while advancing pragmatism’s goal of enhancing public participation.

The present paper first outlines the main ideas of bioregionalism. It then argues that bioregionalism – especially its ethics of reinhabitation – is fundament-
ally a kind of practical ethics, which makes it a form of pragmatism. Next, discussion turns to two central commitments of environmental pragmatism – pluralism and democratic community. Bioregionalism grounds these commitments in local life-places. We will see that Bryan Norton’s pragmatism, which emphasizes place-based community, is already close to a bioregional view. Finally, we will see how bioregionalism can overcome Eckersley’s objections that environmental pragmatism is insufficiently radical or environmental. The paper concludes by asking whether environmental pragmatists should, then, be bioregionalists.

1. Bioregionalism and the Ethics of Reinhabitation

Because it is highly decentralized, both as a movement and a body of thought, a precise definition of bioregionalism is hard to come by. This may be for the best in a practiced-based and constantly evolving cultural movement. Better, says bioregionalist writer Jim Dodge, that definitions emerge from practice than be imposed dogmatically on the movement. This is an admirable pragmatist sentiment. Despite lacking a clear definition, it is clear that bioregionalism is primarily concerned with the ecological health of local life-places and with sustainable ways of living that are adapted to those places. Bioregionalists may take on wider problems that affect other regions and the planet as a whole, but the starting place of concern is local.

A bioregion, etymologically, is a life-place. Normally we might define a region politically, economically, ethnically, or some other exclusively human activity. In contrast, a bioregion is marked out in terms of biotic communities, watersheds and terrain. Or it may be defined by a few dominant species, by a mountain range, a drainage system, or any number of natural features. Bioregions can be identified at different scales, from a small river valley to a large biogeoclimatic zone. The boundaries of a particular bioregion are determined culturally as defining the life-place identified as home by the people living within it. While a bioregion is defined culturally by its inhabitants, it is done so on the basis of the natural features of place, especially those features most important to the local way of life. Significantly, the boundaries of a bioregion are not determined by outside scientists or experts.

A bioregion is a home, a place where human lives are lived. Ask a bioregionalist where she calls home, and she might say the Hudson River Estuary rather than New York City. The place where she lives is not the built environment, but the natural environment that persists under, in and around the built environment that dominates the landscape. As a home to human life, a bioregion is, in the words of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, both “a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness.” It is both a physical place and a way of seeing ourselves in place. For example, as a result of ten years of research, the Mannahatta Project has produced a detailed online and interactive map of Manhattan Island as it was at the time of contact. Users can discover