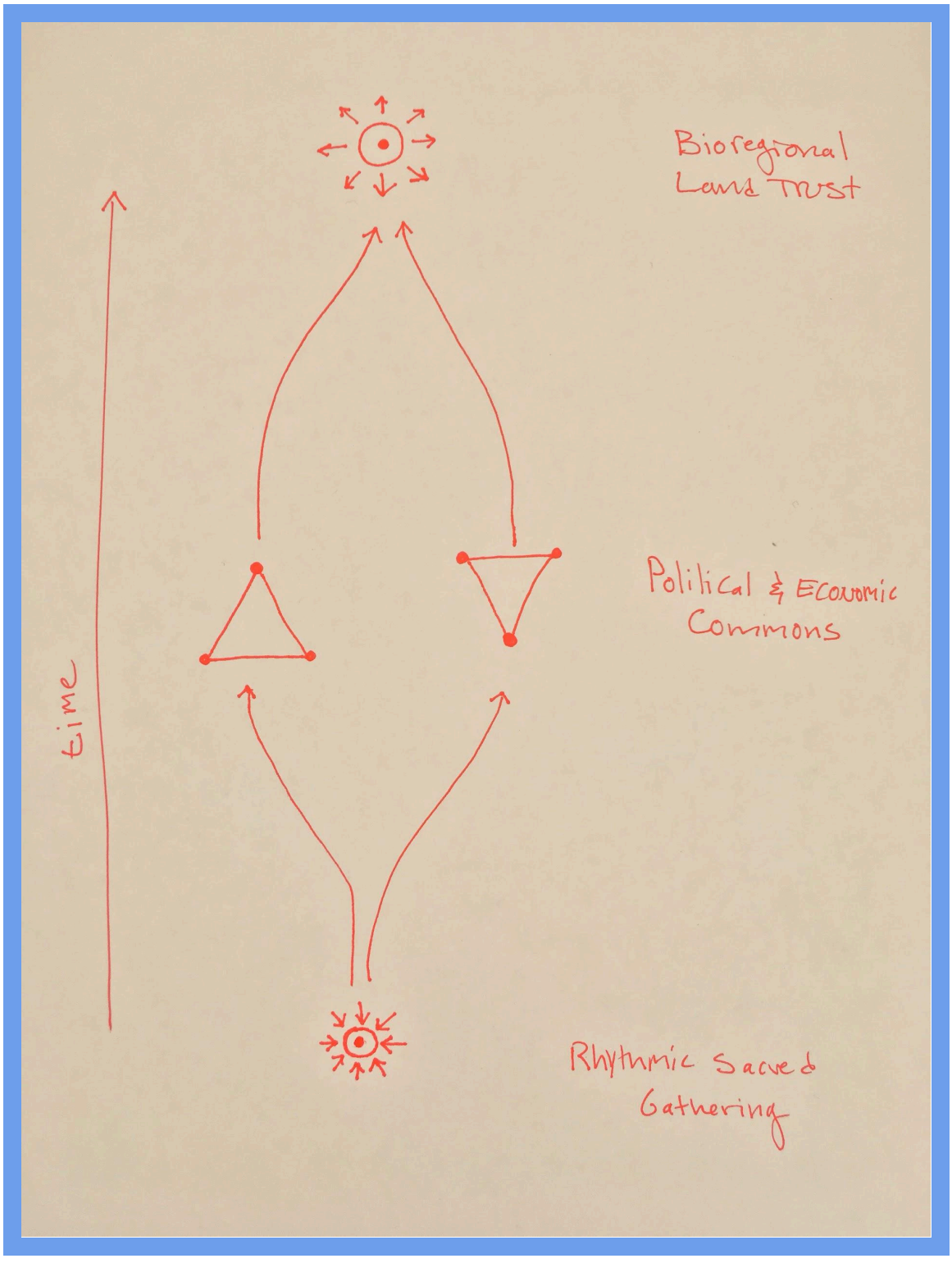
A Strategy to form Bioregional Governance



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Introduction

It is my sense that there is some kind of transition taking place in society. Once trustworthy career paths and institutions are now being questioned and their efficacy is being newly evaluated. If there are in fact improvements to be made, what might they look like and how might investigations be structured?

One of the areas I sense deemable for investigation are the ways people and place coexist. A byproduct of our global economy is that for most of us, our work and material needs are not derived from our local ecosystems. As a result we have atrophied our ability to understand the patterns of the webs of life which surround us. Without such pattern recognition it becomes difficult to discern actions which contribute to life and actions which do not. For these reasons I am called to explore how we might get back to a more place-centered way of life. By integrating best practices from the digital commons with land stewardship practices this document offers a novel approach to learning, prototyping and growing bioregional community.

During elementary school at Play Mountain Place my most vivid memories are from the top of a stone pine I would climb and watch my peers running around the yard. The patterns of their movements fascinated me. I have been interested in people and their environment ever since. That interest has led me to working around the world at the intersection of decentralized organizational models and ecological stewardship projects. Aside from working on a slough of farms and gardens II co-founded the first ecosystem restoration camp in Spain, which has grown exponentially in just a few years to 37 camps in 6 continents. I subsequently co-catalyzed an ecosystem restoration camp regional hub in California for which there are at this point 5 affiliated camps. I have also consulted for permaculture projects in Morocco and Zimbabwe.

My current project is Concow Meadows Research Station, located in the Feather River Watershed of Northern California. We are performing experiments on off-grid village design, ecological stewardship, arts and craftsmanship (using regional materials) and bioregional social movements. What you are now reading came into being while looking around the Concow Basin and asking how it might be possible to cultivate a critical mass of ecological steward teams capable of large scale, but detail oriented rebalancing of the ecosystem. The answer I came to is more research stations where small teams can build capacities while maintaining networked to others in the basin going through their own experiments. I imagine this happening through a conservation land trust which focuses on conserving the practices and cultures capable of stewarding the commons in perpetuity. I see such a conservation trust to be more than a legal entity- more like some sort of emerging governance and culture. This framework offers my best guess on what this emerging space might look like and how to coax it into existence.

The initial motivation to write this was inspired during my simultaneous foray into the cryptocurrency realm as well as the formation of Concow Meadows Research Station which inspired me to ask how emerging tools in the digital commons could be grounded in a place.

While this work draws on fields like organizational development, decentralized organizations, developmental psychology, healing arts, permaculture, crypto currency, open badges, land trusts and festival-rituals this is not a design manual for how to do any of these practices well. This is merely an attempt to see how they might fit together. The links I provide offer more details on each of the domains I investigate. If you are looking for more specifics in terms of 'how to' on a smaller scale I recommend taking a look at Ecosystem Restoration Camps Designer's Manual.

What follows is a strategy for creating awareness and collaboration on a bioregional scale. Essentially it is a 3 step process: 1. Meet in the scared, 2. Form political and economic commons and 3. Create a bioregional land trust legal entity. This process grounds the practices over time into place and offers choreographic suggestions which will lead towards deeper place-based living. This framework does offer loose sequential recommendations. Mainly that it opens with rhythmic sacred gathering and closes with the formation of a bioregional land trust. It does not offer sequential advice beyond that. I advise you to listen to the people and place around you and take advantage of the opportunities to build next steps as they organically arise in your system.

May this framework land well and be of use.

1. Rhythmic Sacred Space

Throughout most of human history public festivals and rituals have been practicedIt all starts with gathering in the sacred. Doing so puts us in the right alignment, asking for relationships grounded in natural cycles. Sacred spaces take place during sacred times including, but not limited to, new moons, full moons, solstices, equinoxes and times of remembering place-based historically important events. Rhythmic Sacred gatherings create the right kind of foundation to build on. When gathering, consider the location. What are ecologically significant points, or places utilized by many. This could be an old tree, a river confluence, a spring, a coffee shop, a park, etc.

By gathering rhythmically in this way old norms are more easily set aside and new ways of relating can be co-created. This way of gathering is not just new, however. Until relatively recently sacred festivals have been central to the cultural, political and economic renewal of human civilization. For more on the history and future of sacred spaces I highly recommend Lawrence Currie-Clark's The Regenaissance - A Metamodern Playbook or his youtube video.

Because most of the gathering in modern society form around actualizing goals for some it is disorienting knowing how to come together in a more nebulous way. I think about it in terms of building relationships before goals. Here is an excellent case study in how to design and facilitate Magical Gatherings.

A further reason for these gatherings is that they allow for a dating pool for teams to form. A good team requires the right intersection of skillsets and background. It is difficult to manufacture that and when it works it is magic. For more on team forming see Richard D. Barllett's Microsolidarity.

2. The Commons

The commons represent the shared norms and resources of a community. During earlier human periods (for example, nomadic tribalism or feudalism) there was a great deal more commons. Lots of this has been lost due to the game theoretic nature of our current economic operating system. Once privatized, how might we move spaces back into the commons? This section outlines areas to build back commons infrastructure. There are 2 domains of commons which are described here, a) the political commons and b) the economic commons. Both the political and economic commons are composed of 3 separate components each.

a. Political Commons

Political commons offers the framework for agreements and processes of engagement of a community. Think of it as the context, or intangible, elements of the process. There are 3 distinct components to the political commons which will be described in this section. They are a constitution, a dispute resolution/innovation process and a decision making process.

● A Bioregional Constitution

A constitution is a document which outlines the principles and processes by which its players agree. In this context players include human and non-human players. By non-human I am referring, but not limiting to plants, animals, insects, soil biologic forms AS WELL AS elemental community members including, but not limited to, hydrological flows, elemental (mineral) flows, atmospheric flows and flows of fire (and even perhaps flows of technology). You can't play together if you can't communicate and communication requires being able to listen deeply. And what I mean by communication is being able to listen deeply to the emerging patterns around and within you. Thus, developing communication proficiency must be central to a mission of the larger bioregional governance project. Another added benefit of excellent communication is that it provides feedback on how your bioregion is connected to other bioregions. For example, where I am in Concow, CA, Pacific Flyway Snow Geese hang out in the winter time while they summer-breed in the Arctic Open Tundra of Alaska as far north as the Wrangel Islands. Understanding patterns of the Pacific Flyway Snow Geese helps me identify how patterns in Conow might be related to patterns in the Alaskan Tundra. A constitution ultimately outlines the rules of the game. Check out the enspiral handbook for an excellent example of a constitution. Check out Richard Bartlett's Patterns for Decentralized Organizing for further details to consider.

- A dispute resolution/innovation process

What does it mean to pragmatically engage limitations? I believe the answer has something to do with eliminating blockages through better design. For commons, some of the best tools to do this is with dispute resolution and innovation.
In both cases their own process design is critical to their success. Design can be thought of as a shared practice which yields ideal results. In order to be resilient the these practices should have an evaluation component built in so to continually improve the process design.

Because the work of engaging pragmatically with limitations builds the resilience of a community it requires resource investment. Resource investment is important for a healthy Bioregion because it mitigates stagnation. Stagnation invites dis-ease. Dispute resolution and innovation are good mechanisms to recirculate surplus, because they contribute to the overall health of your bioregion. If done expertly, they transcend limitations and contribute to resilience. Dispute resolution and innovation also stimulate game rules updates. Make sure that the resources available for these endeavors are equitably available.

In terms of innovation processes I imagine the fruit of the entrepreneurial world (design processes, prototyping tools and seed capital) available for endeavors. Organizations like Stanford d.school, IDEO and Complexity University offer good models. In terms of conflict resolution dialectics check out Process oriented Psychology, restorative justice and Non-Violent Communication offer interesting models.

- A Decision Making Process

Decisions will always be made, with or without a process. A good decision making process brings more awareness, more efficiency and leads to better results. In terms of bioregional governance, having a decision making process is a way of moving from a set of principles and procedures in a constitution into transformative actions.

When developing a decision making process it is good to consider what types of decisions which need to be made as well as who needs to be involved. Defining ‘Thresholds’ around different decisions can be useful for knowing which decision making process to be used for what decisions. For example, decisions about investments under $100 can be dealt with differently than decisions around adding additional principles to the constitution. Richard D. Bartlett describes an interesting decision making procedure in his writing on Synchronous vs. Asynchronous decision making protocols (See Patterns for Decentralized Organizing). Ultimately developing decision making protocols is about getting things done as efficiently as possible. It's also about playing with power fairly.

The tricky thing about a decision making process is that it's only as good as the awareness of its participants. The process itself should facilitate increased awareness through training participants in meta-practices. There is a lot of work which has been done in this area. The key is to develop a metaview which includes all the views and adapts ways of being and knowing which honors this diversity. The Art of Hosting's 4-fold practice offers an excellent framework to work on these metaskills.

When decisions affect non-human entities it becomes a new ballgame and I do not exactly know how it will work out. My sense is that there can be groups of people who learn the language and patterns of particular non-human communities and speak on their behalf. Through protracted observation of a biologic community over many years patterns emerge in terms of food, habitat and other aspects of the niche requirements for that community. For example, a group of people who speak on behalf of the Pacific Flyway Snow Geese would speak on behalf of their needs for places with access to water they can gather in the winter with minimal disturbance.

Decisions effectively trigger the flowing of surplus resources in a desirable direction. For example, the decision to dig a swale in a desertifying hill will slow, sink and spread water. Wise decisions lead to good stewardship which results in beautiful land.

b.Economic Commons

Economic commons represent the engagements of a bioregion and its material flows. If the Political commons represents the game rules (for example, 3 strikes and your out), then the economic commons represents the game tools (for example, the bat, the ball and the glove). Its where the physical stuff takes place. There are 3 distinct components to the economic commons: a unit of exchange, credentialing and schools for wellness and learning.

- A unit of exchange

A unit of exchange is a technology which allows for the efficient exchange of resources amongst a community: a 'coin' or 'token.' It functions on trust. If there is trust in the economic and political commons, their unit of exchange will function, that is as long as it is technologically sufficient and the community is economically independent enough.

Money can be thought of as the material flow of a system, consisting of "packets" information. Each individual financial exchange and the resource exchange partnered to it represents one "packet." The values, integrity and "soul" of a system is derived from the sum total of those "packets" of exchange. The summation of which is an expression of the quality of the entire system.

The virtues and character of an economic community (all people who share a currency) is integrally tied to what they choose to do and not do with their currency. Having clear agreements across the community helps the economy maintain integrity, that is as long as the process by which they come to agreement is also integral (see decision making process.) The rules of exchange should align with the principles outlined in the constitution.

An important area of consideration having to do with an economy's moral compass rests in the commons. Are the commons tended in such a way that ensures continued enthrivement? How does the economy recirculate surplus back into the commons? And what's kind of developmental growth is required to be a good steward? These are questions of charity and meta.

A unit of exchange could potentially contain the additional feature of acting as a public ledger which keeps track of what people are contributing and how valuable their contributions are. This could allow for improved predictive capacity around the value of products and services from various economic community members. It could help determine the value of credentials and their associated healing and learning process through algorithmic interpretations of exchanges over time.

Currently there is a lot of experimentation around new economic models. Blockchain, decentralized finance (DeFi) and cryptocurrency allow for more economic autonomy of a community. They decentralize bookkeeping and make exchange easier and less dependent on third parties.

Projects I am following to learn more about how this sector works include SEEDS and Autopia.

- Credentialing

An accreditation process signals the degree of proficiency one has attained through various initiatory rites. This is often referred to as in the world of technological commons as a "badge" and in the world of academia a 'degree.' Through effective credentialing practitioners can demonstrate trustworthiness to people they have not previously met.

Accreditation should be as decentralized as is reasonable. A decentralized credentialing system allows for less barriers to entry for people wanting to bring new processes of learning and healing into the world. Easy entry into the credentialing process allows for more diversity of practitioners and practices and also supports innovations and conflict resolution processes. By being 'open' credentialing allows for open avenues of participation in the economic commons.

Because of this 'open' nature, there will be variance in rigor that different processes provide and the results they yield. As a result credentials cannot be quantitatively

compared. This is different than in academic communities where classes are worth measurable units and degrees are a summation of units in a learning pathway. Decentralized accreditation is valued qualitatively. It is only through the trustworthiness of the accreditor and their disciples that a badge can be valued over time. The quality of a badge can only be grokked relationally.

I like Stephen Reid's 'earn to learn' model he is utilizing with his Tools for the Regenerative Renaissance course where participants earn units of exchange for going through his accreditation process. Also, I have not gotten an update recently from Andrew Langford of Gaia University but he has been working for the last few years on developing open badges.

- A process for healing and learning

The actual rite of passage by which credentials are earned constitutes the final element of the economic commons. It is the process by which mentorship and a practicum is offered. The result of such a passage is growth and enrichment. IIn academia this process consists of the courses and coursework being offered. In traditional cultures this is rites of passage rituals and apprenticeship relationships. There is also an emerging body of courses being offered online such as Stephen Reid's Tools for the Regenerative Renaissance course.

One important note is that education and medicine are conceptually unseparated here. This is because healing without learning is incomplete and learning without healing is incomplete. Health and learning are complimentary beyond separation. I think of it as the integration of the head and the heart. When combined their goal is synonymous: the task of emitting the harmonious relationship between the subjective and the objective.

This process is simply doctor/teachers offering their practices to students/patients. If all goes well, those involved prosper. The domains with which healing and learning can be applied include but not limited to inner work (phenomenological self inquiry), social systemic work (deep democracy, organizational development, memetic-tribal mediation work), earth work (such as permaculture, ecosystem restoration, regenerative agriculture, ecovillage design, trades and crafts), and ancestral work. By offering and receiving certifiable rites of passages, community members build the capacity and meta-skills to teach and learn BioRegional Resilience.

For example, ecosystem restoration in a post fire Sierra foothill requires the ability to read ecological patterns specific to this region such as understanding the plant succession patterns after a fire. Scotch Broom, though an "invasive," fills an important pioneer plant niche after the fire in that it creates rapid soil cover, creates shelter for less hardy plants to grow and fixes nitrogen into the soil. Because it is an "invasive" it can easily go viral and overpopulate. Being able to manage Broom so that it most optimally succeeds its niche to the next species is important skill specific to Concow.

Another example from the domain of ancestral work regarding the genocidal relationships between the local indigenouse tribe and european descended expansionists: In the 1830s the first european descended trappers made first contact with the local tribe the KonKow Maidu. From that first interaction The KonKow Maidu contracted deadly strains of pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, small pox, malaria or cholera. Later on after fighting between KonKow and Settlers due partly to the KonKows foods resources being eliminated a treatise was made where the KonKow was given Land in an area close to where I live today. Once gold was found on that land the treatise was broken and the KonKow Maidu was forced to migrate to an Indian Reservation in present day Covelo, Ca. Because there was not enough food to eat in Covelo many tribal members made the long trip back where they came from. Upon their return they were rounded up and forced back to Covelo. This was the winter time, most of them were weak and sick and many died on their walk back. This event is known as 'the trail of tears.

Those events have had great effects on the social, cultural and landscape health of this area. Finding ways to release that pain and move forward collectively is an important element of ancestral work in this area. I do not exactly have an answer how this can be done but I think it will be important some day for me to make that long walk myself.

A Bioregional Ecological Stewardship Landtrust

If 'rhythmic gathering in the sacred' is compared to the seed of this process, then a bioregional land trust can be thought of as the fruit. Land trusts provide a platform to ground the practices I have previously described in place. That is, a body to house the political and economic commons as well as the rhythmic sacred gathering. There are three classes of land held by a land trust: 1. Learning Labs, 2. Common Lands and 3. Wild Lands. Bellow I will describe the features of these three classes.

1.Learning Labs

Learning labs are small land holdings (5 to 50 acres) in which humans are most present and thus manage the landscape most intensively. All of the work conducted in learning labs is done to develop more efficient and pattern rich relationships with the systems the lab is imbedded in. They are scientific (testing hypothesis) in their approach, evaluating for 'best practices' based on the principles espoused in the constitution. Learning labs conduct learning/healing research on three topics: 1. Village design, 2. Cottage industry and 3. Ecological Stewardship. I will describe these in more detail bellow.

- Village design:

Village design research explores best practices for infrastructure for human settlement. This includes, housing, water, energy, transportation, public spaces and private spaces.

- Cottage Industries and technology

  As mentioned in the introduction, professions/industries which utilize natural material regeneratively allow for deeper relationships to inform more complex pattern awareness of the local ecosystem. For example, woodworkers (people who harvest trees, mill wood and build furniture) must have a sensitivity to which trees to harvest and how frequently in order to have a beneficial relationship with that system. If the customers also live locally and have pattern awareness they can be more discerning. If the woodworker has a poor reputation amongst his community it will affect the value of his rites of passages and credentials offered. Creating regenerative market materials, ultimately asks how human presence and human economics can be a driver of ecological resilience.

  Cottage industries have a traditional cultural role as artisan expressions enrich and create important meaning, diversity and communication across cultures. In America (as with literally everywhere else) there is a rich history of crafts and cottage industries, starting with the incredible diversity and complexity innovated by the original inhabitants (for example, Chumash basket jars). The nineteenth century saw the rise of a number mystic puritan communities in America, each with incredible expressions of craftsmanship. Examples include, the Shakers, the Quakers, the Oneida Community and many more. These examples are illustrations of the cultural power of artisan objects and in terms of America they illustrate a cultural pathway still available for (meta)modern interpretations. A society is ultimately judged based on the integrity of their arts and craft.

- Ecological Stewardship research and training

  The underlying topic which animates the entire concept of a bioregional governance is good ecological stewardship. For most of us in the world today this knowledge is lost. Tragically, in America those who held this knowledge were exterminated and their culture suppressed by the settler culture. While traditional communities still hold very important information and should be listened to when possible, it is also important to regain stewardship knowledge through research and training. This role is not just a ‘professional’ one but is primary that every member of society and every trade gains proficiency in this area. It is the perennial subject.

  Dedicating resources in learning labs for ecological stewardship research and training sets the foundation for larger stewardship projects beyond the boundaries of the learning labs.

2. Common Lands

Out here in Concow we are surrounded by a round valley of mountains which, once forested, are now defoliated from two large fires over the last 12 years. How those systems regenerate will depend on how they are managed. The question of Common Lands derives from their management design. Common Lands function as healthful as the principles upon which they are shared (which is another reason why a constitution is important.)

Rhythmic gatherings take place on the commons where the mobile versions of the learning labs are developed for temporary ecosystem restoration gatherings. The research conducted on the labs (village design, arts and crafts, and ecological stewardship) are applied during a 2 month celebratory gathering on the commons. During this time temporary villages are erected, ecosystem restoration practices are implemented and local materials are harvested and made into highly skilled crafts (such as clay pots, wooden furniture or bees wax candles).

This is also a time where the members from various learning labs congregate, celebrate and exchange. This is a time for rituals, rites and games.

At the end of the 2 months, the temporary camp is disassembled and the communities return home to their respective learning lab until the next gathering in the commons.

The result of these gatherings is a landscape with improved ecological function, a community with strengthened ties and individuals with fuller hearts.

3. Wild Lands

The wild lands are places that receive little human management but are essential for an intact bioregional ecosystem and thus need to have voices within a bioregions constitutional process.

Traditionally ecological land trusts were created to keep people out of nature. Today, in the Anthropocene, this tactic will not work. Finding a new ecological equilibrium requires human input. Luckly, people are just as capable of creating beauty and harmony as they are destruction and suffering. This is done through rediscovering how to tend to our ecosystem.

Conclusion

The process of building culture and governance is a question of finding our place in the natural world. The digital commons provides important resources to galvanize this process. When combined with place based research new solutions can emerge towards ecological stewardship.

Thank you for reading this. If you would like to provide feedback please do so. You can reach me at concowmeadows.org, tri-ciprocal.com or comment on the youtube video.

Kindly, Robin Woolner