

Wild Salmon, Totem Salmon

An Interview with Freeman House

The following interview of Freeman House by Casey Walker took place in April 1999, with the production assistance of KVMR, a community-supported radio station in Nevada City, California.

Casey Walker: Will you begin by locating the Mattole watershed on the North Pacific coast and describing the physical place in which the events and experiences of *Totem Salmon* occur?

Freeman House: Cape Mendocino is the shoulder of Northern California that juts out into the Pacific farther westward than any other land mass, and the Mattole River enters the Pacific about ten miles south of the Cape. The Mattole is a relatively small river system that runs coastwise from south to north, about 65 river miles, and drains a watershed of some 300 square miles. The Mattole also has the distinction of being located at the soft boundary of two bioregions, creating a sort of super-ecotone. The weather patterns share the regularity of winter-wet, summer-dry of the Shasta bioregion; but many of the vegetative patches are Cascadian. Some of the southernmost occurrences of red cedar, western hemlock, and Sitka spruce communities can be found here.

The Mattole sits at the junction of three large earthquake faults: the San Andreas (running southward), the Cascadian Subduction Zone (running all the way north into Canada), and the Mendocino (shooting out to sea, the most tectonically active place in North America). The King Range, which forms the western edge of the watershed, is rising out of the Pacific faster than any other place on the coast of the continent. It's rising at the relatively speedy rate of about 14 feet every 1,000 years and does that in jolts and bumps. There's a place along the coast very near my home that rose up out of the Pacific five feet in a 45-second period in 1992. A very visceral way to experience the growth of mountains! As a result, the King Range and the watershed of the Mattole are very new lands. They're composed of soft, unconsolidated sea bottoms that are, even without interference by humans, eroding back into the sea almost as quickly as they're rising up.

Another important distinction is that the Mattole is home to one of the southernmost native stocks of chinook (or king) salmon on the eastern coast of the Pacific. Directly south is a 200-mile gap of ruined habitat before other stocks, or races, of chinook migrate up through the San Francisco Bay and into the Sacramento or San Joaquin drainages. Mattole chinooks are one of the very last handfuls of native chinook salmon that hasn't been adulterated by hatchery introductions from other rivers. This gift of place made us realize that our job was not merely to increase numbers of salmon, but to figure out a way to maintain that genetic integrity. An entirely different undertaking.

However, I use the Mattole as the source of my stories in *Totem Salmon* because the watershed offers a biogeograph-



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ical scale of relationships and processes, of other species and histories, that not only satisfies my own personal longing for a certain kind of community and life, but also presents a configuration of inhabitation that is possible anywhere. The potential for rediscovering our roles as communities of place is, I believe, what the planet requires of us human beings. The salmon opened for many of us a pathway to engagement with the natural world. The scale of the watershed turned out to be just right: too large for any one person to perceive and comprehend, but not so large that the small inhabitory community couldn't begin to build a collective experience of it.

Will you describe the problems you found with declining salmon populations, and the significance of that restoration to the wild vs. hatchery salmon debate? How do your concerns re-educate those who see salmon crises in terms of fishing or grocery store availability?



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First, we understood back in 1980 that our experiments in population enhancement were only a holding action, hopefully holding off the extirpation of the natives while we figured out meaningful ways to engage the recovery of the habitat and, ultimately, the recovery of cultural and economic practices that would resonate with the needs of salmon.

Second, as we know, the availability of anything in grocery stores has less and less correlation with the survival of the processes of the wild. By “wild” I mean complex systems that require no regulation or interference from outside themselves, that are self-generating, or auto-poietic, and are demonstrated in the whole continuum of evolution to be the very basis of our success as living creatures. In the case of the salmon in particular, their coevolution has been incredibly complex, elegant, and self-sustaining. Each stock of salmon has adapted itself over time to specific conditions of the freshwater habitat of its birth and early life and depends on those conditions remaining intact and diverse for the survival of the genera and species as a whole. When that diversity has been diminished to the point where only a handful of native stocks are left, it’s not difficult to imagine a single exotic pathogen wiping out a whole species. What happens then to the coevolutionary processes so evident between salmon and humans?

A kind of population crash we’ve seen recently with salmon in Washington’s Puget Sound?

Yes. The insanity of rearing Atlantic salmon in the Pacific Ocean has resulted in the escape-ment of some of those pen-reared fish into the wild population and set off epidemics of disease—diseases that hadn’t previously existed in the Pacific—causing ecological diebacks. Only time will tell how long-lasting those effects will be. Here is a great instance of strong global regulation being appropriate. There is no reason why anyone should be allowed to introduce Atlantic salmon and exotic pathogens into the Pacific Ocean. As I have pointed out in *Totem Salmon*, hatcheries have been homogenizing the genetic diversity of salmon’s place-specific adaptations.

Salmonid fisheries biology had been driven by hatchery technology throughout the last hundred and more years. The enormous numbers of fish that were, until very recently, being quite freely transported from place to place, have in many cases overwhelmed the ability of native fish to compete. Hatchery fish are of the same species as the wild populations. They can interbreed and they do. Thus they diminish and dilute the genetic adaptation that has evolved over

tens of thousands of years. The growth of fisheries science is just now beginning to respond more to the needs of wild populations than to the needs of the marketplace, the engine that has tended, historically, to drive hatchery technology.

Will you describe the history of fishery management and the ways in which it has been driven by domesticating economics—by agricultural models—and recently by the sense that a “fish is a fish” when it comes to mitigation for compromised waterways and habitats?

Originally hatchery culture came out of the same impulse that led to hybrid seeds for agriculture and domestication of the land for production of preferred foodstuffs. Now “salmon ranching,” where salmon are raised in large seawater pens until they reach a marketable size, is a logical extension of that same impulse. Early proponents of hatchery culture weren’t motivated by mitigation for past damages so much as by the vision that they might increase the productivity of waterways that hadn’t seen fit to entertain a large enough array of species. Daniel Bottom quotes one of the most ambitious nineteenth century advocates of the hatchery business, Seth Green, in a statement that spells out his ambitions quite clearly. “We’ve been tilling the land for 5,000 years,” Green wrote, “and we’ve only begun to till the waters.” Hatchery culture has its origins in nineteenth-century entrepreneurial utilitarianism.

Fish stocks were introduced from one place to another all over North America and as far away as New Zealand and Chile. As wild fisheries were diminished by loss of habitat and overfishing, state and regulatory agencies picked up

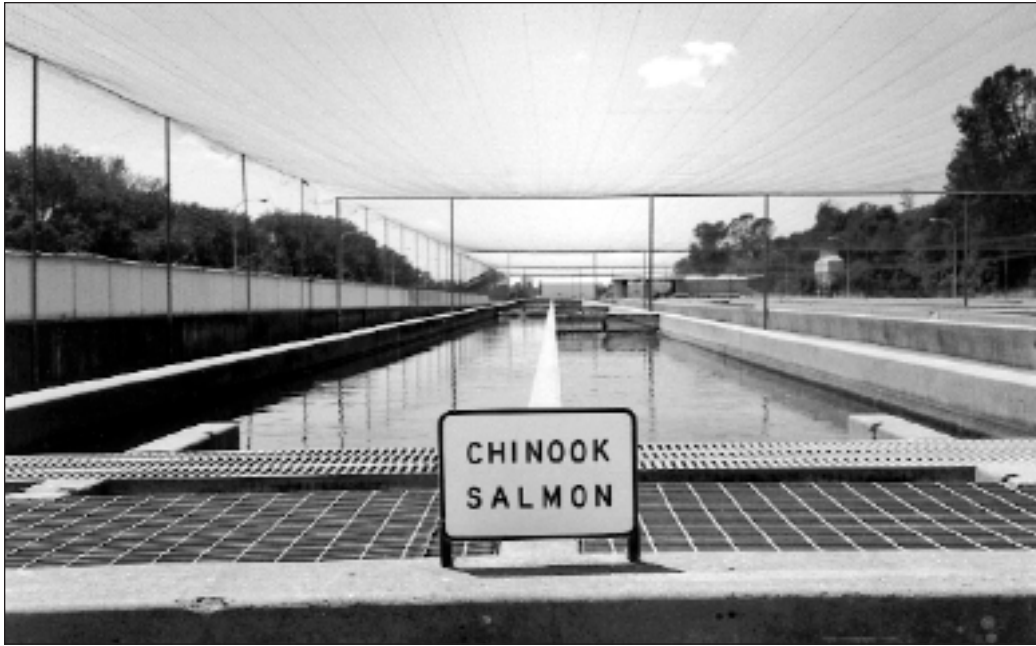
the idea of fish culture as mitigation for other economic activities that were overwhelming the West: dam building, irrigation, poor timbering practices, and on and on. At this point, many of the hatcheries that exist do so for purposes of mitigation of disastrous land use practices that preceded them.

What is the current state of fishery knowledge and approach to both wild salmon populations and wild systems as a whole?

There has been a big shift in fisheries biology that has been driven, as best as I can understand it, by the American Fishery Society, the professional organization for fisheries biologists. In 1991 AFS published a devastating inventory of the number of wild stocks that have already gone extinct and identified nearly 200 others that were in immediate peril. That paper has really created a significant shift in the way that regulatory agencies manage stocks of fish. I think we can see a lot more care taken by hatchery managers in regard

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to their impact on wild populations, and a greater concentration by regulatory agencies on the health of wild stocks.

The fly in the ointment at this point—and that is much too small a metaphor for what’s going on—is the development of large-scale aquaculture, especially among salmon. The fact is, most of the fish we consume these days is coming from “salmon ranching,” where salmon are reared to marketable size in saltwater pens through their entire life cycle. It’s a movement that started in Norway and spread rapidly to the west coast of the Pacific. So far, to its credit, California has resisted legalizing this activity. That is in part, I think, because California fishermen are well-organized, and fishermen are people who understand the value of wild stocks and genetic diversity and the higher quality of wild fish. This is something not to be undervalued. Anyone, and I mean really anyone, can do a blindfolded taste test of a wild fish side by side with a pen-reared fish and detect a dramatic difference.

We are also learning that attendant ecological impacts, both locally and biospherically, are dreadful. Locally, the concentrations of biomass from concentrated rotting food and fish excretions rob the wild waters of oxygen and cause local extirpations of other aquatic life. Disease runs rampant in such stressed environments, and when the penned fish escape, as they inevitably do, they carry those diseases into the wild populations. I try not to buy pen-reared salmon.

There’s an obvious parallel between salmon and seeds in terms of control and homogenization. Much of the so-called promise of biogenetic engineering has been that it will solve food shortages, that we will be able to artificially manipulate and create our own foods to meet demand. This promise effectively marginalizes real damage to wild systems as irrelevant and brings about a whole new order of consequence, doesn’t it?

Right. I think the largest intellectual argument of our

times is just that. Can we exhaust the planet’s natural provision and be clever enough to recreate it for our own purposes? It’s a discussion that needs to be illuminated. It is the basic question at the heart of the survival of the wild and ultimately of our own species. There certainly is a lot of attention being paid to it at this point, but generally it’s in the form of a discussion among specialists that is not getting out to people who are going to be dependent in part on either wild provision or a totally engineered world for the source of their food. The idea of putting

our lives in the hands of a few experts rather than relying on the grand, self-generating, and self-perpetuating processes of the wild should make anyone distinctly uncomfortable. We have only to remember the promises of atomic engineers a generation ago to recognize the perils of such a course.

Will you describe the actual state of the land, the water, and the salmon as you found them in the late 1970s?

I was one of those people who came to the Mattole from life experiences that had been largely urban, and the place looked wonderful. It was green everywhere. The river has not been dammed, and to the uninformed eye it looks quite healthy in comparison to almost any river you’d find anywhere else in California. It takes some digging to find the differences between the way it looks now and the way it was as recently as 40 to 50 years ago. The great eye-opener for me was to get my hands on the first aerial photographs ever taken of the place, in 1942, and to see the landscape as an unbroken sea of dark, old-growth forest so dense you could not find the river. In sharp contrast, contemporary photos show the river fully exposed for most of its length, with the vegetative cover much patchier. It’s obvious the forests are much younger compared to what was here in 1942. In many cases, the original configuration of plant communities is not recovering. There is less prairie, less forest, more brushland and barren land.

About 75 percent of the land base is in forest soils, and three-quarters of the drainage is dominated by Douglas fir. Up in the headwaters, which for a variety of reasons has more fog, you begin to see the grandeur of redwoods.

By the time we arrived, more than 90 per cent of the old-growth forests were gone, but what wasn’t quite so evident was that the salmon populations were on a steep path downward. As long as humans had lived here, salmon had been a core subsistence food, and people who lived here were still acting as if that were the case. But, in fact, as we



discovered in the first year or two of our activities, there were no longer enough fish in the rivers to support a subsistence fishery. That was one of the first things we had to take on. We were a bunch of Johnny-come-latelies who were trying to tell people who had lived here for several generations that it was no longer appropriate to do what they were accustomed to doing. It wasn't cheerfully received.

What experiences and ideas had previously shaped your and others' vision for the salmon and the community?

I developed my fascination with salmon nearly 30 years ago, while working as a commercial salmon fisherman. By coincidence, I also entered into conversation with Peter Berg, Raymond Dasmann, Gary Snyder, and others about a body of ideas we were calling bioregionalism. A bone-simple idea, in retrospect, that changed the course of my life.

I first became aware of Peter Berg's concerns when he returned from the United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm, in 1972, convinced that the strategies of the environmental movement were a dead-end. Its focus on global and political and economic fixes for ecological degradation was not going to take us where we needed to go. He saw we needed a whole shift in the way humans perceived themselves as part of the planetary biosphere; the need for cultural strategies as a context for political struggles. It may sound like a huge concept, but devolved quickly, for me, into the realization that human engagement with ecological and evolutionary processes is limited by physical perception—by what we can see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and sense with our skins. Thus, the scale at which humans viscerally experience themselves as parts of the living biosphere is the key to our reorientation. Scale is everything when putting bioregional ideas into vernacular practice.

For quite a few years, the discussion of these ideas was largely theoretical. I quit fishing commercially for salmon by 1975, began researching and writing, and ended up in San Francisco not too long after the Planet Drum Foundation was founded. I worked in a little office in the basement of Peter Berg and Judy Goldhaft's house, helping to put out their publication *Raise the Stakes* and their first book, *Reinhabiting a Separate Country*. But I became impatient with the theoretical aspects of things and really wanted to get out into a particular place to test out the ideas and to see where they might lead. David Simpson, an old friend who lived in the Mattole, was becoming aware of the rapid diminishment of the salmon population. Suddenly, a piece of land became available that my partner Nina and I could afford to buy, and I had an opportunity to do what I wanted: to engage salmon directly in a community of place.

With this ideal in mind, what was the reality of the place and community when you arrived?

Nina and I arrived here about 1978 to 1980, and during the previous decade the population of the valley had tripled with people who were seeking a different sort of life from what had existed here before. It was a great immigration probably best described as the back-to-the-land movement.

Due to a number of reasons—the breakup of two or three large ranches being one key factor—the Mattole had become a target destination for large numbers of people. As you might imagine, immigration on such a scale created a lot of social tensions.

People understood that they were seeing and taking less fish each year, but nobody was jotting down numbers. Regulatory agencies weren't providing the numbers because of the remoteness of the place. There are long-term cycles of greater and lesser abundance of salmon populations that are entirely natural, too. So it took systematic observation by local residents to demonstrate that the decline was indeed happening. We developed a protocol of counting spawning fish, applied to that a formula that was meant to give us a sense of what percentage of the fish we were seeing, and maintained it for 20 years. Even within a two- or three-year period, we were able to develop a pretty good comparative understanding of what was happening year to year. We were also beginning our work right in the middle of the greatest El Nino event in recorded history, and that was affecting the populations as well. In fact, once we were able to demonstrate those observations, people withdrew from their annual subsistence activities sadly but willingly, because there was a widespread recognition that it was not only a very precious resource but a whole definition of existence that no one wanted to lose.

Will you describe how the community's consciousness went from a sense of scarce resources and self-reliance to a deeper imagination of the place itself?

"Imagination" might be a better word than "remembering." I use the word "remembering" in *Totem Salmon* more metaphorically than literally, with the intent to speak to a continuity of human inhabitation of North America that it is a modern habit to ignore. We have a cultural attitude that history began when it began to be written down, which means when Euro-Americans arrived. The rapid elimination of the aboriginal culture here was simply more rapid than in other places, but no different in any other sense. Euro-Americans have never really had the intellectual tools to understand aboriginal inhabitation of the land; it's not so much that we have forgotten, but have never really known. We have "forgotten" that human inhabitation stretches back anywhere from 1,000 to 30,000 years, depending on where you are and whom you are talking to. That very important concept is seldom recognized, and it takes a vigorous application of imagination to inform the changes I see as necessary in our community practices.

I have come to think that engaging people with other species is the most direct way we have available to us to bring about transformations in individuals and communities. It doesn't have to be salmon that creates that shift, as it was in our case. If you look only at writers, Robert Michael Pyle is able to find a doorway into the natural world through butterflies; Richard Nelson through deer; Gary Nabhan through tepary beans, an aboriginal subsistence food in the Sonoran desert; Terry Tempest Williams through the birds of the Great Salt Lake. I'm convinced that once you find yourself



inside the living system that sustains you, you will realize that the work to be done is only effectively undertaken in the context of the whole community. As an individual, you can take such attentiveness only so far. Gradually, if you're working toward the health of another species, you are led to the perception that the whole place, the whole package of relationships, is what you're attempting to rediscover. Any reading of the anthropological literature will bring you to the conclusion that this is the way humans have lived for most of our million or so years, of our time on earth. It's an aberration in our species behavior that we have lost social structures revolving around relation to place in the last 500 to 5,000 years.

When we don't live in relation to the larger system, we don't experience our individual and community lives fully. Just this morning I realized that the way I check out my moment-to-moment relationship to larger processes is by comparing it to those moments when I'm overwhelmed by the beauty of the landscape, oceanic feelings far beyond articulation. Almost everybody has experienced those feelings, but we tend to dismiss them as irrelevant, aberrant, orgasmic, and temporary. I am convinced they are signals pointing toward the fullness of life that is available to us. Perhaps this is what is meant by the traditional Navaho admonition to "walk in beauty."

Will you describe the greatest social challenges you encountered to creating this kind of community?

In hindsight, the greatest challenge was, and still is, our own ignorance as newcomers, something we share with most Euro-Americans. The only way to get beyond such ignorance is to systematically engage in learning about our relationship to the natural systems in which we are immersed—to engage all our senses directly with those natural systems and then to augment that information with what scholarship has delivered to us. The ignorance of which I'm speaking was compounded by our own countercultural arrogance. We moved

into a new place assuming that we knew the best way for people to act. In fact, we knew very little about the people whose lives we were changing and even less about the ecological system that we were moving into and wanted so desperately to fit into. Most of us were identified in one way or another with the environmental movement over the past 30 years and had strongly held opinions and a contentious approach to the world. We were sometimes guilty of confusing the inhabitory people who had lived here a few generations before us with the corporations that were currently wreaking most of the havoc on the land.

It was an interesting time in the early 1980s because the California Forest Practices Act was just beginning to have its effect. Before that body of regulation, the private lands were in horrible shape and the public and corporate lands didn't look as bad. It was easy to be confused. Now, 25 years later, the situation has reversed: the small holdings, the non-corporate timber lands are looking pretty good, and the public and corporate lands have been devastated. There's something very amiss in that picture. All of us together, the people who are engaged in watershed restoration and community building, some of whom take a living directly from the land and some of whom who don't, are engaged in an ongoing, reciprocal dialogue, trying to understand the two (or more) communities, our common ground, and occasionally moving forward together. This proceeds in fits and starts because the whole back-to-the-land diaspora—which the entire West is experiencing now in one form or another—created resentments and fears and knee-jerk judgments in which people have tended to get stuck. We spend a lot of time un-sticking ourselves, wherever we are.

What were the prevailing attitudes when you arrived?

The Mattole drainage is about 85 percent private property. About half of the remaining 15 percent is in corporate hands (and is managed with increasing aggressiveness) and half BLM public lands, whose management style is increas-

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ingly benign. About 25 percent of the land base is in natural prairie, and up until about 1950 rangelands provided the economic base for the valley. It was largely a ranching culture here. With the whole variety of circumstances that emerged after WWII— including the development of technologies that would make these steep slopes available to chainsaws, and a building boom that had recently discovered Douglas fir as an extremely valuable building material—suddenly that 75 per cent of land covered in forest became tremendously valuable. At the time, regulation was ineffective, if not absent. Then, as now, whatever land use regulations were in place were difficult to enforce. The result was the timber boom that wrought such havoc on the landscape.

Coming into that situation as I and many of my cohorts did—at the end of the timber boom—it was easy to confuse the people with the situation. The people we weren't quite displacing but were certainly disrupting—the people who were here when we arrived— God knows how they experienced us! We must have seemed like barbarian hordes. It's been a process of mutual and reciprocal education that we've all had to take on willfully to begin to understand that our commonalities far outweigh our differences. We'd all like to maintain some sense of self-determination in regard to our ability to endure here with some measure of self-reliance. By this time, the immigrants have been here for a generation. They tend to be the people who are inheriting the social and political infrastructure, and we're in a period of transition in that way—which isn't so different from thousands of other places in the American West. This is a phenomenon that rarely hits the news. The few publications that are devoted to proactive, place-based community development, such as *Chronicles of Community* and *Orion Afield*, have only appeared in the last few years.

One of the greatest strengths of Totem Salmon is its articulation of a place, a community, and a struggle that testifies to ecological ideals largely unknown in the urban or suburban mainstream, or even in the environmental movement as we've come to know it.

The stories told in *Totem Salmon* could be stories told of thousands of other people struggling toward place-based culture, not only in North America but all over the world. It's also directly parallel with the struggles of aboriginal cultures that still have some remnants of their tradition intact. The whole thrust is to rediscover our participatory role. It may be institutionally impossible for mainstream culture to do that. It may be that “mainstream culture” is another way of misidentifying ourselves, as is the word “public,” as is the word “consumer.” When you work to perceive yourself as part of ecological systems that surround and support you, then those code words for social identity begin to fade in significance.

I'm not much of an intellectual and I hesitate to make generalizations about most things, but the reason I'm so drawn to thinkers like Paul Shepard is that no one else I've read has articulated the passions that have driven my life as well as he has. Like anyone else, I am inundated with invitations to accept an identity that doesn't ring true and doesn't explain the profound sense of alienation I experienced in

childhood and as an adult in our culture. What people like Shepard and, at this point, many others are illuminating is the difference between individualism—which has driven so much of our social, political, and philosophical thinking—and individuality, or the process of individuation. Thomas Berry calls belonging the opportunity to take on our true potential as human beings, which is to use our skills of articulation and our tools of rationality to celebrate the beauty of the processes of Creation.

Will you describe examples of grounded and ritualized behaviors practiced by aboriginal peoples that reinforced belonging and the behavior of belonging?

I look for these examples, so I find them. In the ritualized behavior around technologies such as traps and nets and, in the case of the Ojibway, the snowshoes that allowed hunters to hunt in the winter, there is a sense of understanding that those technologies changed the relationship of the tribe to the world that supported it. We have lost that understanding in modern time, and we tend to feel we have no power over these technologies once they are launched, that we have no sense of choice about using them or about how they are used. That is something we desperately need to recapture.

What fascinates me most about these behaviors is the question of how those recognitions evolved: how did they come to be? In order to pursue such speculation, I was forced to use the various tribes who lived in the Klamath area because they still have remnants of traditional culture intact, along with a strong cultural revival movement, and there's more anthropological information about them than most aboriginal cultures in northwest California. It seems reasonable to me, given the knowledge that those various peoples immigrated into that basin at widely separated periods of time, that those ritualized intertribal behaviors of self-regulation that Euro-Americans found when they arrived did not fall out of the sky. They evolved over time. How did that happen? That's a useful thing to think about.

For urbanized or legally-oriented societies, it's a radical shift to generate behavior from local knowledge and experience, isn't it?

Yes. If we look at the way our social and legal constructs are set up, we find no place for a voice for inhabitory rights, nor any place in the larger culture that provides an appropriate level of respect for inhabitory experience. I am fascinated with the evolution of communities. Again, scale is everything. I am not fascinated with the evolution of global culture, and the only resistance to homogenized, globalized culture that I can see lies in the evolution of place-based communities. How to instrumentally effect that evolution is a matter that deserves more attention than it is getting.

The word “ritual” gets overused and misunderstood a lot because it is—especially in the condition called modernity—rarely part of our secular lives. But after a few attempts at consensual decision making among people who, though coming from different cultural and economic backgrounds, can find commonality in their mutual inhabitation of a particular place, I've begun to think of that process as the sort of participatory ritual that might work. Consensual decision



making has had a lot of bad press because it's compared to and perceived as undermining legal processes. This critique may or may not be true from situation to situation. But if a commitment to regular communication is understood as the process and practice of community building rather than as the goal-oriented technique for short-term decision making, then we can understand its usefulness differently. The appropriate analog for consensual practices is not politics but natural succession.

Commitments to the health of places are not going to be legislated into existence. They are going to evolve out of those places over a period of time that is probably longer than any one of us would like to think about. Gary Snyder says maybe in 1,000 years we can realize bioregional goals; I'm a bit more optimistic than that. But it will be the work of several generations, at least. Consensual discussion does become a way to build community standards of behavior over time, but not in a legalistic sense. Such discussion is built on real conditions and phenomena, real experiences and needs, and on a basis that is directly understandable in vernacular life. Community standards are most effective and adaptive over time when they rise out of home-grown community ethics. Progress in that direction can be seen in subtle shifts in local attitudes toward land use, local food security, transportation, and above all in the growth of a kinder and more inclusive etiquette—how we treat each other and other species.



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