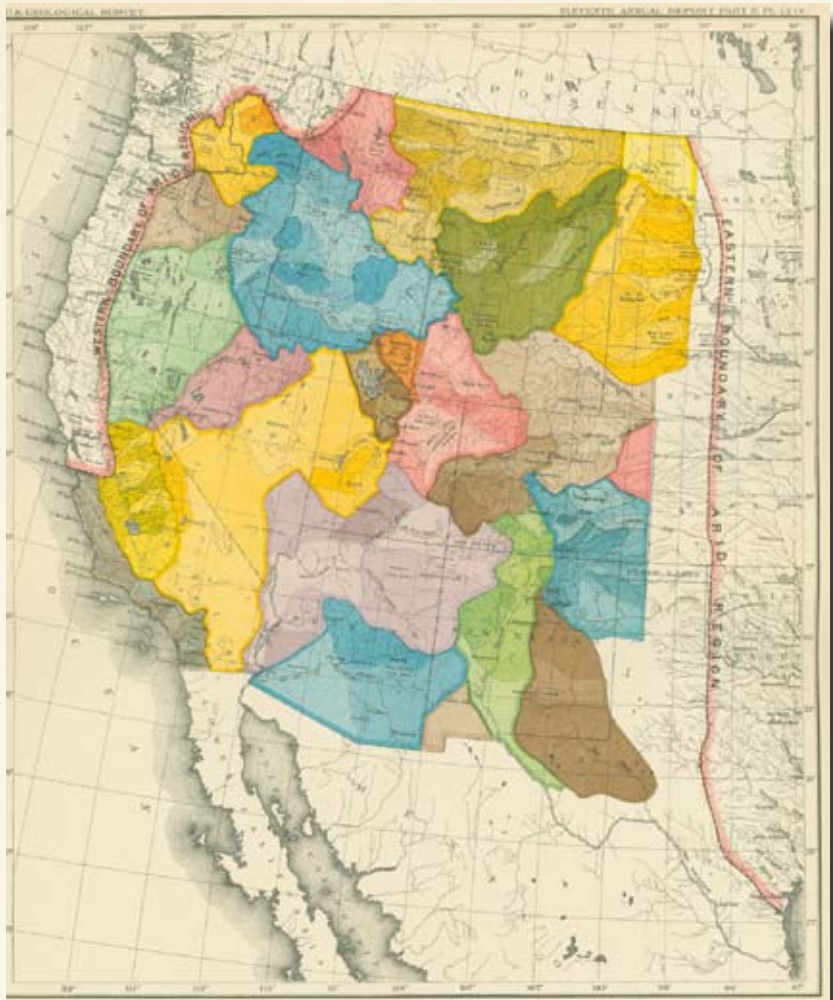


Thinking AS A Watershed

BY JACK LOEFFLER



While thinking like a mountain implies a sense of inertia, thinking like a watershed evokes a sense of constant movement, fluidity, and change.

Several years ago, my friend author William deBuys was writing his fine book, *Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell*. He had selected several illustrations for the book including a map of the drainage areas of the arid West rendered by John Wesley Powell. This map appears in the Eleventh Annual Report of the United States Geographical Survey, 1889-90. Powell had wandered throughout the American West during the late 19th century, and recognizing that aridity was the West's primary characteristic, had organized this map of the West watershed by watershed. When Bill showed me this map, a wave of clarity re-arranged my mental coordinates, and it became obvious to me that watershed thinking is key to human survival in the 21st century.

The map is a work of art in its deepest sense. I commandeered Powell's map for the cover of my own book, *Survival Along the Continental Divide: An Anthology of Interviews*. Thanks to another friend, Craig Newbill, Director of the New Mexico Humanities Council, that map is now a beautiful poster published by the Council.

Powell's map is part of my daily consciousness. Powell had an evolved mind and is regarded by Bill deBuys - as well as writer, tree farmer, and environmental thinker Gary Snyder along with myself - to have been the original bioregional thinker. In 1985, I recorded Snyder as he articulated what remains to me the best definition of bioregionalism: "Bioregionalism goes beyond simple geography or biology by its cultural concern, its human concern. It is to know not only the plants and animals of a place, but also the cultural information of how people live there—the ones who know how to do it. Knowing the deeper, mythic, spiritual, archetypal implications of a fir, or a coyote, or a bluejay might be to know from both inside and outside what

the total implications of a place are. So it becomes a study not only of place, but a study of psyche in place. That's what makes it so interesting."

If we look at Powell's map, bearing in mind Gary Snyder's definition of bioregionalism, it becomes abundantly clear that there is no better way for society to organize itself than within the context of home watershed. Powell recognized that watershed boundaries make a lot more sense than our current ephemeral geo-political boundaries. Watershed boundaries are natural boundaries that cradle bio-geographical drainage systems that are inhabited by many species of biota including the human species.

Human consciousness finds deep meaning in homeland, be that meaning scientific, mythic, or eminently practical—or all of the above. It's as though a single span of human consciousness, or lifetime, is part of a whole, a whole that includes the mosaic of watersheds and seas that surround our planet, that indeed we are part of the

consciousness of the planet. Every morning at sunrise, I face east, and while watching the grasses sway in the breeze, speak four words: Sun, Earth, Life, Consciousness. My four-word mantra carries me through each day. I frequently gaze west out over that portion of the Río Grande watershed, my home watershed, to a distant peak, Mount Taylor, that is the sacred mountain to the south for the Navajo Indians. Or I look to the northwest, to the peak of the Jemez Mountain, an enormous volcano whose eastern aspect is sacred to the Tewa Indians, who live in pueblos that line the banks of the Río Grande. To the North, I look into the looming reaches of the Sangre de Cristos, those Southern Rockies that form the northeastern rim of the Río Grande Watershed, and the eastern horizon of the Tewa World. All of this is visible from where I live, from where I look out over ten thousand square miles of arid, beautiful landscape that is both named and nameless, whose presence is sculpted by the passage of great epochs. I am reminded that rumblings from deep within the Earth resulted in this mighty rift of a plateau, the second largest in the world. Some may regard this as a hostile environment, but to me, it is my greatest friend and has taught me about life.

This northern Río Grande Watershed was rendered in green by Powell, its shape vaguely resembling the profile of a seahorse as seen from the left—a seahorse dancing westward about to hop over the Continental Divide to join its sibling, the Colorado River Watershed. These two great watersheds are modest in their yields of water. However, they contain the American Southwest, and are themselves comprised of myriad smaller watersheds, each unique with its own story, history, and character. The landscape of the American Southwest and northwestern Mexico is the most arid patch of North America. This is desert country broken by mountain ranges. The sense of space is vast. Biota exist relative to the amount of water. Biodiversity abounds. As does cultural diversity. Aridity defines the way we biota comport ourselves. We do not belong to the verdant east. We belong to the arid West.

Some of us are exotic, even within our respective species, having blown in from without and somehow affixed ourselves to this land, and have selected to re-establish our sense of indigeneity. Others of us boast ancestors whose footprints were trod into this soil, then erased by the winds of antiquity.

While thinking like a mountain implies a sense of inertia, thinking like a watershed evokes a sense of constant movement, fluidity, and change. The mountain contains the headwaters of the watershed and cradles biotic communities including those “sky islands” perched precariously at the top defying the possibility of extinction. Below the piedmont, the watershed fans out, expands, the water joining the main stem, thence to flow into the seas that interact with the atmosphere and begin the cyclic process anew. The interactive factors seem infinite, the metaphor too complex to be understood by a single mind. Still, to dance about within the metaphor is comforting. Human consciousness has yet to evolve sufficiently to perceive the raw truth.

Speaking of metaphors, how about “sky islands?” The Madrean Archipelago of the American Southwest is comprised of a series of mountain ranges in Arizona and New Mexico whose peaks contain biotic communities that are separated by seas of desert. These biotic communities have migrated up mountains over a period of millennia that separates our present point in the Holocene epoch from the Pleistocene that ended over 10,000 years ago. Selected species have evolved within these communities, with characteristics distinct from their cousins in other sky island environments. Over geological time, some species sought genetic expression unique to their tiny mountaintop habitats. Their foothold is precarious. If warming trends continue, their respective biotic communities will falter by virtue of inability to migrate up into thin air.

Metaphorically, the human species is poised atop the pinnacle of a dilemma of our own making. We may not go extinct, but the environment that we’ve “cooked

up” is burning away myriad species at a rate that parallels spasms of extinction of species that have occurred only five times throughout the previous 540 million years.

Earth’s wondrous mosaic of watersheds is constantly shifting, endlessly changing. Our species, the human species has come to predominate, even if temporarily. Our longevity within this mosaic will be determined by our degree of wisdom and our future practices. Our wisdom must meld many components including lessons that may be learned only by swimming heartily within the flow of Nature. Much wisdom comes from observation and practice, from aesthetics, from trial and error, from lingering along the edges of existence rather than from a centrist position. One must encompass and digest a mighty array of factors, realize that oneself is but a single tiny factor within that mighty array, then plan and react accordingly. An appropriate metaphor for that state of mind is to think as a watershed. ■

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About the Author

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Additional Resources

Snyder, Gary. (1990). *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*. San Francisco: North Point Press.

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