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A Region by Any Name: From Ecotopia to Cascadia Megaregion, Visions of the Pacific Northwest have been Secessionist in Nature

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CARL ABBOTT

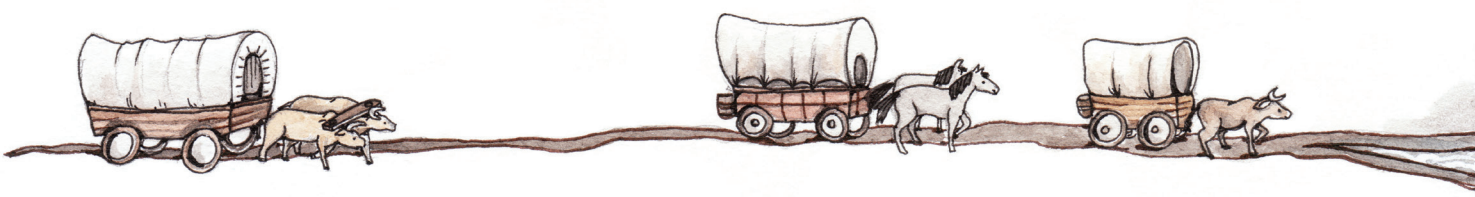
For two hundred years—from the earliest exploration by European and American mariners and fur traders, until 1975—the region made up of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia had a stable personality. This was a region that produced natural resources—fish, furs, forest products, fruit, electricity from flowing water, and wheat from fertile fields. This is the Northwest that H. L. Davis depicted in *Honey in the Horn*, Emily Carr painted from her Vancouver and Victoria studios, and Ken Kesey dissected in *Sometimes a Great Notion*. It is the Northwest that Molly Gloss and Annie Dillard revisit in their historical novels about pioneers, farmers, land speculators, and ranchers.

The 1938 book *Our Promised Land* by Richard Neuberger, then a liberal journalist and later a U.S. senator from Oregon, extols the wonderful possibilities of the regional economy: a "last frontier" and "promised land" soon to be made even more fruitful and industrious by the "concrete Gargantuan" of Grand Coulee dam. *Life* magazine's June 5, 1939, issue on "America's Future" included not only articles on the New York World's Fair with the General Motors Futurama and a feature on John Steinbeck's blockbuster novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, but also a nine-page spread on the "Pacific Northwest: The Story of a Vision and a Promised Land." The land was "rich in nature's goods," and irrigation could make the Northwest bloom. Photographs in the spread included those of an Idaho ranch, the Anaconda smelter, a tower of boards in a Seattle lumberyard, Boise Valley irrigation, and the Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams, which together "will open up nearly the whole Columbia River to navigation, supply enough power to electrify an agricultural-industrial empire."

This identity based in natural resources started to shift in the 1970s when Americans and Canadians began rethinking their economic futures in light of resource scarcity and shifting centers of economic power. This coincided with rising environmentalism in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by an accelerating shift to global economic networks and institutions in the 1990s. Over this last generation, journalists, boosters, advocates, and scholars have tried to conceptualize and shape a regional identity for the northern Pacific coast—as Ecotopia, as bioregional Cascadia, as boosterish Mainstreet Cascadia, and as the Cascadia Megaregion. Though these identities vary in focus and rhetoric, they are the latest versions of secessionist visions for the region.

First came "Ecotopia," arriving not from the heart of the Northwest but from its fringe. Ernest Callenbach, Berkeleyite and editor at the University of California Press, coined the term for his 1975 utopian novel of the same name, in which he imagined an environmentally ethical, energy-conserving polity in a newly independent nation spanning Northern California, Oregon, and Washington.

He wrote *Ecotopia* as an alternative to the post–World War II "consumer's republic," but consumption still remains central in American culture. In the context of the first oil embargo and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report, Callenbach made the challenge of Ecotopia how to support continued consumption through more careful production. In the spirit of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the ecotopian goal is to continue "getting" the good life.



Joel Garreau took up the term "Ecotopia" in 1981 in *The Nine Nations of North America*, a popular book in which the continent is divided into nine economic/cultural regions; the book now reads as one quarter astute analysis and three quarters easy-reading journalism. In the book, Garreau cited biophysical similarities for the coastal stretch from Monterey to the Kenai Peninsula, but emphasized the most consumerist aspects of Callenbach's utopia. The region is all about enjoying the outdoors, consuming nature through whitewater rafting, jogging, skiing, and other such activity. As Garreau put it, "a thundering market" for natural amenities suddenly appeared in the 1960s through more careful and conservative "spending" of energy and natural resources.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BROOKE WEEBER

In reaction came Seattle sociology professor David McCloskey's argument in the 1980s for an ecological Cascadia defined by natural processes rather than human needs. McCloskey's Cascadia emerged in the 1980s as a direct challenge to the tasteful but celebratory indulgence of journalistic Ecotopia. His is a regional vision that takes ecology seriously, positing a "Great, Green Land" and giving natural systems first place. Articulated against both Ecotopia and the "consumer's republic" of mid-century America, it argues for a revolution in production—or nonproduction—rather than changes in consumption.

McCloskey's specific terminology drew from the natural sciences that had been used to denote specific biotic and geological regions. In 1988, when he published the book—a collection of stunning maps of Pacific Northwest river systems and ecosystems and an accompanying manifesto—a political ecotopia seemed a tenuous possibility given the recession of the early 1980s and two terms of the Reagan administration. Instead, his Cascadia is an effort to forge a new awareness of human relationships with the regional landscape.

In McCloskey's evocative maps of water flowing from Northern California to Alaska, provinces, states, and nations disappear under the imperative of the hydrologic cycle that endlessly links the Pacific slope and the Pacific Ocean. In evocative language, he describes Cascadia as "a land rooted in the very bones of the earth and animated by the turnings of sea and sky, the mid-latitude wash of winds and waters. As a distinct region, Cascadia arises from both a natural integrity (e.g., landforms and earth-plates, weather patterns and ocean currents, flora, fauna, watersheds, etc.) and a sociocultural unity (e.g., native cultures, a shared history and destiny)."

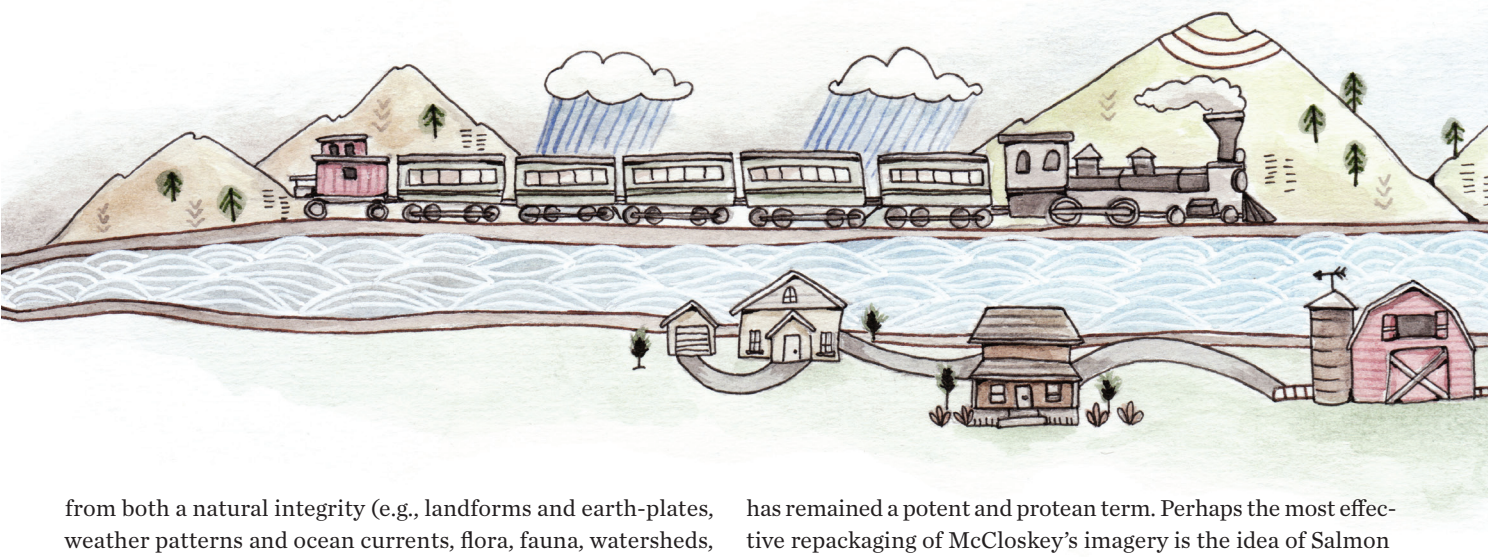
Ecological Cascadia also gains evocative power from the way in which water itself reverberates through regional literature. Rivers fill titles of books: *The River Why* (1983), *River Song* (1989), *Riverwalking* (1995). Daphne Marlatt's long poem "Steveston" (1988) depicts a Japanese Canadian fishing community on the Fraser River, where "this river is a riveting urgency." Rainstorms pounding off the Pacific structure Ivan Doig's *Winter Brothers* (1980), introduce H. L. Davis's *Honey in the Horn* (1935), and drive the action in Don Berry's *Trask* (1960) and Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). Kesey's first paragraphs are a virtual reproduction of McCloskey's map, in prose:

> Along the western slopes of the Oregon Coastal Range ... come look: the hysterical crashing of tributaries as they merge into the Wakonda Auga River. ... The first little washes flashing like thick rushing winds through sheep sorrel and clover, ghost fern and nettle, sheering, cutting ... forming branches. Then, through bearberry and salmonberry, blueberry and blackberry, the branches crashing into creeks, into streams. Finally, in the foothills, through tamarack and sugar pine ... and silver spruce—and the green and blue mosaic of Douglas fir—the actual river falls five hundred feet ... and look: opens out upon the fields.

Cascadia and Ecotopia both emerged from a distinctive regional political culture. The San Francisco Bay Area, Portland, and Seattle were all centers of grassroots work on sustainable agriculture, communal living, alternative energy systems, and other reevaluations of consumer society in the period roughly from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

In the Northwest, "ecotopia" and "ecotopian" have dropped out of general use except for ironic commentary, but "Cascadia" has remained a potent and protean term. Perhaps the most effective repackaging of McCloskey's imagery is the idea of Salmon Nation as developed and popularized by Ecotrust, a Portland-based nonprofit that works for sustainable economic development and microenterprise. The purpose of Salmon Nation (subtitled "a region defined by natural boundaries") is to enlist bioregional analysis on behalf of policy advocacy. The Ecotrust map stretches the region from Arctic Yukon and Alaska to Southern California. Salmon Nation is also "a community of caretakers and citizens that stretches across arbitrary boundaries."

A group of Seattle and Vancouver business promoters thought "Cascadia" was too good a term to leave to the environmentalists.



Their version in the 1990s was "Mainstreet Cascadia," a regional economic development concept that places the metropolitan corridor from Eugene to Vancouver at the center and emphasizes global connections. For committed bioregionalists, this rebranding is blatant hijacking. For others it is evidence that Cascadia is first and foremost an idea.

Mainstreet Cascadia stands in clear contrast to bioregional Cascadia. It draws on a long history of economic boosterism with its attention to Pacific markets, but it developed in the specific context of the U.S.–Canada Free Trade Agreement of 1989 and the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, with their promise of increased cross-border trade. More broadly, it is an effort to envision the local consequences and opportunities that result from the global shift away from a production and manufacturing economy to an information and services economy. Its advocates are "free market Cascadians," in the terminology of political scientist Susan Clarke, and neoliberals, in the trenchant analysis of geographer Matthew Sparke. Robert Kaplan nicely captured the boosterish version for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1998, writing, "what has emerged is nothing less than a strategic alliance of the business elite from Portland to Vancouver."

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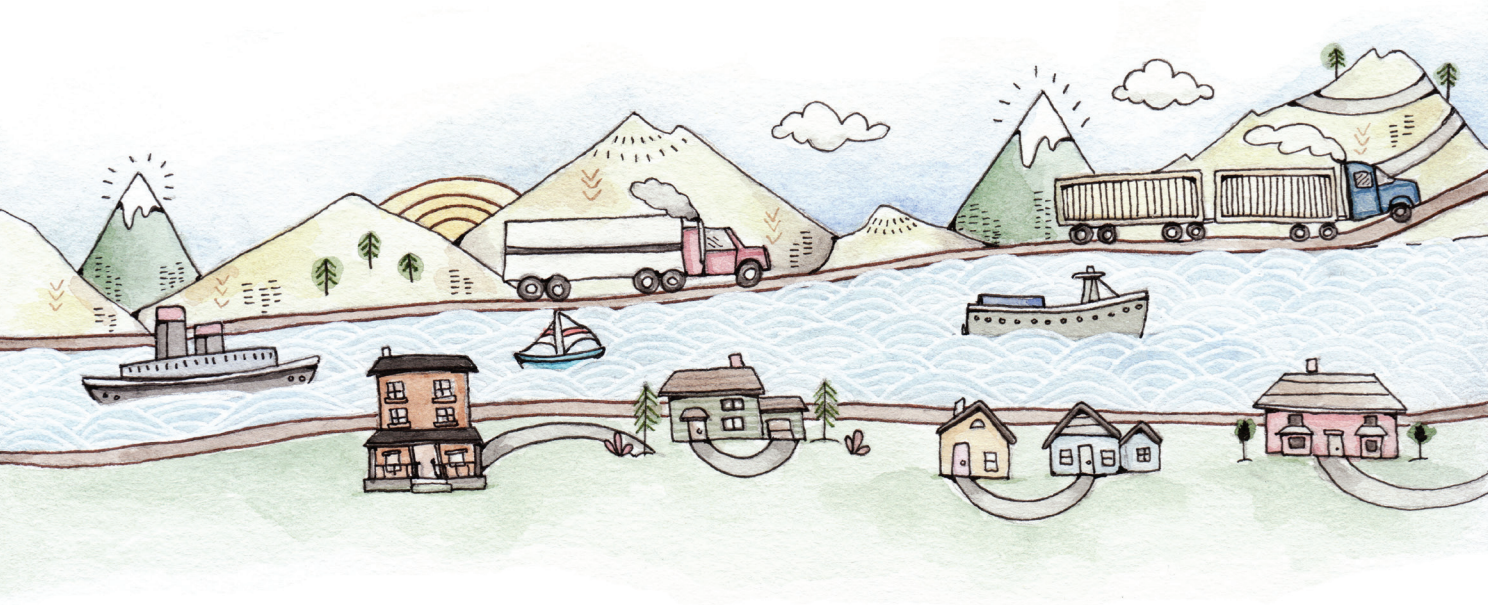
The most active institutional advocate of this regional vision has been the Cascadia Center for Regional Development, housed within Seattle's Discovery Institute, whose motto is "Cascadia: Committed to Commerce, Community, and Conservation." But the center's focus is, perhaps unsurprisingly, on better intermodal freight systems, high-volume surface transit, and improved metro transportation planning.

Most recently, the idea of a Cascadia Megaregion tries to bridge the distance between bioregional Cascadia and metropolitan Cascadia. Megaregionalists see a region that centers on the three metropolitan clusters of Portland, Seattle–Tacoma, and Vancouver, but they also argue that urban and natural systems can find peaceful coexistence.

The idea of a Cascadia Megaregion dates from the late 1990s, developed both to advance and clarify the increasingly nebulous idea of a regional economic alliance. According to its proponents, a megaregion is a large, connected network of metropolitan areas that share enough economic and cultural similarities to be useful units for making policy decisions. A recent definition by planner Cheryl Contant emphasizes the "economic functionality" of megaregions and the concurrent emergence of "cultural identity" from this shared economy.

Advocates of the Megaregion approach in northwestern America see themselves as offering a positive synthesis of commerce and nature. In so doing, they lose some of their regional specificity, since all of the dozen or so North American megaregions have to have something in common. The result is a tendency for both regional planners and business advocates to fall back on standard sustainability rhetoric that invokes the triad of prosperity, equity, and environmental conservation. If Ecotopia is the hook, Cascadia is the real starting place, Mainstreet Cascadia is the business-like alternative, and the Cascadia Megaregion tries to combine the best of all approaches.



There are problems with the megaregion idea, of course. Portland, Seattle–Tacoma, and Vancouver are competitive, not complementary. They each want the same businesses, the same shipping lines, and the same air connections. They are too far apart to function together as a single economy on any regular basis; the distances between them are roughly the same as among Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. If the megaregion has a literature,

it may be the novels of Vancouverite Douglas Coupland, whose characters in *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Microserfs*, and *Girlfriend in a Coma* live in suburban fragments that float in time and space, inhabiting tacky apartment blocks, strip-mall restaurants, and middle-class cul-de-sacs, all interchangeable fragments in search of a city.

These multiple imaginings of region may sometimes contradict one another, but they also share an important common element. Each is to some degree secessionist in nature, which reaches back in time, past the 150-year history of the promised land to the geopolitical visions of the early nineteenth century.

Long before the era of railroads, continental visionaries like Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Hart Benton anticipated sister republics on the Pacific slope—independent but friendly nations settled and developed by free English-speaking Americans from the "original nest" along the Atlantic seaboard. Explorer Charles Wilkes, in the early 1840s, similarly anticipated that "the situation of Upper California will cause its separation from Mexico before many years. ... It is very probable that this country will become united with Oregon, with which it will perhaps form a state that is destined to control the destinies of the Pacific."

tied together two continental nations through railroad building, capital flows, and trading partnerships. These efforts redirected historic and "natural" north–south flows of people and trade into east–west flows. Transcontinental connections to Puget Sound, Portland, San Francisco, and Southern California were the magical technology that integrated the West as an economic colony of the industrial core along the northeastern seaboard and the Great Lakes. The process of continental consolidation in the United States is embedded into the central national narrative.

For U.S. audiences, the Canadian story merits a bit more detail. As the fur trade declined, Britain organized its chunk of Pacific North America as two separate crown colonies—Vancouver Island in 1851 and British Columbia in 1858, combined only in 1866. With the unpromising granite of the Laurentian Shield, vast prairies, and convoluted mountains separating British Columbia from the St. Lawrence Valley, the colony certainly had the potential to evolve separately into an independent nation as a sort of North American New Zealand to the Australia of eastern Canada. Out of the sense of isolation as well, a group of B.C. residents in 1869 petitioned for annexation to the United States, and the province was essentially bribed into Canada in 1871. What ensued was

This early geopolitical imagining reflected the dominance of maritime connections. The British, Russian, and American fur trade were supplied via the sea. The key towns of the first generation of Europeans were sited for navigation and Pacific connections—Victoria on an island at the entrance to the inland sea, Port Townsend on a peninsula jutting into the entrance to Puget Sound, Portland at the head of navigation on the Columbia/Willamette system.

In contrast to the Jeffersonian vision and to early commercial patterns, the great geopolitical projects of 1850 to 1950, which happened in the aftermath of the territorial acquisitions of the 1840s, connected western North America directly to the east and the creation of "Canada" as an economic as well as political union. Central here was the National Policy that Premier John A. Macdonald introduced in 1879, designed to develop an autonomous economy on an east–west axis with the Canadian Pacific Railroad as the centerpiece. The CP reached Burrard Inlet in 1886, creating the city of Vancouver and supplementing B.C. road systems that ran eastward from the coast while carefully avoiding connections to the United States.

The new regional imaginary runs against that mission or cause, and explicitly or implicitly argues for secession, for treating the region as something different from, apart from, detached from the rest of Canada and the United States. Journalist Stewart

Holbrook called the region "The Far Corner"; more recent political jargon has dubbed it the "upper left coast," a nod to the political tendencies of ecotopian territory.

How secession plays out varies. Callenbach's Ecotopia depends on a revolution, nuclear blackmail, and literal secession from the United States, an independent nation with a recent successful revolution. In bioregional Cascadia, separation appears in the cartographic rhetoric. In McCloskey's key map, the rivers all run westward, while the rest of the continent is a blank, unknowable territory—or not worth bothering about. A second map that shows the rivers that drain eastward and northward from the Cascadian mountains offers far less detail about the Missouri, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie, and Yukon rivers than it does about the Fraser and Columbia. The waters tumbling into the Pacific are what really count.

Ecotrust has also picked up and developed the theme of separation in its own efforts to remap the Northwest. It identifies its home territory as the temperate rainforest that the Northwest shares with other western coasts. In effect, its map suggests that Cascadia should be understood as part of a discontinuous region that includes coastal Tasmania, New Zealand's South Island, southern Chile, and Norway rather than a part of continental North America. The boundaries of a true Salmon Nation would reach beyond the map of North America to encircle much of the Pacific, including Chile, New Zealand, Siberia, Kamchatka, Hokkaido, and even the very non-ecotopian Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Mainstreet Cascadia developed as a way to engage the Northwest with the Pacific economy and Asia, and it depends on the idea that the twenty-first century will be the era of metropolitan "region states" that ignore and transcend the boundaries of old nation states. Enthusiasts of electronic communication say that when wealth comes in bytes rather than carloads, and information is instantly portable, national boundaries will erode under a hail of faxes, email messages, and hits on websites. When the world is deconstructed, becoming a network of direct connections—person to person, people to people, and corporation to subcontractor—it is likely to be reconstructed around quasi-independent city-regions such as Cascadia, with semi-independent, multilateral connections to the world economy. Promoters repeatedly cite data purporting that a separate Cascadia would be the world's tenth or eleventh or maybe twentieth largest economy.

Not only does the emerging regional imaginary emphasize physical distance and difference from the Atlantic world and embrace the Pacific Rim, it also looks away from its past. Other American regionalisms have struck deep roots into their regional pasts, whether through efforts to understand and celebrate the distinctiveness of an American South and Southern culture, to honor the history of Francophone Canada, or to probe the long multiracial history of the Mexico–United States borderlands. In a manner that echoes the future-oriented boosterism of the resource development centuries, recent conceptualizations of northwestern North America look toward a future in which nation states will take second place to the conflicting imperatives of global economic flows and environmental systems. **O.Hm.**