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The incline is steep enough to allow me to view the long ravine yet gentle enough to keep me from sliding. Lying back among the fallen leaves and vibrant, green ferns carpeting the area, I stare into the understory of hundreds of moss-covered trees.

The air, fresh with rain, moistens my face and chills my lungs. I can feel my flesh intertwining with the earth below. Even through my Gortex jacket, school, personal relationships and impatience seep into the soil.

Even through my Gortex jacket, school, personal relationships and impatience seep into the soil.

The need to be independent, to accomplish or to produce are gone. I only need to enjoy and ponder the endless possibilities of this world; to sit back and become part of the earth by touching the soil, feeling the trees and smelling the rain.

Suddenly I hear my mother on the back porch yelling for dinner. I am sad to rise and break the bond created with the hillside, but I gather to my feet. Slowly climbing up the steep slope I savor the cool air in my lungs, holding it in just a little longer than usual. I feel refreshed and at ease within myself. A sense of being whole once again.

These woods behind my mother's house were my refuge for many years. They enlarged my perspective of life beyond humans. Among the trees and moss, I realized how huge and intricate the earth is, and how I am but one of many details.

As I travel to new cities I seek out natural places for their wildness and the sanctuary they provide. They have managed to keep my sanity intact in the rat-race of life.

I see, hear and read about natural places being cut, cleared and paved — it is painful. Not only for the natural community itself, but for the realization that humans are so intent on improving, advancing and controlling, they have failed to learn from each other and the earth surrounding them.

However, I also know how easy it is to slip into apathy. Lately I have become engrossed in school and work, losing touch with my friends and my surroundings. Walking around campus and Bellingham, I occasionally come across smiles, but I feel distant. I am frustrated that I do not feel closer. I wonder if the essence of community, human and natural, has lost meaning and respect in modern society.

I have also come to realize that defining community is a personal voyage. It is a matter of finding your place among the humanistic and natural world. A balance must be found, one which requires stepping back and looking at all of the pieces: neighborhood, family, friends, work and the city you live in as well as the land, air, water, forest and animals you share it with. Each piece can be looked at separately for its own personal community and together for its relation in the earth’s community.

This issue of The Planet addresses how parts of our society, such as industry and money, have unjustly enlarged some of their pieces and shows how other parts of the community such as educators and stewards of the land are working to reclaim their rightful pieces of the puzzle.

In the words of writer and conservationist Rick Bass, “I see these several years, on toward the end of the century, as the last chance we have to relearn respect: for the land we live on, and respect for ourselves, and out of that, respect for all others.”

Julie Irvin
Editor

Cover photo and design by Taylor Talmage and Ryan Hooser
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The Planet is a student written and edited magazine of Huxley College of Environmental Studies. We are dedicated to environmental advocacy and awareness through responsible journalism.

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"Americans sense that something is wrong with the places where we live and work and go about our daily business. We hear this unhappiness expressed in phrases like 'no sense of place' and 'the loss of community.' We drive up and down the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce, and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight — the fry pits, the big-box stores, the office units, the lube joints, the carpet warehouses, the parking lagoons, the jive plastic townhouse clusters, the uproar of the signs, the highway itself clogged with cars — as though the whole thing had been designed by some diabolical force bent on making human beings miserable."

— from James Howard Kunstler’s book “Home From Nowhere”
Your home and neighborhood is about to be destroyed; do you care? Why is your home and community so important? They both harbor memories of family, friends and love — all the good and bad times. Both remind you of your struggles, accomplishments and failures. A home is a work in progress, a hobby, an expression of the way in which you choose to live your life.

Your home is an integral part of the community in much the same way a forest is part of an ecosystem. Both are just as vulnerable to the forces that shape American society. Economics and social trends can remake a neighborhood and change a home in a matter of years.

As students, we may have a hard time identifying with a neighborhood or community as being our own if we have not had time to settle down and really sink our roots. Even so, we all know how we feel when something we care about is threatened.

Jude Pflanzer's struggle against a proposed Home Depot store in her Bellingham neighborhood proves home and community is worth fighting for. Pflanzer is not a career activist, powerful business owner nor a politician. She is an average citizen that loves her home and wants to keep it. Pflanzer feels the world's need for a cheaper hammer does not outweigh her need for home and family.

Bellingham's Roosevelt Neighborhood, where Pflanzer's lives, is being eyed as the new home of an offspring of urban sprawl, the "box store." Box stores are the homes of organizations such as Wal-Mart, Target and Home Depot. The box store is just that — a giant box housing every conceivable product known to humanity, sold for the lowest possible prices to the greatest number of consumers by employees working for the lowest possible pay. According to The Bellingham Herald, the proposed Home Depot store will be huge — up to 134,000 square feet. Add the parking lot and it will cover 18 acres of land. Bellingham transportation engineers estimate the store may generate up to 3,000 individual automobile trips a day.

Though this type of development can provide new tax revenues for cash-strapped cities, it can also cause economic problems. Big corporations, such as the Atlanta-based Home Depot, can enter a community with little or no connection to the existing social and business infrastructure. Consumer dollars normally spent on local business then funnel out of state. In an Utne Reader article on Wal-Mart, studies showed a dollar spent in locally owned stores holds four or five times the economic impact of a dollar spent at a nationwide box store chain. The study also found that up to a 95 percent employment loss in local business offsets the new jobs created by these large stores.

Pflanzer does not want to live next to Home Depot. The Bellingham City Council is deciding whether to rezone her neighborhood to allow the giant store, as well as the other businesses that inevitably follow. Some of Pflanzer's neighbors petitioned the City to rezone the area for commercial activity during the planning department's ten-year zoning review of city neighborhoods. They thought their properties would be worth more with the new zoning status. Home Depot, already looking for a location in Whatcom County, seized the opportunity and offered financial incentives to Roosevelt property owners for their land. Pflanzer, whose home lies just outside the affected properties, will have a nice view of the huge parking lot.

Many area residents feel that commercial development is inevitable and gladly sell out. Pflanzer disagrees. She does not want the traffic, pollution and eyesore of a giant box store. She does not want her residential neighborhood to retain its character. She has learned to work within the system, becoming a small but effective voice in the community development process. Lack of support from neighbors and city officials has not stopped her.

"I'm not going to move — I love this place and I can't afford to anyway ... but I also don't want to live next to [Home Depot]. My destiny is being changed without my permission," Pflanzer declares.

To Pflanzer, Bellingham's planning department fails to grasp the nature of her dilemma. "City planners have asked me, 'How could we make it better? Is it a matter of aesthetics? If the building were more attractive would that make a difference?'"

On a recent trip to California, Pflanzer got her first good look at the inevitable ending to box stores — the old Ernst sits vacant on the Guide.
"I couldn't believe the size of that thing. It’s not cute – it’s white and it’s orange and it’s massive and it’s ugly."

the "enemy." "We went by a Home Depot and it’s the only one I’ve ever seen — I couldn’t believe the size of that thing. It’s not cute — it’s white and it’s orange and it’s massive and it’s ugly," she says. The issue is not one of aesthetics. Rather it is about the type of development that is appropriate for her neighborhood.

Jackie Lynch, Northwest Section President of the Washington State Chapter of the American Planning Association, defends the planning process as "organic" and continually evolving. "It is a very difficult process for all parties. Nobody’s ever going to get everything they want. The planning department serves the residents, the planning commission and the city council," Lynch says. The entire process is open to the public for commentary and review. Lynch describes the planning department as a necessary tool for community development and not a political entity. The final decisions lie in the hands of the planning commission and local politicians.

Like a growing number of weary urbanites, Pflanzer regrets the loss of community in America as it is consumed by unending sprawl and giant corporations. "Everything looks the same. Small towns used to have unique personalities and now you can drive through any small town in America and you’ll find a Wal-Mart or a Home Depot or a Home Base or a Target or a K-Mart and they all look the same. These towns have lost their individuality, their uniqueness. You’ve lost the local feed store you went to, the local hardware store you went to."

Keeping small retailers afloat in centralized business districts like downtown Bellingham is not as simple as one would hope. Lynch says it would take an influx of tens of thousands of residents actually moving into downtown to support the small-business potential at its full capacity. The drawing power of Bellis Fair Mall is an almost insurmountable obstacle to consumer business downtown. The return on investments in small-town business is not great enough for major investors to incur the risk.

What can city officials do to encourage small business and slow sprawl development? Not much, says Lynch: "Government tax incentives sufficient enough to bring significant development downtown could represent an unreasonable loss of revenue for the city to bear." As a planner, Lynch feels that box store developments have a place in the community, provided infrastructure issues are examined carefully and impacts on neighborhoods are small.

Win or lose, Pflanzer does not regret her efforts. "I certainly feel like I at least gave it a try and I didn’t just roll over. I went to every meeting and I did my homework. I’m caught between a rock and a hard place. I try as hard as I can as a citizen to make a difference, to make my voice heard, to make my neighbors’ voices heard. I think the biggest thing I learned through this whole thing is the importance of your local elections. You just don’t think much about it. Oh yeah, city council — who are you going to vote for? It really matters. Those seven men and women control this town completely."

Across the United States, citizen groups are organizing to stop the invasion of big box stores and sprawl development. Newsletters, websites and books have been published informing citizens how to stop development like Wal-Mart and get involved in community decision making. The Peninsula Neighborhood Association in Gig Harbor, Washington gathered 11,000 petition signatures to stop Wal-Mart from building there. The old phrase "You can’t fight city hall" simply is not true. It is going to take everyday citizens standing up for their homes and communities to prevent America from continuing its decline into a vast monoculture of mass-produced consumerism where mediocrity replaces pride in our value system.

In his book on community development, "Home From Nowhere," author James Howard Kunstler summarizes the effects of urban sprawl on the human condition. "When we drive around and look at all this cartoon architecture and other junk we’ve smeared all over the landscape, we register it as ugliness. This ugliness is the surface expression of deeper problems — problems that relate to the issue of our national character. The highway strip is not just a sequence of eyesores. The pattern it represents is also economically catastrophic, an environmental calamity, socially devastating, and spiritually degrading."

Whether or not the Bellingham Planning Commission shares these views is unclear. But they have heard Jude Pflanzer’s plea. At a recent meeting, the members decided to deny the rezone that would have enabled Home Depot to build. Pflanzer may not deserve all the credit, but she did make her case. While some citizens cite lack of political clout as a reason to avoid getting involved, people like Pflanzer are an example for everyone who wants to make a difference. "Find out what’s going on," she says. "Get involved, get to know your neighbors and your council members. Read, write, make phone calls, go to meetings and pay attention!" The community development process is designed to enable people to take part and make their voices heard. Even Home Depot’s billions of dollars could not prevent one determined woman from doing what she felt was the best thing for her home and community.
Wild Places Serve the Spirit

Nature inspires community to honor preservation of sacred sites

by Arlene Frazier
photos by Taylor Talmage

What do a stained-glass window from a 13th century French cathedral and a Pacific Northwest old-growth forest have in common? Light floods through both, stirring a sense of wonder and spiritual uplift in people gathered beneath.

Throughout the human experience, from church architects to timber harvesters, people have sought such inspiration. From ancient times to the present, many have found it in nature.

Nature’s wild places are much like the church communities of old: both nurture a sense of spirit — a kind of glue that binds people together — which is the core of community.

Nature’s wild places are much like the church communities of old: both nurture a sense of spirit — a kind of glue that binds people together — which is the core of community.

Natural and religious environments motivate people to worship, renew and protect their source of spiritual connection. Yet, these revered wild places can be as diverse as the members that make up a community.

Although I was born in Bellingham, I grew up in Lynnwood, a disjointed and sprawling city 80 miles to the south. My only visits to Bellingham were summer stays with my uncle in Fairhaven before I started college here three years ago. In that short time, I have come to appreciate the abundance of beautiful natural places in Bellingham.

I have also wondered about the connection between community, spirit and nature.

My quest to find others throughout Bellingham and Whatcom County who could share with me sacred places that serve their spirit began with meeting a variety of community members: Ron Polinder, a Christian high school teacher; Jewell James, a member of the Lummi Nation; wildlife biologist Sean Ebnet; acupuncturist Paula Brown; and Dick Beardsley, a member of the Whatcom Land Trust.
I explored the wild places they described hoping to discover my own sense of inspiration and connection. My journey took me by horseback across mountain ridges and by canoe through silent waters of the bay. I picked medicinal plants in Whatcom Falls Park and viewed bald eagles in flight across the Nooksack River.

Ron Polinder understands the need for inspiration. An active Christian, he lives in his hometown of Lynden where he is steeped in its traditions of family, community and land stewardship.

"I am concerned with how we treat the earth and the environment because of my faith, which does not separate the secular from the sacred," Polinder says. "The Bible is surprisingly full of direct advice ... with concern for creatures and how we treat them."

Polinder finds spirit in the nature around him as well as in church. Walking the Nooksack River on Sunday mornings or riding his horse through the mountains, he finds the biblical "cool of the garden" in the canopy of the trees arching over him.

Polinder is not the first to find spirit in these Northwest places. The Lummi have done so for ages, and today they still cherish the sacred grounds of Arlecho Creek, around the upper reaches of the South Fork of the Nooksack River.

Near the rock spine of the Twin Sister mountains, generation after generation of Lummi have come for healing and renewal among the old-growth trees, some of which were alive when the first North American colonists arrived.

Today places like Arlecho Creek and the groves along the Nooksack that inspire Polinder and the Lummi are increasingly threatened by development. Jewell James, coordinator of the Lummi Treaty Task Force, is frustrated that some people fail to appreciate the spiritual value of such places within the community.

"When we ask, 'Can we have one or two spots in Whatcom County?' it is almost like a joke," James says. "In spite of that, we have not given up working on preserving sacred sites from being devastated by industry and logging."

James is disgusted at the relationship that has evolved between man and nature "in the name of wealth and materialism," which has damaged land his people depend on to survive. What alarms and saddens him the most is that, like many natural places, the Arlecho Creek watershed will not recover in his lifetime from erosion and the other destructive legacies of logging.

"The spirit has been raped from the land," says James. "The land suffers, and we suffer because we take it to heart."

Some members of our community make their living by understanding the impacts of development and fostering awareness about the biological uniqueness of areas like Arlecho Creek. As resource consultant with Cascade Environmental Services, Inc., biologist Sean Ebnet surveys wildlife populations and habitats. His studies provide valuable, and sometimes controversial, information for savvy clients seeking development permits that impact wildlife habitats.

Ebnet’s work often takes him roaming the mountains of the Cascade Range, and he knows he is one of several thousand people who do so each year. What once seemed like wilderness is now more like an urban forest, he observes.

"We demand from the environment certain amounts of recreation, timber commodities and trails," Ebnet says. "My concern is that in the compromise we lose some habitats and serenity of the areas."

Ebnet finds serenity while birdwatching at the mouth of the Nooksack or hiking on Mount Baker. "These areas offer refuge, cover and sustenance to a multitude of species — yet these areas are declining in abundance."

Mountains, trees and wildlife are all threatened by the demands of human population, but they continue to offer people refuge from the stresses of urban life. Paula Brown, an acupuncturist and Belling-
ham resident for 14 years, finds "a feeling of permanent beauty" in Whatcom Falls Park, a natural area spared from development.

Brown takes her lunch-time walks in the park. Over the years, she has learned to identify the change of seasons by noticing the different sounds of the waterfalls, smells in the air and shapes of the plants. "In the middle of this winter, the Indian plum is starting to bud," Brown said. "Then the bleeding hearts come on in the spring and the rose-hips in the fall."

Like the Lummi, Brown knows about nature's power to heal and renew. She uses the buttercup and rose-hip flowers in her acupuncture practice, an ancient art of Chinese medicine that respects the cycles of nature. Brown knows she can depend on nature's changes to remind her of new life.

More importantly, she knows she can depend on her community preserving the park. She can continue her walks among the waterfalls and a trout hatchery, enjoying a sense of sanctuary. "It is like food for my spirit," Brown exclaims.

But who are these people within our community, the vigilant land stewards, who make sure we have places like Arlecho Creek or Whatcom Falls Park?

The Whatcom Land Trust embodies the spirit of our community at work. Since 1984, its volunteers have functioned as community watchdogs over land development and have served to preserve these, and other, important natural areas.

I was invited to join the Whatcom Land Trust on a tour of bald eagle roosting habitat that was preserved by a protection plan spearheaded by the Land Trust. The Land Trust proposed a conservation easement within the Kenney Creek watershed, north of Bellingham, in order to ensure some 200 eagles gathering there each year a permanent place to feed and rest in winter before their departure in spring.

In 1995, their wish was granted. In cooperation with the Land Trust and Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Trillium Corporation, a local real estate and timber company, set aside 169 acres of forest to form the Kenney Creek Bald Eagle Communal Winter Roost Protection Area.

Now two years later, Dick Beardsley and several other board members of the Land Trust meet at Carol's Coffee Cup at 8 a.m. on a Saturday in mid-January. The Protection Area tour would offer a chance to view the fruits of their labor and, hopefully, an eagle or two.

Characteristic of their unwavering commitment, a sleepy but excited group of men and women, with a few children in tow, venture out in the biting cold and windy morning. Adorned with wool caps and binoculars, the group carpools through the timberlands now being managed to benefit the local economy as well as the migratory bird.

"It is not like 200 years ago when this was all habitat," Beardsley explains, waving at the valley of trees below as we roll back down the bumpy logging road. "We just have selected areas left, and we have to work to enhance it."

The Land Trust works like a protective hand that reaches out to private individuals and public agencies interested in saving vital links in nature's chain and essential parts of our community. With the preservation of the Kenney Creek area from commercial logging, the eagles have a sanctuary of their own. Like cathedrals of the past, this refuge will provide their basic needs of food, shelter and access to one another.

Across the Nooksack River from where I stand, a wide-winged bald eagle swoops toward a stand of evergreen trees where eight other majestic, white-crowned birds meditate over the river's roar. I realize the eagles have their own community and, at the same time, are part of my community.

My memory echoes the sage words of the Chickasaw Indian author, Linda Hogan, from her book "Dwellings":

"(W)hen we take up a new way, our minds and hearts are filled with the vision of earth that holds us within it, in compassionate relationship to and with our world ... It is a place grown intense and holy. It is a place of immense community and of humbled solitude ... We remember that all things are connected."

I feel inspired watching the eagles sway on the fir boughs, knowing that I belong to a community that has chosen to value nature and "the earth that holds us within it." My spirit lifts toward the open sky, and I know this is my wild place.
At the marine park, I watch them swivel their heads back and forth, as if the scenes would decide for them where to look. Casting long looks to the islands, mountains and water, then furtive glances in the other direction at the smokestacks, docks, Texaco sign and square buildings, their confusion steadily increases. I could tell they were not from Bellingham because they looked just as I did the first time I went down to the waterfront: confused and hopeless.

I wanted to shout to them and acknowledge their confusion. The map I used to find my way around Bellingham on my first visit did not illustrate the real appearance of the bay. My image of a city on the beach disappeared as I traveled down Holly Street to turn onto Roeder. Industrial buildings line the waterfront. Large docks jut out in states of newness and disrepair. An enclosed pool of yellowed foam the size of a mall parking lot extends from the shoreline out into the bay.

I spent my childhood running up and down the beach, finding shells, swimming and playing in the sand where I grew up. Disturbed by the contradiction of industry on the edge of such aesthetic wonder here, I decided to research the bay's history of pollution and cleanup to placate my disgust.

The use of Bellingham Bay has been central to this community's economy and existence after finding coal, gold miners arrived using mercury as a bonding agent to pan for gold in the various creeks and rivers that empty into Bellingham Bay. Soon the Bay filled with runaway mercury, floating logs, garbage and ships delivering people and goods.

The more I learned about the history, the more it became obvious that instead of obscuring the scenery, the shoreline industries had become a part of it. Once industry established its foundations along the Bay, communities of the past did not question its reasons for being there. Fortunately, I knew where to find out how interested the community had become. For 15 years my father worked as the port manager of the town we lived in. I learned then that port authorities often work with the airports, train depots and, most importantly, waterways of towns and cities.

The Port of Bellingham owns a majority of the waterfront property at this time, except for the pulp mill. It leases the rest out to different businesses and industries. When I spoke with Michael Stoner, the Port's Environmental Manager, he knew about the Bay's history, but wanted to explain the history they are making now.

Bellingham Bay has been selected as a site for a model project to clean up contaminated sediments. This is the first cleanup project being done cooperatively among the contaminators, state and federal agencies, local governments and private interests. "This project integrates economic development with environmental cleanup - making the environmental cleanup faster, better and cheap-
er, also shares in the costs among the Port, Georgia Pacific and the City of Bellingham," Stoner explained. This new model and, in particular, the participants, will set the stage for other targeted cleanup areas in Puget Sound.

All involved parties agreed to participate in the cleanup. The Department of Ecology (DOE) and the five other state and federal agencies agreed not to pursue the usual form of cleanup encouragement: litigation. Mike Connors, the Port's Communications Manager, said when polluters work independently, "nothing will happen until you start getting court orders coming in."

"We're hopeful that the people of Bellingham, working collaboratively, will help us create a new process — one that avoids millions of dollars in unnecessary litigation costs around Puget Sound," Jennifer Belcher, the state's Commissioner of Public Lands, said.

The DOE, Department of Natural Resources, Washington Puget Sound Water Quality Authority, Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chose this bay because efforts were already underway between waterfront industries to clean up historical pollution.

During my visit with Stoner, he told me about the city landfills that creatively extend the waterfront property. The city used the two areas extending out from the shoreline as city dumps from 1965 to 1975. Currently, the chemicals we usually let seep into the ground in "normal landfills" are seeping into the Bay. A separate cleanup project between the City, Port and Georgia Pacific will attempt to stop the seepage. The goal is to cap both landfills to prevent rain and wave erosion from allowing the chemicals to leach out. Stoner said that Georgia Pacific is involved so they can use the land for a 200,000 square-foot tissue storage warehouse.

To me, the most dominant building on the waterfront is Georgia Pacific, a pulp and paper mill. It reminds me of a giant corn-cob pipe billowing smoke, with a brand of tobacco no one likes.

It reminds me of a giant corn-cob pipe billowing smoke, with a brand of tobacco no one likes. Puget Sound. They dumped organic wastes from the unused parts of trees, chlorine used to bleach the paper, and mercury (used to make the chlorine) directly into the Bay. Georgia Pacific began operation of the mill in 1963. For a period of five years in the late 1960s, the mill dumped mercury in the Bay at the rate of 10 to 20 pounds a day, making up a large part of today's contaminated sediments. The large amount of organic material robbed all the oxygen from the fish, crabs, squid, oysters and clams, enough to eventually establish Bellingham Bay as a "dead bay."

Bellingham maintained this status until 18 years ago when federal legislation demanded a cleanup. Georgia Pacific began by putting in a retaining lagoon to treat the organic wastes before pumping them into the Bay. The City of Bellingham, under community pressure, reluctantly stopped pumping primary sewage into Whatcom Creek. Although Georgia Pacific's lagoon is not like the one you will find on Gilligan's Island, and secondary treatment sewage is pumped into the Bay instead of the creek, these are improvements.

Learning the Bay's history lessened the feeling of hopelessness I felt when I first saw it.
Environmental attitudes have changed within the people and industries of this community. The cleanups of the past are obvious to long-time residents of Bellingham; the Bay once again has living creatures and no longer smells like a sewer. Now, the industries are working together to cleanup the pollution that cannot be seen.

The Port will be the day-to-day coordinator of the current sediment cleanup project, managing $700,000 the DOE set aside for research and coordination of the project. Lucy Pebles, a DOE representative, explained to me that with so many state, federal and private interests involved that having just one agency coordinate the research, information and cleanup eliminates redundancy and saves money.

All of the sites involved have been identified as contaminated by the DOE. “Once a site has been designated as contaminated,” Pebles explained, “banks hold the economic power, and refinancing or loans are not available. Basically you can’t do anything with contaminated property.” When sediments are identified as contaminated they cannot be disturbed or the pollution spreads.

The two cleanup projects will include dredging the contaminants out of the area beside Georgia Pacific, in what is called the Whatcom Waterway; capping the two city landfills that are leaching into the Bay; and dredging the area around the shipyard that is contaminated with heavy metals and hull paint.

By completing the projects, the partners will be able to “meet multiple objectives and create additional usable property out there,” Stoner said. What Stoner means by “usable property” is usable industrial property. I wonder if the conflict between recreational community uses and industrial use of the Bay arises in native Bellingham residents.

Unlike where I grew up, Bellingham does not have a beach with tide pools to explore at low tide, sand to build with, or clean water to swim in on hot summer days. Just as this bay’s missing elements seem abnormal to me, this industrial scene must be normal to those that grew up here with this Bay.

Much of my hopelessness has been dissipated through my conversations with the Port and the DOE. The waterfront community is working together for the economy and the health of the Bay.

As Conners says about the project, “There is an incentive, a benefit to it that all parties can understand.” Their convergence of environmentalism and realism may someday include my idealism. I hope this Bay can become a greater community resource. One that can strike a balance instead of letting economics rule. A beach with tide pools, clean water to swim in and a place to put your feet in the sand and watch the sunset, that is the future I see for Bellingham.

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In order to release pollutants in our water, industries must apply for permits.

\[ \text{5-year permit renewal} \]

\[ \text{Permit management by the DOE.} \]

The state Department of Ecology reviews the applications and issues draft permits.

The Pollution Permitting Process

Final permit issued.

Contact Robyn at RE Sources 733-8307.

The 30-day Public Review period is when you can get involved and BAYWATCH. You can have important input into this permitting process.

Citizen Action Training for Water Quality teaches how to monitor and submit comments to the DOE regarding pollution permits.

This training is part of RE Sources’ Whatcom Waters program.
Imagine what America looks like through alien eyes.

I come from Finland, in Northern Europe. Geographically it may be East, but history and culture bind it to Western Europe. The differences between life in Finland and in Washington state should not be so huge. I am sure that compared to life in the African savanna they are not. Yet, there are differences.

If you have ever traveled abroad, you know that when you arrive in a new country everything looks a little different. Signs, houses, cars, people, vegetation — everything. During my first few weeks here, I felt as if I was walking in a movie. People kept asking me what I thought of America. I told them, "It looks very American to me." They were not satisfied, but my answer was the simple truth. I had never visited this country before, but it had visited me through my mail box, radio and TV. I had seen these signs, houses, cars and people before.

I came here as an exchange student to pursue environmental studies, not to find "the American Dream." I may seem very critical towards everything I see, but I do not criticize only America. I see many characteristics that frustrate me about any Western lifestyle. I do not want to judge this country and its citizens; I know too little to judge. I simply want to tell about my impressions of America during my first four months here.

Big, Huge or King Size?

From the beginning I noticed everything was big. I could have guessed this beforehand from what I had heard, but sometimes you have to see it to believe it. The land is big, distances long and trees huge. Stores are immense, cars are oversized (I wonder how they park in big cities), and food is packed in large containers. Even people are big. Bellingham is considered close to Seattle although it is 90 miles away. In a restaurant you get more food than you want. Homework is often huge, too.

Quality is not appreciated as much as quantity. The huge homework fails to make me wise, because I do not have enough time to concentrate on it. I write a lot but do not think deeply and a big meal does not necessarily taste as good as it looks. And, the
Environmental issues are very important to me, so I paid attention to the amount of waste everybody, including myself, produces here. I have been reacquainted with the phenomenon called the 'paper plate,' although I had almost forgotten what it felt like to use one. For years I have not bought a plastic bag for my groceries. (In fact, in Finland we pay for them.) Suddenly I was drowning in plastic bags coming from a very special store called Haggen. In a few weeks, I learned to be brave enough to say, "No bag, please, I have my own!"

May I Keep a Pet Worm?

I cannot recycle my milk cartons and I do not have a compost pile. I once asked where one could get a worm compost, but all I received was strange looks. I still do not know if the words I used were wrong or if it was a really weird thing to ask. I can recycle glass, but nobody seems to reuse my bottles. They just go into the same box with all the other glass. Plastic bottles are recyclable here, but not in Finland. On the other hand, I hardly ever bought anything in a plastic bottle there.

It is painful to use energy as carelessly as people here do. My apartment is heated with electricity, which is not economical nor efficient. The windows have only single-pane glass and leak heat. The common way to dry clothes is in a dryer; I failed to find a rack to drip-dry them. Traveling everywhere by car does not save energy either.

How's Sweden?

I was warned that Americans are very easy to meet but hard to get close to. I found out every word of that statement is true. Most people are friendly. Service workers are usually so nice they cheer up your day. From my first experience at the university I found that other students are friendly, too. Many times I have heard, "Oh, you're from Finland! I've always wanted to go to Finland." Germany, England or France I could believe, but I bet most people have never considered visiting my dear, cold Finland. I have met students who think it is great to get to know me, who are excited to hear about Finland, and who would love to get together at a better time. The very next day they may ask "How's Sweden?", the promised better time never comes. It gets on my nerves that I cannot tell if they truly like me. Who could have guessed that the most difficult thing during my year in America would be to find an American friend?

I have not found the way to an American heart although I believe such a thing exists. My way of developing a friendship is getting to know a person through deep conversation. But I cannot get an American to discuss one topic with me for more than five minutes. They are willing to talk with many, but discuss with few and debate with none.

Please, do not misunderstand me. I really appreciate the smiles and politeness I see. I am just used to living in a country where no one smiles, but "I'll call you" means "I'll call you." I am extremely grateful for the friendly student-professor relationships so common here, but rare in Europe. It makes university life more enjoyable if you feel comfortable asking questions of your professor!

Are We Truly Free?

There is also lack of trust in human relationships. People here are afraid of things even more than in Finland. Violence is one thing. On our orientation day at Western, the foreign exchange students — especially girls — were told that it is dangerous to walk from the university at night. I would not worry a moment about walking alone at night in any town the size of Bellingham if I was in Finland. Almost everywhere in Helsinki, the capital, I feel pretty safe to walk at late hours.

Based on literature about American culture I have read, freedom and independence are extremely important ideals. Most Americans believe they are independent individuals. Yet, their independence is not as true as it could be. Americans are free to own a gun for self-protection, but does it truly make them free? Does it make them independent? Perhaps instead it makes them dependent on weapons and tied to fear. If a woman has to live her life fearing rape, she can hardly call herself emancipated.

Another observation concerns people's responsibility. The whole world knows the story of the American woman who won money in a lawsuit because the coffee she spilled burned her lap. The cup did not tell her it was hot. The effects of events like these are visible in all kinds of products here. There are funny warnings telling what a product can and cannot do. I saw an ad where a blindfolded taxi driver drove a car. Small text at the bottom of the screen told that this cannot be done in reality! People's lack of common sense can become a problem. If preschool teachers do not dare touch children because they are afraid they will be charged with child abuse, something is very, very wrong.
Dreams for Sale

Money has enormous power in this country. Money rules in many places, including TV. I am still not used to the amount of advertisements here. Ads even control the length of programs. Money rules in the film and music industries because it is valued more than art. I am convinced you can buy dreams, too, at least in Las Vegas. (But do not blame anybody else if you do not find them as you expected.)

Happiness may not be for sale, but equality seems to be. Americans are supposedly created and treated equally. But are some people more equal than others? In America, the more money you have the more equal you become. Health care is for sale, education is for sale, even the law is for sale. Because I am used to Western European social democracy, the holes in this society you can fall through here scare me.

People know little of what is going on outside their country and many of them actually do not care. One notices this in details. People do not speak foreign languages or watch foreign movies. They keep speaking of Czechoslovakia (Czech and Slovakia are two different countries now), of Leningrad (St. Petersburg), or even of the Soviet Union. I understand this country is big enough to satisfy any needs you may have, but sometimes I want to wave my hands and shout, “Hey, there is another world out there!”

On the other hand, I understand a little of the problems you have in this country. I was ashamed of myself when I noticed how seriously most people fight against racism and how little I had thought about the issue. People of color are a new phenomenon in Finland; racism could become a problem there in the future. Americans seem to be getting over it little by little.

Then I stop to admire all these responsible people who try to take care of things. They donate to schools and museums, help the hungry, and even adopt highways. I myself am used to taking litter removal for granted, but of course someone has to do it, too. I admit my ideal of social democracy is not the only way of taking care of the society. A spontaneous way, where everyone takes care of their own share, would be even more admirable. Perhaps it is size, more than the system itself, that causes problems. Small, village-like communities might work better, but America is too big to be a village.

America in the Middle

America is a self-confident and self-centered nation. I feel embarrassed when I try to draw a picture of the American community. To me it seems to have well-working communities inside it, but the contrasts between those systems are huge. All the good people together is still not enough.

Is the country just too big? Or is this all because the country and its culture are so young? There is hardly any tradition. Tradition can be wrong, too, but often past experience has really shown the best way. My tiny country is much more homogenous. It is easier to sense a feeling of community there, because everybody shares more things with each other. Americans still have a long way to go before they get all the different pieces to work in harmony.
Between the hum of the engine and the gentle rocking of the little boat, I'm hard pressed to bring myself back to the waking world. Karyn slouches on the deck, her coarse brown hair blown into knots waving around her eyes. "You come 600 miles to the most beautiful place in the world, then snooze. I don't get it." She has a point. I rise slowly, rub my eyes and take a deep breath.

Nuxalk nation, to see with my own eyes the last great wilderness — the world's largest remaining old growth temperate rainforest — before it is gone. I have come here to learn from the rain, from the silence, from the Nuxalk people, and to offer my help. I never planned on falling in love.

The northern coast of British Columbia is a place so remote, so rugged and inaccessible that the landscape has been allowed to exist and grow largely unmolested for thousands of years — until now. Here, settled at the feet of great and imposing peaks, grizzly bears roam dripping forests of ancient western red cedar and Sitka spruce. Clean, cold waters flow from alpine lakes and glaciers and flash with the passage of spawning wild salmon. Life crowds in upon itself; a natural community of such size and diversity can be found nowhere else.
I am in the company of good people. We have come here from Germany, Poland, the United States and England to help a proud nation fight for its homeland. Accents and skin tones mingle like coastal fog hanging amid fir trees. We are the guests of the Nuxalk people, living in their company, in the home of their ancestors.

The small coastal town of Bella Coola, home to most of the Nuxalk people, or Nuxalkmc, is the most divided community I have ever seen. Fault lines of economy, race and religion crisscross the cultural landscape. The native people live in poverty on the "res" side of town, while not 100 yards away, whites live comfortably in another world. Unemployment and alcoholism have reached near-epidemic proportions. Tensions between white loggers and Nuxalk fishermen cloud the lines of communication in stereotypes and resentment.

I would not claim that I came here with a false, romantic hope of healing these wounds any more than I would claim to be a voice for the Nuxalkmc. I can only speak for myself, for my experience in someone else's home.

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A light rain begins to fall as we round the finger of rock and swing into the South Bentinck Arm. Melvina, a Nuxalk woman whose silence speaks more than words, stares out at the wild serenity that is her home. She seems an extension of the forest itself: quiet, patient, beautiful. A sadness lingers in her deep brown eyes. She knows more than I do.

These woods and mountains have been home to her people for a time beyond memory. Once there were thousands of Nuxalkmc scattered over some 300 village sites in the waters around Bella Coola. Now around 300 Nuxalkmc live on two small reservations. One human today for every community of yesteryear.

The vast profusion of life here allowed for one of the most complex societies of native North America to evolve. Abundant salmon and cedar enabled a sustainable society to flourish for around 10,000 years — yet in the past 200 years it has been brought nearly to extinction.

The Nuxalkmc are a strong people, not easily defeated. In recent times the House of Smyusta, the organization of hereditary chiefs who preserve the traditional ways of life in story and practice, have organized to defend themselves and their land against the threat of deforestation and cultural genocide.

The boat chugs on, bringing us to new places and emotions. The first clearcut unfolds before us — swallowing up the entire side of a mountain. Near the top is a deeper tear in the upturned soil where a logging road has given way. Tons of loose brown earth have tumbled down to the waterline. This is the killer of salmon. The silt chokes out the fish, and in so doing, the silt chokes out the Nuxalkmc.

Further down the fjord we see a great hump of green rising from the water, an island shaped like some emerald turtle. Directly across from that swell is the last remaining sacred hot springs on Nuxalk territory, Talyu. Two before it have been leveled.
The Nuxalkmc did not cede their lands to the government of British Columbia, Canada or anyone else. Yet government agencies granted timber licenses allowing giant logging corporations to clearcut Nuxalk territory without Nuxalkmc consent. And although much has been lost, a great amount still remains.

Twenty-six million acres of ancient temperate rainforest — an area roughly 13 times the size of Yellowstone National Park — line the valleys of British Columbia's mid-coast in a thick evergreen cloak. Excepting coastal Alaska and Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, grizzly populations are higher here than anywhere on earth. Wolf packs can be found in greater density than in any other corner of North America. This remaining biodiversity is our single greatest hope for repopulating the devastated Cascadia Bioregion, the temperate rainforest ecosystem of Canada and the United States.

The fate of this land is an issue not limited to one people, one province or one nation. Here is the last great stand of wilderness — once it is gone, if it is gone, there can be no going back. In the words of professor Donald Alper, director of Western Washington University's Center for Canadian-American Studies, "We in the U.S. need to be concerned with Canadian environmental issues because air, water and wildlife don't respect national boundaries ... it's all essentially one ecosystem."

The movement to save this place has been international. A network of concerned people, many of whom will never even see a rainforest, have united all across the world. Demonstrations in Germany and Japan bear testament to the global significance of this landscape. Corporations have been silently clearcutting a people and a place for too long — the quiet is now broken.

Days have washed past as we sit around the campfire, paddle leaky canoes through narrow fjords, and climb trees bigger than our imaginations. We fill our time plucking wild, ripe huckleberries and scampering through groves of cedar and devil's club. We have been preparing to defend No Name Creek, a watershed scheduled for oblivion. We make a retreat to the healing waters of Talyu to soak in the sacred springs.

Stories are shared in the water, songs and tears. The First Woman descended to cedar and eagle. It is the cradle of humanity, a wild Garden.

The Nuxalkmc responded in cooperation with the Forest Action Network (FAN), a Bella Coola-based environmental and social justice group. For 20 days tree-sitters, elders, hereditary chiefs and FAN activists blockaded the logging and road building. Finally, a 41-member Royal Canadian Mounted Police raid broke up the gathering, arresting 22 Nuxalkmc and FAN members. The chiefs spent almost a month in jail for refusing to sign a document forbidding them to carry out traditional obligations to defend their territory. The sacred groves are falling.

We awoke late, still feeling the lightness of spirit found the night before, bathing in holy waters. Or perhaps it is the sky. For the first time in 10 days, the sun has fought off the clouds, reminding us of the importance of little wilderness fills in around us — we can feel it. We can feel ourselves becoming a part of it. Love is binding us to this place, and to one another. We can feel the ties, a sensation of the flesh and spirit, like the drinking of cool water or September rain.

The season draws out, summer has passed and the scattered hardwoods begin dropping yellowed leaves to the forest floor.

It was this time last year that they came to clearcut Eden. International Forest Products, the largest logging corporation operating in Nuxalk territory, landed on the shores of King Island, at a place known to the whites as Fog Creek. The Nuxalkmc have their own name for it, Ista. It is a holy place. According to Nuxalk tradition, the earth here, living in the presence of
victories. We roll about in the tall grasses by the water’s edge, basking on rocks. The gleaming white pillars of the Coast Range stand like ivory sentinels on the horizon, pecking out from behind the bald slopes that surround Talyu.

David, an ethnobotonist from Seattle, closes his eyes and leans against the rock I have taken as my perch. For four months now, he has been in the wild. Before coming here, he was working in the Skowquiltz valley on the Temperate Rainforest Research Project, another collaborative effort between FAN and the Nuxalk nation. In this valley, several hours to the north, a team of researchers, volunteers and activists are documenting the natural community of a pristine watershed.

Scheduled for road building next summer and clearcut the following, the Skowquiltz is located in the heart of the largest continuous tract of undisturbed temperate rainforest in the world. It is only a portion of the Great Coast Rainforest, an area slightly smaller than the country of Switzerland. Marbled murrelets, an endangered species south of the Canadian border, abound here with spotted owls, wolves, black and grizzly bears, cougars and tailed frogs.

"If the people of Washington, Oregon and southern British Columbia want a healthy ecosystem, for themselves and their children, this is where it will have to come from. This is the last great stronghold of the temperate rainforest ecosystem; the ability to re-wolf, re-grizzly, re-salmon is stored here, in the genetic resources, the biodiversity," said Simon Waters, a coordinator for FAN.

However, the holy places are going fast. As they clearcut the genetic resources, they unravel the web of wilderness. Destroying a forest is not merely a matter of removing trees — this is the death of a system. Here is a community which includes not only wildlife, or trees, or water, or soil, or people — but all these, living together as a unified whole.

The provincial government has every remaining watershed of the mid-coast slated for roads and clearcuts within the next five to seven years. If things continue at this pace, within 12 years all the ancient rainforests of coastal British Columbia will be made into pulp.

Sitting here, in the heart of someone else's homeland, I am finding a kind of peace. This is to be my last evening in the wild. In the past weeks, I have forged a relationship, a sense of rapport with a people and a place teetering on the brink of disappearance. Twilight is approaching. I bundle on my climbing gear and work my way some 70 feet above the forest floor. Suspended, bound to the body of a 500-year-old Douglas fir, I look out across the channel. The sun draws out over the mountaintops. No clouds have yet returned.

Feeling the rough brown bark press against my skin, knowing the power and presence of this forest, it is impossible to imagine this place may soon become telephone books.

Looking down, gazing through firelight and canopy, I see the clearing where I have shared so many meals and stories. I hear the voices of friends drifting up to me. I smile that same sad smile I did not understand when seeing it in Melvina's eyes as she looked out on her home from the deck of a chugging little boat. In a small way, this is my place too. I will take something of it with me wherever I go. I am unsure of whether these are tears of hope or loss. This much I know; I never meant to fall in love.

~ Brian Sokol
Life on the Farm

Intentional Communities

Our Past and Future

by Kristen Clapper
photos by Ryan Bergsman

Steering around the last sharp curve of a snaking country road, the car tires crunch the gravel and snow of River Farm. Immediately I am greeted by Alan, his arms filled with firewood from a leaning shed. From beneath his sandy, kinked beard, he smiles at me with the warmth of acceptance that permeates the crisp winter air of the Farm.

We enter the Common House, where seven members have collected after a successful community work party. The walls are lined with faded, folded paperbacks; a folk song plays on the radio. Bundled herbs gathered last spring hang from the wooden loft.

The River Farm is an intentional community composed of 13 adults and seven children, located approximately 30 minutes from Bellingham. An intentional community is a diverse group of related and unrelated individuals who purposely join together to occupy land and consider themselves a community.

Often, intentional communities are united by a common ideology. “We’re here to live a better life,” explains Tiffany, a Fairhaven student with an easy smile. Pamela crosses the room and squeezes Tiffany’s hand in agreement. Pamela expresses the vision of River Farm: “To be sustainable. To live respectfully. To be able to cooperate and develop relationships with each other.”

Throughout human history, individuals have responded to a general dissatisfaction with mainstream society by settling collectively. In the 19th century, visionaries sought to build utopian communities. The communes and crash pads of the 1960s and ’70s allowed individuals to “drop out” of a tumultuous society. Today’s intentional communities encourage individuals to explore new ways of reconnecting with each other and with nature. Many communities also serve as educational centers or activist retreats. Instead of escaping from society, communarians work to develop new political and economic structures to make change happen.

The exploration of alternative structures of governance within communities can be applied to mainstream politics as well. As communities develop successful structures of group consensus, new principles can be applied to organizations other than intentional communities. In mainstream America, some businesses, worker-owned cooperatives and grass-roots activist organizations already use group consensus in their decision-making processes. At the Farm, all decisions, whether they are about bills or chores, are made through the process of group consensus. At two meetings each month, lasting four to six hours, the adults deliberate over each issue listed on the agenda. Every adult rotates through the position of facilitator and note-taker. They make decisions final only when there is unanimous agreement, enabling everyone to feel his or her opinion has been heard and considered. Tiffany believes the process is fair because “it doesn’t put all the stress on a decision-maker.” Every adult in the community is given an equal voice, making this community a true democracy.

The economic structures of intentional communities also vary widely. Some communities organize a total communal economy, with all land, labor and resources held in common. Other communities, like River Farm, prefer a more individualistic economy, using a mixture of commonly held land and individually owned homes. Community economics are based upon reducing consumption, waste and income. By living and working collectively, members simplify their needs and the means involved in attaining them. Almost every adult resident at River Farm is either employed at an outside job or works...
out of the community by consulting, contracting, or developing a cottage industry. Members pay monetary dues to the Farm and dedicate 30 hours per month for communal chores. Communities are excellent situations for experimentation with alternative economic systems.

Gina, a serious woman with dark hair twisted into two braids, walks with Tiffany and me to one of the seven residences on the property in frigid, 20-degree weather. We walk the road dividing the 80 acres of land; half is caught in the shadow of the bordering forested hills, while the other half slopes down to the winding bank of the Nooksack River. Gina stops to check for eggs in the chicken coop, then crosses the gravel road to watch Star, the black-and-white pony, dip her ice-crusted chin into the water trough.

The history of River Farm began in the early 1970s when this land of hills, forests and river was originally held by one owner who encouraged a small community to settle the area. Two major floods, financial distress and strained relations caused this initial community to collapse. Most intentional communities suffer a similar fate. "Like small businesses, intentional communities have a 95 percent failure rate in the first three years," Bill, a 12-year resident, explains.

The land is now in the care of the Evergreen Land Trust, an agency that holds and manages five community properties in Washington state. Land owners donate property to the trust to protect it from intensive development. In 1982, the Trust listed the River Farm as an Educational Non-Profit Organization. Throughout the years, Farm members have paid off the title to the land for the Trust so it will be protected from development indefinitely.

The people of the Farm have an uncommon connection to the land. The sandy, swirling river bank, the evergreens, the fields that feed — this is the livelihood, the religion, the existence of the community members. "Everyone has some tie to the land," Gina says. The bond between the people here, perhaps the most base connection, comes from stewarding the land and taking care of their needs. "It is our self-reliance that bonds us," Bill adds.

We pass a snow-covered garden where grapes, kiwis and berries color the landscape in the summer. Gina fills our walk with comments about the cold, discussion over a recent electricity bill, and remarks on the health of the animals we pass. We slip through a tight gate into the barn, where twin lambs, born just the day before, circle their mother in a small paddock. As the ewe stamps her foot, Gina places one of the lambs, a sweet alfalfa package of wiry black curls, into my arms.

I am intoxicated by the connection I feel with the land and the people of the Farm. I cannot name it or place it. It smells like mud, grass and fire. It feels whole.

Bringing together people of diverse backgrounds, knowledge and skills, intentional communities are an ideal situation for experimenting with development and implementation of environmental technologies. The Farm has developed a "Purpose of Trust," where one vision is "to treat the land, forest and water of this farm in an ecologically sensitive manner, preserving a balance between human habitation and the existing natural ecosystems."

To exist on the land, Farm residents had to first learn the temperaments of a river that had flooded and buried the fields of their predecessors. Working with the Soil Conservation Service, the Farm developed a successful flood control and fish habitat conservation project now used as a model for the entire Nooksack River Basin. By practicing organic gardening, permaculture and animal

Work is an integral part of daily life for Stephanie
husbandry, the Farm is mostly self-sufficient in its food production.

Reaching a house at the road’s end, we shed our coats in the cluttered kitchen. A proud iron stove spits out heat. A Beatles song plays in a back bedroom. Afternoon sun stumbles upon potted plants resting on window sills. Toby, almost three and red-cheeked, shares his toys with his friend Eloise. Two teenage boys, whom Gina refers to as the “big boys” of the Farm, pass through in baggy jeans and few words.

While the adults of intentional communities try out alternative economic and political structures, the children are a community’s biggest social experiment. A few of the adults run a preschool several days a week for the three youngest children. The four teenagers who live on the Farm, all boys, were home-schooled for the past few years. All have chosen to return to public school this year for the social dimension.

The informal education children receive is perhaps the component of communal life that most influences them. Children in communities are constantly exposed to the adult world, witnessing and participating in processes often inaccessible to children in mainstream society. Children watch their parents and caregivers develop political structures, organize economic systems, build their homes, make decisions through consensus and grow their food. Bill believes Farm children are “more well-rounded, more articulate, and are used to talking to adults like adults.” I was impressed to learn that as part of their home-schooling, the boys built an addition to one of the houses, from floor to roof. The four now live together in their own space, which Bill refers to as “the master bedroom.”

We leave the warmth of the house to walk down to the river. Gina shows Toby how to stomp through iced puddles with a satisfying crunch. We reach a concrete fire pit on the sandy bank. In the summer, swirling, barefoot bodies move to the pulsing rhythm of drum circles at twilight and dawn. This is a sacred place.

Bill, Toby and Tiffany gaze at the fields that feed their community.

In the summer, swirling, barefoot bodies move to the pulsing rhythm of drum circles at twilight and dawn. This is a sacred place. Bill describes the spiritual connection among the Farm community as an “earth-oriented stewardship.” The spiritual fulfillment of communal living appeals to many individuals.

Community members, who live, work and play intimately, often develop a sense of extended familial relations. In this supportive atmosphere, members are encouraged to develop a connection between body, mind and spirit. Communities recognize the wholeness in individuals and the group, and they work to heal the fragmentation modern society can cause between, and within, people.

As I leave River Farm, I feel an ache within me. River Farm is a part of the longing that is within every person who has emitted a quiet sigh at our lonely, industrialized, urbanized society. Years of living in the suburbs, riding in isolated automobiles, and walking on pavement have separated people from each other and from themselves. The people at River Farm are living a life that my soul seeks and my bones ache for. They have rediscovered a definition of community that seeks to heal spirits and spark minds. As social experiments, communities can offer much insight to mainstream culture about alternatives to traditional institutional practices. As groups of individuals living in a cooperative, supportive, loving atmosphere, communities provide their members with the spiritual, economic, political and social growth and fulfillment many of us seek. As humans, community is our past; it is our future.
How can we calculate the value of a sunset over Bellingham Bay, illuminating Mt. Baker in its fading rays? Or measure the importance of safer streets for children to ride their bikes on? Determining quality of life depends on giving value to factors such as environmental quality, community partnership and city culture. In the pursuit of a better tomorrow, we need to measure our progress toward shared goals in new ways, without simply relying on financial indicators.

The City of Bellingham is trying to do just that in the "Benchmarks for Progress" program. Former Bellingham Mayor Tim Douglas appointed a task force in January of 1995 to develop ways to measure commonly established community goals.

Two years later, after collecting and analyzing information gathered from schools, environmental agencies, city accounts and other sources, 41 measuring sticks of progress, called benchmarks, are now being compiled into a comprehensive report.

Accurately gauging benchmarks such as community involvement, rush-hour traffic and day-care availability requires a scale that transcends the limited scope of dollars and cents. Robert Dahms, who heads Benchmarks for Progress, says the task force worked to avoid monetary measures because of the commercial bias of the dollar. Benchmarks' well-rounded appraisal is commendable, and thus has gained prominent support.

Bellingham Mayor Mark Asmundson bills Benchmarks for Progress as a way to direct the city's focus. "It's important for those of us involved in policy making to do so in a context of the goals set forth in the benchmarks," he says.

Rick Tremaine, who chairs Benchmarks for Progress committee meetings, sees the benchmarks as important tools for residents as well. "Initially we were brought together to organize a benchmarks program for the City of Bellingham, but really it takes the whole community's efforts to see it through," he comments. For instance, a goal such as increasing recycling requires that households participate by separating their wastes, while government and businesses provide the necessary infrastructure.

The effectiveness of Benchmarks for Progress lies not only in how well the city government and residents work together in carrying out common goals, but also in how accurately the benchmarks reflect the overall community's ideals. The diversity of Bellingham's community — ranging from deep ecology advocates to conservative timber barons — may hinder its ability to establish a shared vision of the city's future.

Bill Hinely, an activist who leads a progressive movement for social change in the city, does not think the indicators are comprehensive enough. "Benchmarks are not going to get us to where we need to be from an economic perspective," he says. But he applauds the City's attempt. "The strong point is that they are at least trying to set up criteria for development; but the criteria they come up with, I think, leaves much to be desired."

Sustainable Seattle's "Indicators for a Sustainable Community," a similar benchmarking program in King County, emphasizes environmental indicators more than Bellingham's Benchmarks for Progress. Hinely thinks the emphasis will make Seattle's approach better in the long term.

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Though Sustainable Seattle may please Hinely, neither Bellingham nor Seattle have arrived at accurate measures that appeal to all individuals or incorporate all views. Even benchmarks that are agreed upon by different groups as proper goals are deficient. For instance, Sustainable Seattle’s 1995 report describes the idea of neighborliness: “It’s a hard concept to define, but most people know what it feels like and it’s a critical part of a healthy city and region.” Such shaky definitions do not provide firm foundations on which to build policy. In a society where money talks, experiences and goods must either be brought to the policy table in solid, convincing packages or given a price tag.

Western Washington University environmental economist Dan Hagen has been working on the problem of calculating the value of intangible benefits. He believes, for instance, that old-growth forests have intrinsic value rather than just commodities to be cut down. Recognizing that accurate and powerful measures are necessary to influence policy, he has found a way to put dollar values on standing forests. Recent court precedents in Alaska and Ohio lend credence to Hagen’s research which indicates dollars can value even non-commercial benefits.

Benchmarks do not allow for comparisons to be made easily between individual indicators such as health and recreation because they use radically different techniques to measure progress. Translating these statistics into one standardized unit could help prioritize the relative costs and benefits of benchmarked items. Dollars allow for easy comparisons and could increase the benchmarks’ effectiveness in determining policy. But it is a big jump, and one the city is not willing to risk.

Despite their distance from monetary measures, Benchmarks for Progress will influence the economy by directing spending towards quality of life arenas that show signs of neglect. Next to each benchmark in the annual report will be a positive or negative sign indicating whether the city is working towards its goals. For example, if environmental quality declines year after year, policy makers will be inclined to use taxpayers’ money to improve it.

Although benchmarks point the way, revenues ultimately influence the ability of the City to meet community goals. Arne Hanna, a City Council member, wants the public, who often scoff at monetary indicators, to realize that “increased revenues increase the city’s tax base and help to secure improvements in education, recreational access, and other benchmarked items.” A thriving community needs a vibrant economy to support it, but other values should not be sacrificed to do it.

Benchmarks for Progress’ strength is its inclusion of other important elements into its final assessment. The picture that emerges is more complete than one dominated by financial interests.

Although understanding the value of a sunset will never allow us to buy one in a store, benchmarking allows our priorities to be expressed in ways that do not require spending. By establishing a definition of progress that agrees with the city’s residents and striving to achieve those declared goals, we will begin the road to a priceless future.

A few organizations working on defining and preserving our quality of life in Whatcom County:

Alliance of Border Communities
Contact: Robert Tibbs, 676-6850
Alliance of community leaders in the Fraser, Nooksack and Skagit River Valleys. Purpose to coordinate efforts to ensure the long-term, balanced well-being of the region between Seattle and Vancouver.

Community Sustainability Forum
Contacts: Joy Monjure, 676-6850 or Craig MacConnell, 676-6736
Diverse community members focus on preserving the quality of life in Whatcom County. Working under the framework of sustainability to protect the environment while promoting the economy.

Sustainable Communities Network
Contact: Bill Hinely, 595-2324
Mission is to help improve the quality of life of all the inhabitants of Whatcom County, both current and future, while regenerating and preserving a healthy, bio-diverse environment.
Community inspires an array of definitions. The conventional concept of community is limited to humans. Typically it includes your home, neighborhood, family and friends. But the sense of community taught at this site encompasses more than just people living in the same locality—it goes beyond humankind into the natural realm.

Through the Environmental Site Program, Bellingham teacher John Horner is encouraging a different view of community. “One of the things I try to do with my job is give students a sense that the community is larger than just the people and things people have made around them; the community involves more than just the resources they extract to make the society work. It is all the living and nonliving members of the local environment,” says Horner, who also coordinates the Bellingham School District’s environmental education programs.

Wendy Walker, an environmental educator at Western’s Huxley College, echoes Horner’s thoughts. “Community is very powerful and reflected on numerous levels. When we understand we are all connected to each other, we can look for connections instead of separations,” she says. “We are not individual beings; we are all connected.”

We need to reestablish the lost connections of our community. Once individuals understand they are part of the earth, they will understand the need to care for it, as they care for themselves.

The Environmental Site Program is one of many local programs making the steps toward promoting community. The site is designed for sixth graders, focusing on their place in nature by addressing human impacts on natural systems, and how they can restore impacted environments.

The 135-acre site was acquired by the district in 1954 specifically for conservation education, but not until 1961 did students use it for nature walks and similar activities. Horner came into the District in 1984 and suggested enhancing the program with small group activities. The District approved the program in 1991. Horner became the site instructor, soon revamping the entire program.

“The program gets kids outside, immerses them in the natural world, gives them first-hand exposure to plants and animals, and gives them a lot of individual attention. The expert and enthusiastic instructors have a one-to-nine ratio over the kids. It’s when play time becomes learning time,” Horner says.

Walker feels the first priority of programs like this should be “getting the kids in contact with their places and their home, so they can become aware of their connections with their place.”

The connection described by Walker draws on the importance of community stressed by naturalist Aldo Leopold. “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us,” he wrote. “When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

This connection has been lost in present generations, and needs to be established once again in all age groups. Educating individuals in natural settings about their connection to, and dependence upon, nature can help them conceive of an expanded sense of community.

“Good environmental education involves leading the students to a place where they’re aware of their place in the world. They are aware of the natural systems that support their lives, not only to develop an understanding, but to develop an affinity for those things that they now realize they are a part of,” Horner explains.

“Schools reflect culture as much as they create it,” Walker says. “Environmental education is facilitated in ways that allow people to remember the ways they are connected in an ecosystem and the importance of being in balance with each other.”

Horner tells how his own mentor influenced his path in life. This mentor, an educator as well, told him, “Touch a few kids, they touch others, and you never know how many you reach through education.”

It is now time to reach one another. The Environmental Site Program has touched thousands of sixth graders, who have shared with others their new sense of community. Wendy Walker has taught hundreds of people about the importance of community and environmental education. Many of her students will go on to be educators, sharing these concepts with hundreds of other students.

Leopold, writing over a century ago, touched millions of people with his thoughts on sense of place in our living and non-living community. The time has come to reestablish the lost connections, and pull together the sense of community we have long since lost.
Plants, animals and tracks flash before us on the slide projector. With my paper numbered one through twenty, I quickly answer questions relating to each slide. "What type of tree is this?" "What medicinal uses does this plant serve?" "In what direction and at what speed was the animal who made these tracks moving?" Grunts and laughs come with each slide, a nervous reaction to our lack of knowledge. Finally number twenty: "From where you are sitting, which way is North?"

Pencils down everyone, the "Alien Test" is over.

John Young and Warren Moon from the Wilderness Awareness School (WAS) go back through the slides with the correct answers. In a room filled with potential environmental educators, only a handful of people are able to answer more than half correctly. I am shocked at how unfamiliar the class is with our local, natural world. We are aliens in our own environment! How are we to become successful educators when we know so little ourselves?

Young, the founder of WAS, sees a direct relationship between our loss of kinship with nature and the current worldwide environmental crises. He dedicated the school to three main ideas: reviving understanding of the natural world, training people as naturalists who can combine the awareness of a native scout with the language of science, and restoring life in balance with nature's ways.

Young and Moon use the art of tracking to reach these ideas. Tracking was a necessary skill for our ancestors. They followed tracks, listened to bird calls and noticed disturbances in the patterns of nature to provide food and protection. However, the art of tracking is lost in current society. We get our food from supermarkets and call the police in an emergency. Knowledge of street maps and bus schedules is directly applicable to surviving the urban wilderness of modern cities. The knowledge of native plants and landscapes seems unnecessary.

This separation from our natural world is reducing our understanding and respect for an essential part of our community, a part of the community I do not want to lose.
On a cold February morning I take my first tracking lesson with a local group of people who began their own tracking club after attending one of Young’s workshops on the Nooksack River last year. Many continue to study with Young through correspondence courses, and the group meets at least once a week to spend time outside practicing their tracking and nature awareness skills.

The air is cool and slightly hazy as the winter sunlight filters through the high clouds. I join Peter, Jim, Jeff, Grove and Stephen. We walk from the main road down a gravel path to the river. The rotting scent of river mud fills my nostrils as my feet upset the sandy river bank. Everyone smiles happily through their thick layers of wool sweaters, hats and gloves.

The day officially begins by gathering in a circle on a small flat area a few feet above the water. Jim, a tall man with long, blond hair flowing out from underneath his broad-brimmed hat is facilitating the group today. He explains how the day always starts with the Thanksgiving Address, a tradition passed down from the Iroquois people.

We pause and address all of the things we will be conscious of today: people, earth, water, animals, plants, trees, birds, weather, the four directions, moon, sun, stars, ancestors, future generations and the Creator. After addressing each of these separately, we give a sighing hum of agreement. It is a wordless guttural sound, one that warms my body as I make it.

After a few moments of silent contemplation, we set off. “One of the things we do out here is fox walk,” Jim tells me. He takes his rubber-booted foot and shows me how to step quietly by first setting down the outside edge of my foot, then the ball and finally weighing down on the heel. I practice the walk along the gravel and wince at each crunch my foot makes.

As a group we stop to inspect many sets of tracks in the frozen mud. The tracks of a rabbit prove particularly interesting. “Which direction do you think this animal was moving?” Peter asks me, with an inquisitive light in his eye.

I stop and think. I know that rabbits usually make tracks with their hind feet in front of their fore feet. I study the tracks for another moment and then point behind me. “That way,” I say.

We study the tracks more closely and notice the depth of the indentation made by the animal’s heel. Grove jumps across the sand leaving a deep indentation from his heel very much like that of the rabbit track.

“Try it,” someone says. I find myself crouching on my haunches in the sand, trying to hop the way a rabbit does. It is hard to land with hind feet before my front, but the story of the tracks makes more sense from that perspective.

We move down the sandbar stopping periodically to look at other animal tracks such as bald eagle, seagull, mouse and coyote. Eventually we stop at a clear set of coyote tracks. Jeff tells me there are over 3000 different pressure marks to be read from a set of tracks. I wonder if we’ll be here a long time.

As I stand looking at the tracks, Stephen and Jeff, both kneeling next to the prints in the sand, begin to ask me questions about them. “Which paw do you think made the bigger one?” Stephen asks.
I think hard about this one. I say, "the front one," but I'm not so sure. They ask me why I think this is true.

"If you were to pick up a dog, where would you put your hands?" Jeff asks me. I think about it and now I am sure — the front half of a dog is heavier. This extra weight makes the front tracks larger. Satisfied with this answer we move on to other aspects of the tracks.

Jim is busy filling in the log book and trying to keep his hands warm so he can write. He asks questions and the group reports back to him. He records the width of the tracks and the length of the animal's stride. Next Jim asks for evidence of whether the animal turned its head.

I wait and wonder how this is determined. The group members begin to point out tracks in which the front and rear tracks are offset, the front one slightly left or right of the rear. Then we must decide which way the animal was looking. Again I find myself on my hands and knees moving along next to the coyote's tracks and trying to imitate him. When I reach the offset pair I'm not sure which way I should look.

"Look around you," someone says, "Where do you think the coyote would look?" I look around and am surprised at how different the world appears from this perspective. To my left I see brush and small trees. Ahead of me is smooth sand and the dried skeleton of a salmon. As I look to both sides of me I realize something — when I turn my head my shoulders also turn. From this and some more helpful questions I deduce that the front tracks are offset to the right.

After the log book is filled out and our curiosity is satiated, we take a lunch break. We move a bit away from the tracks, but I'm hooked. I see the prints of the coyote near our lunch spot. I stoop down next to them and look at where the coyote has traveled through the trees.

I realize after this brief morning spent looking at prints in the sand that I will look at the world differently. I will no longer be able to walk past the tracks of an animal without being curious about the stories they hold. The ability to reveal these stories is the true magic of tracking. To have the knowledge to listen to the tales of the landscape is essential to reconnect with the natural world.

The local tracking club and WAS are studying the language of nature and are learning and teaching how to engage in her conversation. By doing this they are reestablishing their place among their entire community.

"I was really oblivious to a lot of things that were out there. I've been an outdoors person my whole life, but I've never taken this kind of perspective before, the nature perspective — learning about tracks and the connectedness of everything," Jim told me. "You wonder why people don't really care that much about what's out there."

To learn more about tracking:
• Call Wilderness Awareness School at (206) 788-1301
  or visit their web site at www.speakeasy.org/~wasnet
• Call the local tracking club at (360) 650-8415
The sandstone boulders sit in the forest like smiling Buddhas. They live in an oasis of calm between the roar of Interstate 5 and the omnipresent clangs and whistles of the Georgia Pacific pulp mill. With mossy beards and thick fern eyebrows, the Buddhas have been meditating on Sehome Hill for as long as anyone can remember.

I slush through melting snow following a raven. Morning sun filters through the Douglas fir grove, though it brings little warmth. Sword ferns, crushed by the winter storm, begin to spring back to life and all around is the sound of wet snow dripping from trees.

Looking up through a cloud of my own breath, I see a raven circling overhead. The bird carries some twigs in its beak, therefore unable to voice its opinion or greet the dawn.

I continue wandering until I reach the crest of a stone Buddha’s head and look down into a lush valley. Beads of moisture drift across my field of vision like dust in a sunbeam. I feel inclined to take a deep breath. Instead of the usual feeling of sucking
on a car's exhaust pipe, the air is fresh and smells of the green around me. It is the type of morning when one cannot help but feel content. Not long ago, however, the character of the hill was much different.

* * *

When Western was founded in 1893, Sehome Hill experienced the last few snips of a bad haircut that started in 1870. Shaved of its old-growth mane, it became muddy and bald. Looking into the mirror of Bellingham Bay, Sehome Hill would have flushed with embarrassment. “But I said just a little off the sides ... Look at me — I'm a mess!” A logger sets down his ax and shrugs.

Luckily, time is a shampoo and conditioner in one. Sehome now wears its hair short (yet respectable) and the Buddhas no longer have to squint in the glare of a clearcut.

From my perch, I look further down the valley and see the sandstone quarry that provided the foundation for Old Main. Ferns and alder trees now form a scab over the region, and, if left alone, the area will likely follow a pattern of succession that concludes with cedar and hemlock becoming the dominant species. “If” is the key word. Humans have the tendency to pick at scabs until they bleed.

Two years ago, on the way to class I came across a rare trillium flower on Sehome. It was definitely eye-catching with its three white petals. I returned a few hours later to find that it was gone — cut at the base. Someone had evidently been so moved by the flower that they probably transplanted it to a water-filled vase where it withered in a couple of days, was tossed out and forgotten. I have not found any trillium blooming in that location since.

Sehome Hill was officially established as an arboretum in the summer of 1974. An agreement between the City of Bellingham and Western Washington University states the hill is “to be preserved in a natural state, devoted to educational, aesthetic, recreational, and research purposes, and developed in a manner which is compatible with sound ecological concepts.”

City residents and a wide range of nonhuman species (including my dog) have taken advantage of the many opportunities the hill has to offer. Morning hikes, sunset strolls and nature walks are just a few options.

* * *

The air around the sandstone Buddha is cold and I forgot my wool hat. Kicking some mushy snow down into the valley, I think of a steaming bowl of oatmeal and decide to return home. Stumbling like a drunkard down the steeper sections of the trail, I occasionally catch glimpses of the raven continuing its quest for twigs.

Leaving Sehome Hill and feeling refreshed, I try to imagine what type of community Bellingham would be without it. The space would probably be filled with better parking, a wider array of fast-food options, and perhaps a Costco so students wouldn’t have to drive so far to stock up on Top Ramen. In any case, the hill would be replaced with pavement, and pavement, if you ask me, lacks character.

I am grateful this sanctuary exists.
"THERE IS ONLY ONE CORNER OF THE UNIVERSE YOU CAN BE CERTAIN OF IMPROVING, AND THAT IS YOUR OWN SELF."

— ALDOUS HUXLEY
“All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.”

— Aldo Leopold