

California, 2050: Living Within the Doughnut

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The train glides peacefully through San Jose. I am traveling from my home in San Francisco to one of California's many Commons Farms, a sprawling permaculture farm and ecological restoration center established on what, decades ago, was once a military base.

It still feels remarkable to say, "There are no military bases in California anymore." Over the last twenty-five years, one by one, they were decommissioned and transferred into community stewardship. Some became affordable housing and cooperative villages. Others became eco-universities, ecological research centers, renewable energy hubs, and wildlife corridors. And many like the one I am visiting today, became communal farms.

The work happening at places like Common Ground Farm is considered some of the most important work in California: regenerating soil, restoring watersheds, growing food, rebuilding biodiversity, and training people in the skills needed to develop food sovereignty and care for the places where they live.

The publicly owned high-speed train is moving quickly now. Outside my window, the landscape blurs between restored oak woodland, Orange tree orchards, vibrant painted intersections, and solar canopies. San Jose is once again a Valley of the Heart's Delight. I put on my headphones and tune into the morning news. After a brief update on international events, the announcer turns to the economy.

"And now, California's quarterly economic update. The latest Doughnut indicators show continued progress in freshwater restoration and biodiversity, with housing security remaining within the social foundation for the sixth consecutive year. Food insecurity remains below the state's threshold, while energy consumption has declined another two percent. Nitrogen and phosphorus levels continue to improve..."

I smile. I can still remember an economic report from August 2026. I was listening to the radio on a drive home with my parents from Tahoe when I heard that California's economy was doing well because GDP had increased. The reporters discussed inflation, unemployment, interest rates, stock markets, and consumer spending without mentioning anything that connects with what is actually important to us – the health of our soils, our connection with our neighbors, or our needs being met within consideration of the needs of our ecosystems.

The report stood out to me because at the same time, I was working with the California Doughnut Economics Coalition after we had just released our first California Doughnut Economics Snapshot. The findings of our snapshot were sobering. Every social category we measured showed some degree of shortfall, while 89 percent of the ecological indicators

exceeded our ecological boundaries. The Doughnut gave us a radically different definition of economic progress. The question was not: How much is California producing? It became: Are we meeting everyone's needs within the means of the living planet?

An Economy for the Good of People and the Planet

Coming back to the present day news playing on my fairphone, I relax in my chair with a sense of ease and accomplishment. I recall all the friends I've made along the way. I sometimes hear about California's just transition as though there was one great policy that changed the state. There wasn't. There were thousands. And behind them were millions of people organizing, experimenting, teaching, building, repairing, farming, striking, legislating, investing, divesting, and imagining. We stopped treating the economy as something that simply happened to us or that we must leave to the "experts" and we began to understand that an economy is something we collectively create and we made the decision that we would deliberately create an economy around meeting our human needs within our ecological limits.

The Doughnut became our compass. Not a blueprint. Not every community had to look the same or reach sufficiency in the same way. We valued diversity and unity. But for the first time, we did collectively agree upon the destination: the safe and just space where human needs could be met without exceeding the ecological systems upon which all life depends. Once we all agreed on the destination, a much more interesting question emerged: What should our money, land, technology, institutions, entrepreneurship, and labor actually be for?

The transformation of finance was crucial. California created a network of bioregional public banks. Instead of allowing so much of our collective wealth to flow toward speculation, extraction, and shareholder value, we began directing it toward the things our communities actually needed. Credit unions for individuals expanded alongside them. Public and cooperative finance helped build permanently affordable housing, renewable energy, public transportation, regenerative agriculture, worker cooperatives, community-owned businesses, ecological restoration, more public spaces, care infrastructure, and land returned to indigenous stewardship. Corporate banks shuttered. Community land trusts took land out of speculative markets and placed it into permanent community stewardship making housing and land for farming affordable in perpetuity.

Businesses changed too. Conventional companies transitioned into worker cooperatives and work-self-directed not-for-profit enterprises. Instead of organizing businesses around maximizing returns to distant shareholders, we began asking what each enterprise was *for*. A bakery existed to bake nourishing food, provide meaningful livelihoods, and contribute to its community. An energy company existed to provide clean energy. A housing organization existed to provide homes. Communities rallied to replace corporate chains with local and independent businesses that kept wealth circulating locally and had a sense of pride in place. Profit became a means rather than an end, a tool for maintaining and improving an enterprise

and for social and environmental good. Non-profits became resourced to do their mission-driven work without worrying about grant reporting and appealing to donors. And because workers and communities increasingly participated in governing these institutions, economic democracy stopped being an abstract idea. It became something we as Californians practice every day.

From Consumers to Commoners

We also learned that not everything requires money. Every neighborhood now has some combination of tool libraries, share shops, repair cafés, community kitchens, seed libraries, and community fridges. Why should fifty households each buy a drill they might use for ten minutes a year? The question seems obvious now, but it did not then. Over time, we reclaimed the commons: resources that are neither privately owned nor controlled from afar, but are collectively stewarded by the people who depend upon them.

We also rediscovered something mainstream economics had almost trained us to forget: much of what makes life meaningful has never been produced by markets. Care, friendship, healthy ecosystems, community, knowledge, art, and time all exist beyond the logic of buying and selling. So do a meal shared with neighbors, a forest returning, and the laughter of children playing in a street once dominated by cars. Gradually, our economy became less obsessed with producing more things and much more capable of enhancing wellbeing.

Going Upstream

But changing our institutions was not enough. We also had to go further upstream and ask why we had created an economy that was so destructive in the first place. We came to understand that capitalism was intertwined with a much older set of power-over paradigms: white supremacy, Global North supremacy, patriarchy, and the belief in human supremacy over the rest of the living world. Beneath them was a common story of separation and domination, the idea that some people are worth more than others, that humans stand apart from and above nature, and that land, labor, other species, and even one another can be treated as resources to control and exploit.

Transforming California required more than new policies and regenerative and cooperative economic models; it required transforming this story within ourselves. We did the deep individual and collective work of healing from these inherited ways of seeing and remembering something older: that even though we are diverse, we are all connected, embedded within communities and ecosystems and dependent upon one another and the living Earth for our survival. As our sense of self shifted from separate to ecological, so too did our understanding of the economy. The question was no longer how much we could extract,

accumulate, and consume, but how we could organize our lives together in ways that allowed all life to flourish.

Going upstream also required us to look beyond California's borders. We realized that it was not enough to bring California within the Doughnut if we did so by pushing the social and ecological costs elsewhere. As Kate Raworth, the founder of doughnut economics has argued, a twenty-first-century economy must be planetary in scope. We recognized our responsibility was not only to meet the needs of Californians while respecting our own ecological boundaries, but to ask how the food we ate, the clothes we wore, the inputs in the technologies we used, the energy and water we consumed, and our waste affected workers, communities, and ecosystems around the world.

We began tracing our supply chains and asking whether our wellbeing depended upon someone else's exploitation or ecological destruction. We developed accounting for the full social and ecological footprint of what Californians consumed and financed—from the minerals in our phones and the working conditions behind our clothing to the enormous energy and water demands of AI data centers built by California companies thousands of miles away. We committed to global living-wage standards, supported efforts for debt cancellation in the Global South, and replaced so-called "free trade" with genuinely fair trade relationships that respected the sovereignty and self-determination of countries worldwide. We also confronted the role of militarism in sustaining an extractive global economy. This is why California decommissioned its military bases and converted them into institutions of life rather than war. We understood that solidarity could not end at our state border. California took a stand against the genocide in Gaza and against imperialism, colonization, occupation, economic blockades, and military intervention around the world. Everyone deserves to live in a safe and just economy and we have great responsibility and privilege to support that effort.

Planning for Wellbeing

Perhaps the most controversial transformation was also the most obvious: we began planning. Every economy plans. The question is simply who does the planning and toward what ends. For much of California's history, enormous economic decisions were effectively made by bosses, corporations, investors, developers, and financial markets. Capital flowed toward wherever it could generate the greatest financial return, whether or not those investments corresponded with what communities or ecosystems actually needed.

We replaced this with increasingly democratic forms of economic planning. Guided by local doughnut snapshots, communities now identify their most urgent social shortfalls and ecological overshoots. Regional public assemblies coordinate needs across watersheds and bioregions, while state institutions provide resources and expertise. Workers, scientists, Indigenous communities, unions, cooperatives, local governments, and residents all participate in setting priorities and allocating budgets. Together, we ask where we are outside the

Doughnut and what resources—money, land, materials, technology, and human labor we need to bring us in.

This changed the meaning of economic policy. Instead of endlessly trying to stimulate economic activity in general, California became much more discerning about what should grow and what should shrink. Affordable housing, public transit, care work, regenerative agriculture, ecosystem restoration, renewable energy, and worker and community ownership all needed to expand. Fossil fuel extraction, materials designed with planned obsolescence, speculative finance, industrial agriculture, excessive luxury consumption, advertising, and other extractive activities needed to contract. We stopped asking whether the economy was growing and started asking what was growing, what was shrinking, and whether those changes were bringing us closer to the world we wanted.

Welcome to the Commons

My train begins to slow and outside the window I can see our destination. Twenty-five years ago, this land was surrounded by fences and trespassing signs. Today, the chainlink is gone. Fruit and nut trees stretch toward restored grasslands. Former barracks have become cooperative housing, and an old aircraft hangar is now a tool library, repair workshop, fab lab, and free community gathering space. Another building houses a free training center for agroecology, soil remediation, ecological restoration, and cooperative enterprise.

Children are visiting today. I can see them gathered beside a wetland that did not exist when I was their age. Somewhere beneath the reeds and willow trees are soils once contaminated by military activity, painstakingly remediated over decades. The land is healing, and so are we.

I think again about 2026. Back then, California was framed as “extraordinarily wealthy.” It’s true that we didn’t lack the money, technology, intelligence, research institutions, creativity, or human capacity. We had all of those things in abundance. What we lacked was shared access to them and a collective understanding of what they should be used for.

The great transformation of the last twenty-five years was not that California discovered some miraculous new technology. It was that we changed our destination. We stopped treating endless economic growth as the goal and began treating the economy as a means for creating the conditions in which all life can flourish. Once we knew where we wanted to go, we redirected our resources towards getting there.

The train doors open and I step onto the platform surrounded by edible foods. I eat a bright orange cherry tomato. I smell sage, wet soil, and something cooking nearby. Above the entrance to Common Ground Farm is a simple sign: “Welcome to the Commons.” Beyond it, hundreds of people are joyfully at work, not producing economic growth, but healthy soil, good food, and a resilient community.

AUTHOR BIO:

Della Z Duncan is a Renegade Economist who guides journeys *upstream* to the root causes of the challenges of our time to empower us to realize and re-member who we are, why we are here and how we can contribute to [the Great Turning](#). Plants in her [regenerative livelihood garden](#) include hosting the [Upstream Podcast](#), which challenges mainstream economic thinking through documentaries and conversations including [The Green Transition: The Problem with Green Capitalism](#) and [The Myth of Freedom Under Capitalism](#), supporting individuals as a [Right Livelihood Coach](#), co-founding and co-leading the [California Doughnut Economics Coalition](#), which recently released a [Doughnut Snapshot of the state of California](#), helping transition businesses and organizations to post capitalism, and teaching and facilitating courses and retreats on Buddhist Economics, the Work that Reconnects, and Regenerative Economics including the annual [Regenerative and Cooperative Economic Design Course](#) and the [Cultivating Regenerative Livelihoods Course](#) through Gaia Education.