

Bioregional California in 2050

Weaving the Bioregional Future: Stories of Attention, Affirmation, and Art

This Bioregional Foresight Narrative offers a vision of what life and living in California could look like in 2050. What follows takes place in a bioregion. A bioregion is an inhabited place shaped by the ecological processes, cultural lifeways, and interdependent relationships that sustain life there. It reflects the patterns of watersheds, soils, climate, biodiversity, and human communities that co-evolve within their shared territory. A bioregion is not a fixed polygon on a map; it is a lens, an actionable framework, a compelling countervailing story that helps us recognize and value how our collective wellbeing is tied to the health of land, water, flora, and fauna — the living systems we depend upon to secure regenerative and just futures.

The Location and Context of this Bioregional Foresight Narrative

This fictional narrative set in the year 2050 unfolds through the voices of three San Diego Bay Watershed Council leaders gathered around a campfire on the Point Loma Peoples' Cultural and Ecological Commons — a site within California's growing Land Back Network. Once part of the Point Loma Naval Base and fenced off for generations, the land was returned to community and tribal stewardship in 2040 after years of public deliberation, shifting values, and a renewed understanding of land as a shared responsibility. Perched beside the historic Fort Rosecrans Cemetery, the Commons sits on high ground with sweeping views of San Diego Bay, the harbor entrance, and the downtown skyline.

The site's cultural and coastal significance to the indigenous Kumeyaay people — and to many others — combined with its lower operational importance relative to the submarine-focused core of the base, made it a natural focus for the increasingly successful Land Back movement. Between 2040 and 2050, people transformed the area, artfully reconfiguring buildings, infrastructure, and landscapes. They call it a *Thrival Commons* — a generic name that spread across California during times of great hardship to describe places designed not only to meet basic survival needs like food, water, energy, and shelter, but also to cultivate thriving. The term thrival is the opposite of survival: not just coping, but flourishing, regenerating and expanding collective wellbeing. Thrival Commons embrace a bioregional way of life rooted in reciprocity, ecological care, and renewed urban–rural relationships.

This narrative describes ways that land governance and climate adaptation can change when the values and rules of engagement that guide them change. The Point Loma Peoples' Cultural and Ecological Commons is an active, meaningful, and beloved place for gathering, reflection, and biocultural practice — a place that honors the long arc of bioregional regeneration.

The Fireside Bioregional Storytellers

It is June 21, 2050 — the statewide Thrival Commons Holiday, when thousands of Californians gather to honor the flourishing of bioregional life and living. Three of those celebrants, legendary leaders of the San Diego Bay Watershed Council, now sit around an evening campfire reflecting on the day's events: **Jason**, a university professor and researcher linking urban–rural land use with climate adaptation to strengthen place-based democracy; **Barbara**, a craft brewery owner whose exemplary business fosters watershed-based Community Wealth Building; and **Macawi**, an Indigenous elder whose weaving of Traditional Ecological Knowledge into bioregional governance helped secure legal personhood for the San Diego River — a profound ethical shift now benefiting many people and the more-than-human world.

Earlier in the day, the three convened their Annual San Diego Bay Watershed Council Public Celebration in sync with the Thrival Commons holiday. Over two thousand people showed up — many having marked the event on their calendar's weeks in advance, drawn by the trustworthy, charismatic, and deeply grounded way these leaders spark imagination and turn bioregional hopes and possibilities into action.

After the crowds dispersed, Jason, Barbara, and Macawi made their way up to the Point Loma Peoples' Cultural and Ecological Commons. There, overlooking the bay under a cool, starlit sky, they built a small fire of their own — a place to unwind, savor the moment, and speak from the heart as they make sense together of what bioregional life and living mean to them.

The Fireside Conversation: Stories of Attention, Affirmation, and Art

Jason, Barbara, and Macawi at first sat quietly around their campfire, hardly a word spoken since they settled into the campground. The day's endless talking drained their reservoir of language. Their fire was tucked into an outdoor gathering space on the Point Loma knoll, a place designed for community convenings. Picnic tables, a roofed assembly area, a stone fireplace, winding nature paths, and a small coastal-adapted food forest surrounded them — a mix of native and salt-tolerant plants that had taken root on the knoll as part of the Commons' regenerative design. While Jason coaxed the fire to life, Barbara and Macawi gathered a few handfuls of their favorite pickings — lemonade berries, elderberries, coastal strawberries. From where they sat, the San Diego Bay stretched out below, the city skyline glowing softly in the distance.

Jason — Attention

After their silent period under the cool, bay-scented, starlit sky, Jason was the first to speak. “You know,” he said, “standing on that stage today as I was about to give my keynote... I paused to soak in the view of two thousand or more people who truly understand the importance of bioregional governance, and I just thought to myself: this is deeply promising. That heart pounding feeling stayed with me.”

Jason gazed out over the bay, the lights of downtown shimmering like a second constellation. “That moment stepping onto the stage made me think about how far we've come. Twenty-five years ago, this knoll where we presently sit was fenced off. Now it's a place alive with community stewardship — housing, cultural spaces, ecological restoration, all held in trust.

He paused, letting the fire crackle and settle, then goes on to say:

“As a Professor and researcher working to advance bioregional transitions with justice, I find real hope in the way some universities have stepped up. Science matters. And these Rooted Universities — grounded in community-engaged research, teaching, and learning — finally stopped acting like ivory towers and started acting like civic partners.” Drawing attention to his role in the process he goes on to say: “My part in this has been helping build open-source mapping tools, sovereign community-run data hubs, design studios embedded in neighborhoods. And honestly, nothing gives me more purpose than watching community members use those tools to plan their own futures — not as ‘stakeholders,’ but as co-governors.”

Jason smiled, the firelight catching the edges of his face.

“That’s the good life to me: people shaping the places they love with knowledge that belongs to everyone. Professors working alongside tribal leaders, youth organizers, elders. Students and residents co-designing affordable housing, foodsheds, water systems in localized regenerative ways that bring people and nature together. That’s what bioregional life and living looks like.”

He took a deep breath full of ocean air and emotion.

“And today, as I stepped onto the stage... when all those people from both urban and rural areas, fell silent at once — anticipating my talk — I felt something very strong. I felt what it means to reclaim our attention.” He let that sit for a moment, then added, “And you know... reclaiming our **attention** isn’t just a personal thing. It’s political. It’s civic. It’s how we safeguard the *demos* — the will of the people.”

Jason poked gently at the fire with a stick, sending a small spray of sparks upward.

“For so long, our attention wasn’t ours. It was harvested. Monetized. Pulled apart by algorithms, ads, outrage cycles — all of it designed to keep us distracted, divided, and exhausted. And when people can’t hold attention together, they can’t hold power together. They can’t govern together.”

He then looked directly, emphatically, into the eyes of Barbara then Macawi saying:

“That’s why today meant so much. Those people from both urban and rural places -- Barrio Logan, Ramona, Chula Vista, Julian — weren’t just listening to a speech. They were practicing something we lost for a long time: *attention sovereignty*. The ability to choose what we notice, what we care about, what we give our collective mind to.”

He took another deep breath.

“And part of that is finally seeing the *urban–rural metabolic rift* for what it is — not a cultural divide, not a political binary, but a wound. A wound created by systems that treated cities and rural lands as separate worlds, when in reality they’re interdependent. One watershed. One foodshed. One fire regime. One bioregion.”

Jason's voice briefly slipped into teaching mode.

"The UN's New Urban Agenda back in the 2030s tried to get people to see this rift by drawing attention to the non-binary reality of *urban-rural continuums*, and *urban-rural linkages* that shape everything from water to housing to climate resilience. But it wasn't until communities here started practicing bioregional governance that the problematic nature of existing urban-rural relationships really clicked."

He stood up for a moment and paced back and forth a bit as if he were teaching a class.

"Attention is how we heal that rift. When people from the city and people from the backcountry sit in the same room, look at the same maps, listen to the same river, and realize they're part of the same living system — that's when democracy becomes real again. That's when the fault line putting blue states in feuding opposition to red states begins to wind down."

Choosing not to dwell on the ugly past, he continued. "You know, when I first started researching land governance twenty-five years ago, I never imagined I'd be sitting on a former naval base that had been returned to community stewardship. Back then, the idea of land giveback was treated like a fringe concept — symbolic at best, threatening at worst." He glanced toward the dark silhouette of the restored coastal bluff while saying: "But this place... this place changed everything." Still standing in teacher mode, he emphasizes the profound nature of the land transfer as truly transformative.

"Creating the Point Loma People's Cultural and Ecological Commons was not just a long overdue land give back reconciliation with Indigenous Nations, though that was essential. It was part of a deeper rethinking of land itself. The old private-property paradigm had been cracking under the weight of housing crises, climate displacement, and widening inequality. People began asking a simple but radical question: *What if land is not a commodity, but a living foundation for community well-being?*"

"That vital question," Jason claimed, "redirected our *attention* toward new legal-institutional mechanisms — community land trusts, watershed trusts, commons governance charters, cooperative zoning districts. And eventually, toward the recognition that living space — safe, stable, dignified living space — is a right, not a privilege."

Catching himself in a preachy teaching mode, he sat down, resuming with a more relaxed tone, but no less dramatic. "This site became one of the first large-scale experiments. Instead of selling it off to private developers, the state partnered with tribal nations, local communities, and public institutions to create a shared stewardship model. Affordable housing, cultural spaces, ecological restoration zones, community enterprises — each governed democratically, each held in trust for future generations."

He paused, letting the fire settle. "But the transformation wasn't just physical. It was cultural. The land became a teacher again. People walk it, tend it, learn from it. Children are growing up knowing the names of native plants. Indigenous elders, original inhabitants of the bioregion now

continue passing down stories shared over 400 generations, stories that had nearly been lost. And Migratory birds are returning to restored wetlands.”

Jason’s face warmed with pride — not personal pride, but the pride of someone speaking on behalf of the San Diego Bay Watershed Council. “Creating this place was one of the milestones that catapulted California’s bioregional transition into high gear. We stopped treating land as a backdrop for economic activity and started treating it as the living heart of our communities.”

He smiled, a little tired, a little awed.
“Now *that* is giving our attention to the right things.”

Jason had shared his most poignant testimony as a teachable moment, and a thoughtful stillness came over the group. Their shared attention — reclaimed, held, practiced — had opened the space. Barbara felt the invitation it created, the natural handoff to offer the next piece of the trilogy. She leaned forward, ready to speak from the place where affirmation begins.

Barbara — Affirmation

Barbara is quick to weigh in. “Attention’s one thing, what we do with it is another.”

She smiles, a little wry, a little proud. “That’s where my world comes in.”

“You know,” Barbara begins, “when I first started the craft brewery, I thought I was just making good beer. Local, small-batch, nothing fancy. But somewhere along the way, it stopped being just a business. It became a way to help end the degrading extractive economy. We joined many others assertively affirming the significance of equitable urban-rural relationships in making a bioregionally regenerative circular economy possible, an economy that is also just and climate-friendly.”

Barbara lifts her glass beer mug as if to make a toast, the firelight illuminating the beer’s amber color. “This isn’t just a drink. It’s a map of relationships.” Barbara explains how they now source grains from regenerative farms in the backcountry—small family operations, tribal farms, ranches experimenting with perennials and cover crops.

“These farmers rebuild soil, increase biodiversity, cut chemical inputs,” she says. “They’re not just producing commodities; they’re carrying biocultural heritage—seed varieties, land practices, stories. When we sign a contract with them, we’re not just buying grain. We’re affirming that way of life.”

Barbara uses her arms to theatrically gesture a hand-off of one of her brewery’s byproducts—spent grain—making its way from her production facility to the other places where it gets put to good use.

“Our spent grain doesn’t go to waste anymore. Some of it feeds animals, some goes into compost, and some goes to the biobuilding co-ops. They turn it into insulation panels, acoustic

boards, even low-carbon bricks. Hop waste becomes thermal insulation. Brewery ash helps stabilize soils for foundations.”

She laughs. “We used to call it ‘waste management.’ Now we call it ‘another product line.’ Barbara collects her thoughts, then adds another example — one from her earlier days. “Back in the mid-2020s, I helped start a tiny pilot project growing native seaweeds for food and habitat restoration in and around San Diego Bay and the Port District. At the time, it felt like a small experiment, nothing more.”

She shakes her head, smiling at the memory. “But by 2050, that little project has become part of a dynamically innovative regional seaweed cooperative network. Currently we are supplying culinary seaweeds, soil amendments made from our byproducts, biostimulants for regenerative agriculture — even low-carbon building materials. That network is now one of the blue-green infrastructure cornerstones of our bioregional economy.”

Barbara explains how “This kind of industrial ecology works because we pay attention to the metabolic flows of a place — and then we affirm what’s life-giving in those flows. Attention shows us the pattern. Affirmation strengthens it. And when enough people do that together, something bigger happens. A kind of collective resonance. A shared sense of what matters and what we’re building toward.”

She leans in a little, sharing what she has learned about this. “And look — industrial ecology isn’t just about following the rhythms of the land. It’s about ending the waste stream altogether. Designing production so that one facility’s outputs become another’s inputs. That’s **industrial symbiosis** — the metabolism of a place made visible.”

Barbara smiles. “I even traveled to Europe back in the 2030s to see how they were doing it. Places like Kalundborg in Denmark showed what was possible when businesses shared heat, water, nutrients, even CO₂. Seeing that changed everything for me.”

She settles back, letting the firelight catch her expression. “So, when we sync our production cycles with the ecological cycles *and* the material flows of a place, the economy stops extracting and starts regenerating. That’s industrial ecology-- a crucial feature of **bioregioning** at the scale of materials.”

She lets that sink in for a moment, then continues.

“We are now paying serious attention to and affirming the value of viable business models — local ownership, social entrepreneurs fostering regenerative and fair circular economics. We’ve established a Community Wealth Building network — co-ops, land trusts, credit unions, community development funds. Plural ownership, local finance, workforce development, progressive procurement, democratic governance — all core pillars of Community Wealth Building and Bioregioning. What makes this especially powerful is that it’s rooted in place. In this watershed. In these farms. In these people.”

She pivots her glance from the Bay to the county’s rural lands and inland mountains.

“When we sign long-term contracts with regenerative farmers, we’re not just securing our supply chain. We’re saying: *You belong in this future*. When we hire youth from rural towns and urban neighborhoods into the same circular-economy projects, we’re saying: *You belong together*.” She pauses, letting that sink in.

“People ask me how we survived the old extractive economy,” she says. “But the truth is, we didn’t survive it. We replaced it — one relationship at a time.” She turns back to the fire, thoughtfully pausing for a moment. Then drives home her key message.

“The more I work with these farmers, ranchers, and tribal nations, the more I realize something. They’re not just producing food or fiber. They’re carrying biocultural stories — about how to live with land, not just on it.”

She looks over at Macawi, a knowing glint in her eye. “And that,” she says, “is where someone else at this fire has a lot more to say than I do.”

“Biocultural stories,” she says softly to Macawi. “That’s your territory.”

Barbara’s words struck a chord, the imagination of “biocultural stories” settling gently over the circle. Her eye contact with Macawi conveyed an invitation, not a prompt. Affirmation had reached its edge, and the deeper stories were waiting. It was now Macawi’s turn to step into the talking circle. Macawi let the silence breathe for a few moments longer before stepping into it, carrying the thread forward in her own way.

As soon as she started, Barbara and Jason irresistibly began chiming in with remarks and prompts --the beer at this point in the evening had loosened their tongues.

Macawi — Art

Macawi begins: “You both talked about turning points,” she says. “For me, it was when the San Diego River became a legal person.”

Jason nods enthusiastically. Barbara reacts too, “Your keynote today recognized that nature has rights, and that Traditional Ecological Knowledge is increasingly valuable--yet not for sale as a commodity... that story moved people.” Jason adds, “It moved me too.”

Macawi smiles gently. “When we recognized the San Diego River as a living being with rights, we joined a global movement — New Zealand with the Whanganui River, Colombia with the Atrato, Canada with the Magpie, Bangladesh granting rights to all its rivers. But for us, it wasn’t new. Indigenous Nations here have said for more than 10,000 years that rivers, mountains, and coastlines should not be viewed as inert resources for humans to extract and consume recklessly. They are living relatives.”

She places her hand over her heart, steadying herself. Telling this story always stirs something deep in her.

“Legal personhood isn’t symbolic. It changes the understanding and approach to governance. The river gained guardians — one from the tribal nations, one from the state, one from the community. Development proposals now must consider the river’s rights. Restoration has become a legal obligation --and not just to bring back the lost beneficial use of these resources by and for humans. An understanding of, and support for, biodiversity became essential for both humans and more-than-humans.”

She pauses, letting the pleasant sound of the fire crackling claim the audio space for a moment. .

Continuing her story, she explains how “The deeper shift for me and my people was emotional. For the first time in my life, I saw Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge not just acknowledged but trusted. Not just referenced but followed. Our stories, our seasonal rhythms, our fire practices, our water teachings — they became part of how the bioregion governs itself.”

She draws a small circle in the dirt with a stick.

“And that shift — that trust, that new meaning — is what made the subsequent creation of the San Diego Bay Commons possible.” Jason looks up. “Tell it,” he says, reverently. Macawi nods.

“You remember what the Bay used to be,” she begins. “A patchwork of jurisdictions. Port authority here, Navy there, city parcels indiscriminately carved into watersheds, state tidelands, private leases, development pressure everywhere. The Public Trust Doctrine said the bay belonged to the people, but in practice it was managed from the top down — power-over, not power-with.”

She shakes her head. “And the fights... every year. Housing mandates pushing to classify shoreline as ‘surplus land.’ Developers circling. Agencies arguing. Communities exhausted.” She looks out over the water, now dark and calm.

“The turning point came when we built the Adaptive Management & Monitoring Coalition. Scientists, tribal nations, fishers, harbor workers, youth groups, coastal residents — all gathering data together. Water quality. Biodiversity. Sediment health. Kelp forest dynamics. Shorebird nesting.”

She smiles. “Citizen science became legal data. And legal data became power.” Jason chuckles. “The Water Board didn’t know what hit them.”

“Oh, they knew,” Macawi says. “They just weren’t used to the community having the same information they did.” She continues.

“When the Biological Objectives amendments passed, biological integrity became a regulatory metric. That meant the coalition’s data had standing. Suddenly, we weren’t just advocates — we were co-governors.”

She draws another circle in the dirt, intersecting the first.

“That’s when we proposed the San Diego Bay Commons Charter. Not to take power away from the Port, but to braid it with community stewardship. To shift from power-over to power-with.”

Macawi stands up for a moment and counts on her fingers some of the many ways the Commons Charter triggered changes in life, livelihoods, infrastructure, planning, and governance in the Bay and Coastal Zone:

- “Living shorelines instead of seawalls.
- Blue-commons cooperatives instead of private concessions.
- Eco-tourism and aquaculture incubators instead of speculative real estate.
- Term limits for Port Commissioners.
- A guardianship council with tribal, scientific, and community seats.”

She looks up at the sky, the stars reflecting in her eyes.

“And slowly, the bay began to heal. Marshlands returned. Water clarity improved. Fish nurseries expanded. The shoreline became a place of ceremony again.”

She sits again and her voice softens.

“When I walk along the bay now, I see children learning plant names in Kumeyaay. I see planners consulting with elders before drawing a single line on a map. I see young people practicing land-based ceremonies without fear. That’s the good life to me — a world where our ways are not just remembered, but lived.”

She places the stick down gently.

“And let me add to the mix two crucial features of human creativity and the power of imagination: Art and Artivism. I am dedicated to artfully merging biocultural imagination with responsibility as an aspect of bioregional governance seeking justice. Art isn’t a category. It’s a way of knowing. A way of making meaning. A way of shifting perception. Sometimes that happens through words — story, poetry, teaching. And sometimes it happens through forms that lie beneath or beyond language — color, movement, ceremony, craft, the quiet work of tending a place.”

She looks at Jason and Barbara in turn.

“Art helps us feel what governance alone can’t teach. It helps us imagine what policy alone can’t reach. It helps us remember who we are — and who we’re becoming.”

She searches for the right words to bring this point home.

“Some truths travel best through words. Others through song, or dance, or the way a community plants a garden together. All of it is art. All of it is world-making. And all of it is needed.”

Macawi pauses, then adds something she rarely shares — a story that lives close to her heart.

“You know... back in the 2030s, before any of this was possible, our tribal youth and I created an exhibit we called *The River Remembers*. It started as a small weaving circle — just a few of us making baskets dyed with plants from the watershed. But it grew into a whole installation: woven maps tracing the river’s historical course, clay vessels shaped like its bends, songs recorded in Kumeyaay, even a living altar of native plants. We installed it in an abandoned warehouse by the bay.”

She smiles softly at the memory.

“People walked through that space and cried. Not because it was sad — but because they could suddenly *feel* the river as a living relative. That exhibit changed minds. It softened hearts. It helped build the public will that eventually led to the river’s legal personhood. That was the moment I realized art isn’t just expression. It’s governance. It’s biocultural stewardship in motion.”

She looks back at the fire, her voice quiet but steady.

“That experience taught me what I’ve carried into every part of this bioregional transition: art shows people the world they’re already part of — and the world they could choose to build together.”

She smiles softly.

“Jason, you call for reclaiming attention. Barbara, you suggest we affirm what matters every chance we get. And together, we imagined a new world into being.”

The fire crackles loudly again, as if offering its own affirmative applause.

For a long moment, the three of them sat in silence before departing. The evening had come to an end. Jason stood to gather his things, adding a few last words: “Attention brought us here. We’re all learning to notice again. Learning to listen.”

Macawi nodded, amused and tender. “That’s why the Great Spirit gives us two ears and only one mouth,” she quipped.

Barbara added her parting words of wisdom: “And affirmation keeps us moving — identifying, naming, and reinforcing what matters. Strengthening what works. Choosing, again and again, to build the future we really want.”

Macawi looked up at the stars. “And let’s not forget artful imagination,” she said. “Art deepens our courage to imagine what doesn’t exist yet. To see the world not just as it is, but as it could be — and then to walk toward it together.”

The fire popped again, sending sparks of approval upward.

Jason exhaled, as if releasing the last thought of the night. “It’s remarkable,” he said. “We spent decades thinking governance was about systems and structures. Turns out it was about human capacities.”

Barbara reacted, calling out with a grin, “Power to the people — and power to the more-than-human.”

Macawi closed the loop. “Our Attention + Affirmation + Art trilogy names the three strands we must keep weaving if we want thriving bioregions — including healthy, just, and regenerative Thrival Commons.”

Jason, Barbara, and Macawi walked together toward the forested path leading out of the Point Loma Cultural and Ecological Commons — three friends, three stewards, three storytellers carrying with them the truth they had affirmed yet again: that a bioregional future is shaped not only by institutions, infrastructures, ecosystems, and climate, but by the shared capacities — human and more-than-human — that make right relationship possible: Attention to what matters. Affirmation of what strengthens the commons. Art that helps us imagine the way forward.

AUTHOR BIO:

Keith Pezzoli served as a Teaching Professor in UC San Diego's Department of Urban Studies and Planning for thirty-seven years. Before retiring in 2026, he co-founded and led the university's Bioregional Center for Sustainability Science, Planning, and Design. Throughout his career, he has advanced collaborative planning and justice-oriented approaches to climate adaptation, emphasizing food security, water resilience, and responsible land stewardship. As Professor Emeritus, Pezzoli continues to promote stronger connections between urban and rural communities, foster bioregional imagination, support community wealth building, and explore ways to integrate physical, civic, and knowledge infrastructures. His current work combines research, art, and storytelling to inspire civic engagement and place-based innovation. He is presently engaged in "activism" and writing a book about *Becoming Bioregional*.