

Bioregion

How does one measure home? What does the word mean to you? The question has been asked by others and answered in many different ways. Some think of parents, others of food, cherished experiences or a house in a suburb where they raised a family. Does anyone think of a landscape? Very often it's the oaks of the south, the mountains of the west, or the beaches of the east coast that many people miss when they move.

A good place to start when learning about bioregions is to consider where and how Native Americans lived. Chumash villages, their trading trails and seasonal movements were related to climate and watersheds. Imagine how you might live if there were no utilities, if there wasn't a grocery store on the corner, a cable company and gas station. What would life be like and what would your relationship to the landscape be? Would the Santa Ynez Valley or San Rafael Mountains hold the same meaning for you as they do today—some distant ridgeline that you glance at while driving by?

To bring context to this, consider that we live in Mediterranean California, an expanse of earth running along the coast from just north of San Francisco to Santa Barbara. East of us the North American Deserts stretch across portions of five states, and north of us the Northwestern Forested Mountains blanket northern California, western Oregon, Washington, Canada and parts of Alaska. These are known as *ecoregions*, large portions of earth that are recognized not by political boundaries but by the natural life that colors their soil. (Visit the reference page for the Environmental Protection Agency's document on American Ecoregions.)

Tucked way down in the very heel of Mediterranean California is the central Coast Bioregion. What is a bioregion? A more intimate segment of an ecoregion, some have also called it a Life Place. Simply put it's home.

With that in mind however, the 'bioregional' boundaries for this website and its activities have been drawn more intimately, running roughly from Point Conception along the Santa Ynez River into the San Rafael Wilderness, and south again to cross the Santa Ynez Range while also incorporating the Channel Islands. Ask anyone in Santa Barbara or Santa Ynez and he or she will tell you that they are more intimately acquainted with this area than the rest of the Central Coast. This intimacy is important.

If you were Chumash you would want to live near water. Here you would also have access to fish, wildlife and plants. You would use these to supplement any agriculture and trading you practiced, but most of all you would want your watershed to remain healthy because the lives of your family and community depended on it.

While economics might be an important part of your life, especially in the form of trade, your primary view of the world is not an economic one. In many ways it's an ecological view. A purely economic view might allow you to harvest all the otters in the Channel if it makes you wealthy—the next generation after all, can go and look for another way to make their fortune.

But an ecological view considers that the Channel, if respected and harvested in a sustainable way, can support life forever. The ecological view positions me as a part of the landscape, not an owner who can take from it what he wants so that I might get rich, while trashing it with offal and waste because that's costly to remove.

I am connected to this bioregion. For a start its boundaries are not measured by a distant politician's pen on a map, but by the distance my horse or I might be able to walk in a couple days. I want to trade with those living across the ridge or downriver, but I don't want to be away from my family for too long. And my activity, the years spent loping along the creek trail, riding the crest of a ridge, rambling the riverbanks; these have given me intimate knowledge of the ways of nature. Perhaps more importantly they have connected me to the landscape in an emotional way, teaching me the value of observation and its child, perception.

Seeing my world through an ecological stereoscope rather than an economic telescope, I am more in touch with the impact I have within my bioregion.

It was Thoreau who said that an area twenty miles in diameter could take a lifetime to explore closely on foot. Based upon these considerations it made good sense to delineate a more intimate boundary for this project, than the whole Central Coast. Using US Geological Survey maps it doesn't take long to notice that our little hidden corner is unique—home to the only east-west trending mountains in the West. Part of the Inner South Coast Ranges, we are particularly at home in the Santa Ynez and Santa Barbara watersheds.

In addition, because of their unique situation and historical connection to these watersheds, we have also included the Channel Islands.

Hidden Corner is the name of this project because its primary purpose is to introduce you, your family or students to this bioregion, and to an ecological view, while coaching the growth of observation and perception. Its primary measure of success will be three things:

1. Are participants more conscious of the natural world, and willing to alter any behavior that impacts it negatively?
2. Do participants feel more connected to nature and our bioregion?
3. Are participants more informed about nature, and do they enjoy getting active outside, more than before?

How far can you and your kids bike in a day, how large an area can a class become more intimately connected to, while learning about its life systems, what distance might a father and his son cover in a kayak while on an overnight adventure? The answers to these questions are similar to those the Chumash had to come up with, and they helped outline a bioregion for this project.

As to nature and its ways, the Chumash passed knowledge and information from generation to generation. At best modern families might pass along an iPhone. Say the word Blackberry and people no longer think of a fruit. For this reason we tried to close that gap in a meaningful way by providing an environmental education Guidebook with lessons to use on the various outings. Read more about this in the Education section.

The Inner South Coast Ranges host an amazing array of life. Butterflies migrate here for the winter; tarantulas go on the march to find mates in the spring, endangered shorebirds flock to our beaches to breed in the summer and ocean giants ply our waters in the fall. Our aim is not to return to life as lived by the Chumash, but we do need to change some of our values, so that we might enjoy a healthier lifestyle. So put down the iPhone, close the laptop and yes, sell the Xbox. Hidden Corner awaits the pleasure of your company.