



**THE  
BIOREGIONAL  
LEARNING  
CENTRE**

2018 Review



“Every farmer, every person who works with soil and water knows that something is wrong. Perhaps it is just common sense we are missing, rather than big data and new tools?”

Above: Quote from the Slovenian pavilion, 'Living with Water' at the Architecture Biennale, Venice 2018. Left: In conversation; the Upper Owens in the Eastern Sierra foothills, US, meets the tidal River Dart, South Devon, UK. Thanks to Mike Wier, CalTrout for the Sierra photo.





# Working openly

We work with flows, systems and relationships.  
We pay as much attention to what happens between things as the things themselves.

As a backbone organisation, BLC aims to act as a trusted neutral player that is building a shared vision that many stakeholder partners can agree on.

We work collaboratively and in a strategic way.  
So that those two goals do not conflict, we communicate clearly and define our goals clearly.

So that the work we do can regenerate people and place, we direct our actions to be generative: opening up to new possibilities and views, while maintaining boundaries. We aim to stay open and curious in shared enquiry.

We are in the business of difficult conversations at a time of rapid change. That means we practice personal resilience by not taking conflict to heart but seeing edges as where the new emerges.

Our way of working is what binds us together, is visible to the world around us, and is our strategy for change. We do not have any one methodology, though we can point to many influences and inspirations for our work.

## Influences

The IPCC Report  
Donella Meadows  
Oat crackers  
Janine Benyus  
Bioneers  
John Rheinfrank  
Terry Frost  
Mary Midgeley  
Motovun Film Festival  
California Trout  
Thom Yorke  
Buckminster Fuller  
Nucleario  
Seth Godin  
Dartmoor  
Betty Friedan  
Christopher Alexander  
Rachel Whiteread  
Transition Towns  
Michael Pollan  
Seaweed  
The Almond Thief



# Finding space

In the earlier part of this year we spent time consolidating our projects and building our networks. It became apparent that we needed an overall strategy that could link up the projects and make it easier to talk about our purpose. So, over the summer we wrote a *Resilience Strategy for South Devon* which brings our work for the next three years under one heading.

We surveyed nine different plans; from the joint local plan for our area to Defra's 25-year Environment Plan, and from the Hudson Valley Rising Waters plan to Doughnut Economics as applied to a region. We outlined our purpose as an organisation as not to offer yet another plan, but instead to invite many stakeholders to together design for collective impact, involving civil society in finding solutions to large and complex issues.

The key message is that environmental issues are as pressing as economic, health and social challenges, and that it is going to take all of us, not just governments and experts, to come up with effective responses that build local resilience. The recent IPCC report has made our work even more timely and in our external meetings we point specifically to the need for rapid responses to climate change. BLC is now focusing on creating spaces to interact, and facilitating collaborations.

Having clarified our aim of collaborative working across sectors to establish regional resilience (in ecosystems, food, health, energy, water, waste, transport etc.) we are working towards a Resilience Summit in 2020. That means our immediate work is to build networks, advocate for shared action towards resilience, and invite people within and across sectors to meet and plan together. We see that systems change needs this groundwork first.







# Sparking dialogue

BLC is a core group member of the South Devon Catchments Partnership (SDCP) which aligns itself with the principles of the national Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) and the EU Water Framework Directive. At a recent SDCP meeting, our presentation about water as a Common Pool Resource struck a chord with Dartington Hall Trust's estate team. We have since launched a pilot project to prototype a River Charter for the River Dart on the Dartington estate.

At the CTRL Shift Summit that took place in Wigan with many different groups of social innovators attending, BLC led a session on bioregional working. This caught the imagination of people present and has resulted in setting up a UK-wide Bioregional Community of Practice that regularly meets on Zoom. A new group has formed in Oxford, called the Oxford Bioregional Forum and we recently went to give a talk to them.

In January 2019 BLC will be chairing a Bioregional session at the Oxford Real Farming Conference, with speakers Molly Scott Cato MEP, Andy Goldring (co-ordinator of the Permaculture Association) and John Thackara (author of *How to Thrive in the Next Economy*).

"It was brilliant... I had been looking at soil surveys, but it's water that's the cornerstone of life on the estate and the Dart is not as healthy as it could be. We agreed to be BLC's first pilot location along the Dart... it's clear that locals and visitors love the river, and, in particular, the bend of the river that wraps around the estate."

- Harriet Bell,  
Community Resilience  
Food & Farming Manager,  
Dartington Hall Trust.

For the SDCP meeting we painted a river down the centre of the conference room table as a way for us to consider the whole river with all its systems, source to sea.



# Doing the work

We have a live pilot project: **The River Dart Charter at Dartington:**  
*Creating a culture of shared stewardship by putting the river first.*

Do we want the Dart to be drinkable, swimmable, fishable, paddle-able and to be there in all its beauty for future generations? This project is about those who live near or use the river as it passes through the estate sharing a vision for the river's stewardship. Dartington Hall may own the four-mile section of river which wraps around the estate—but in reality, the flowing water, the wildlife it supports, and the beauty and leisure pursuits the river enables are vital to us all, so how can we best care for the river with the guidance of those who already do? It makes sense that the community of people who live close by, or make use of the river, can work together with existing stakeholders to plan for its future.

The Dart Charter project is an open invitation to all river user groups –including young people, canoeists, swimmers, farmers, anglers, dog walkers, conservation volunteers, regular visitors—to co-create a vision for the bend in the Dart from Staverton Weir down to Totnes Weir, name its assets, and record them in a public document (the charter). The project's aim is to inspire people to want to help preserve the assets we treasure.

The popularity of Dartington's river walk brings problems, like bank erosion, litter, dog poo and disturbances to wildlife. It's also the area on the estate that's most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change through increased frequency of drought and flooding. Access, agriculture, conservation, pollutants and water abstraction all place demands on the river. How do we identify—as a community—what are the most important factors to consider when looking at future water management on the estate? Our intention is to give voice to the thoughts and ideas of civil society, stakeholders, and to the river itself, as we surface the issues, circumstances and desires that affect it.

Our first workshop with stakeholders and people who work and/or live on the estate.





# Experiencing place

Together with Totnes Renewable Energy Society (TRESOC) BLC delivered three experiential learning programmes on local renewables and their relationship with the environment into primary schools in South Devon. Site visits and the participation of local tech businesses were key aspects of the programme. With pilots complete, TRESOC is now running a wider-reaching programme with a part-time person to run it.

BLC's collaboration with TRESOC and Westcountry Rivers Trust underpins the BLC-produced Archimedes Screw Festival. The Screw Fest connects our four key programmes—Ecology, Arts, Economy and Learning—in a free, day-long event on the River Dart; a celebration of joined-up, bioregional thinking.

The venue is a unique location on the River Dart where tidal water meets fresh water at Totnes Weir. The weir is home to a twin turbine hydropower plant that generates around 1,350 MWh of clean electricity per year, and a best-practice fish pass. This year Archimedes made an appearance to check on 'his' screw turbines and to keep an eye on the river scientists showing people how to test the water for oxygen levels (by looking at macroinvertebrates), acidity, biodiversity, and microplastics. Citizen Science is an important part of BLC's work.

The arts are vital in bringing attention to difficult subjects, like climate change and the decline in health of the UK's rivers, as well as celebrating the natural environment as it is now, or creating future visions. Each year BLC explores different ways to incorporate hands-on art activities or experiences that bring insight into this particular place on the Dart.







# Learning from Nature

In September BLC was invited to be a UK partner in an Erasmus Plus EU learning project that is developing Biomimicry materials for secondary schools. The first BioLearn meeting was in Hungary.

Together with partners from the USA, the Netherlands, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia we are adapting shared materials on designing from nature that will be suitable for schools to use in our own countries. Here in South Devon, we will work with 3 schools and one outdoor learning centre and angle the materials towards real-world problem-solving in the bioregion. We will design and co-brand these as bioregional learning resources for use in schools across South Devon.

In November, BLC and Plymouth University brought together educators in the region to explore the first steps in applying to the UN for South Devon to become a Regional Center of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development. While Plymouth Uni and BLC are lead partners for now we made it clear that it is all about collaboration. We had a very good response to the invite, and around 30 people were present. They ranged from our hosts Dartington Hall Trust, to Paignon Zoo, from South Devon College to local organic growers, and from Dartmoor National Park to the SW STEM representative for schools.

Our next steps are to review all the ideas that people put forward in the meeting, and hold a collaborative application-writing day, before submitting the application to the UN in April. While there is no funding attached to gaining this status, we can see the ambition already sharpening peoples' minds and getting them to think how South Devon can become a learning region for future resilience. One action is to showcase and amplify what people are already doing, and create a 'guild of resilience learning' that works across sectors.

In the hands of a student: river mud, packed full of microbes.



# Learning to share

While on a learning journey to the Hudson Valley, we were introduced to a report called *Rising Waters* that explores future scenarios in response to climate change. We are inspired by how the report was compiled from stakeholder workshops that included local communities and see this approach being a valuable strand in our South Devon Resilience Strategy. BLC plans to learn from their approach and look for funding to adapt and implement it here.

The Nature Conservancy's New York chapter launched the Rising Waters project to assess the vulnerability of Hudson River Valley communities to sea level rise and climate change. Using a multi-stakeholder scenario planning process, key recommendations on potential mitigation and adaptation strategies were developed to assist local communities prepare for the effects of global climate change.

Another strong international link has been forged with the SDG Transformations Forum and restoration ecologist Glenn Page in Maine. Via video conferencing, we are working with Glenn on establishing a baseline for our bioregion from which to measure its economic and ecological wellbeing. The BLC team will meet him at the Leverage Points conference in Lüneburg, Germany in early February 2019. BLC has been invited to be a regional learning lab by the SDG Transformations Forum, part of a growing network of 'beacon' regions in different parts of the world.

BLC is also one of the founder members of the international Ecovercities network. Ecovercities are defined as 'learners and communities reclaiming diverse knowledges, relationships and imaginations to design new approaches to higher education.'

What can we learn by comparing examples of bioregional resilience in Maine (top left) and Brixham, South Devon (bottom left)?





# To close...

This is BLC's definition of resilience. Unlike the Stockholm Resilience Centre, or the Brundtland Report, this one focuses on relationships.

“A resilient person is able to take a blow, a loss, a shock, or a challenge and muster internal and external resources to build muscle and rise to a new level of potential. Nobody can do this on their own. Relationships are as important as access to internal and external resources.

It is the same for a place, or region. The more connections exist between people and between organisations... the more access there is to help and resources, the more conversations take place, the more challenges are shared, the greater the diversity of solutions, and the more a collective will emerges. Then a ‘can do’ culture threads through everything.”



[bioregion.org.uk](http://bioregion.org.uk)

Photo: A Parisian drain



*Polden Puckham*  
Charitable Foundation



Network  
for Social  
Change



South Devon  
Catchments Partnership

2018 Review was written by Isabel Carlisle and Jane Brady, co-directors of The Bioregional Learning Centre and designed by Jane Brady. We are very grateful to our friends, advisors and funders who have supported our work this year.