A History of the Origins of the North American Bioregional Congress (NABC): NABCs I-V

By David Haenke

This brief history of the origins of the North American Bioregional Congress (NABC), focusing on the first five Continental Bioregional Congresses convened on Turtle Island, necessarily begins with the Ozark Area Community Congress (OACC – pronounced like the *oak* tree).

After a few eco-epiphanies stemming from a notion about an "Ozark Free State" that popped into my head in fall 1976 (before I had yet heard the word "bioregional"), I called a meeting for Ozarkers who felt the need to "get eco-political".

This first Ozark eco-politics meeting took place in February 1977, north of Cabool. About 10 people came. We discussed a number of problems, and groped for a name for our ongoing efforts. I suggested an acronym variable on "acorn". Within a couple of weeks, it had come to OACC – after oak, the totem and power tree of the Ozarks.

From then on, I began doing intensive networking and traveling to identify every ecologically oriented individual and group that I could that might be willing to come together under the whole-Ozarks umbrella of OACC.

In October 1978, a group of us incorporated an appropriate technology / ecological research and education group called New Life Farm (NLF). From that point, OACC and NLF carried on their unfolding as separate but strongly interconnected entities, each supporting and nurturing the other, with many dedicated people affiliated with both.

New Life Farm's ongoing work with solar energy, methane gas production, hydraulic rams, organic agriculture, and other ecological systems was fully consonant with OACC's developing consciousness. OACC added the "total ecology" perspective, including an original eco-centric politics to integrate and synthesize everything within the Ozarks bio-political boundaries.

Throughout 1978, from my home place (Edge City Farm, 35 miles southeast of NLF), I continued to network and discuss possibilities with a number of visionary Ozark people relative to OACC and bioregionalism. By this time, we had found out about Planet Drum Foundation, and been further inspired by Callenbach's *Ecotopia*.

By December 1979, planning began for the first Ozark Area Community Congress (OACC I). New Life Farmers were in the majority of a planning committee which formed to organize the first formal gathering of OACC, with me as coordinator. NLF agreed to host OACC I on its 40-acre farm, and allow OACC the use of its renovated farmhouse / office center. OACC I convened in the first days of October 1980. With around 130-150 people attending, it was an inspiring success! The Congress consensed on a set of resolutions calling for ecological systems and values to re-orient all human activity in the Ozarks, and for the Ozarks to begin to evolve a self-reliant ecological infrastructure. OACC called for a second Congress the next year, and I volunteered to be coordinator.

From OACC I on (until 1984) I carried on as OACC coordinator, full time into bioregional organizing. OACC I had a number of participants from other bioregions. Through them and in correspondence with others outside the Ozarks, word of the events at OACC I spread around the continent through the ecological networks and publications like Planet Drum's *Raise the Stakes*.

OACC II is came off strong in October 1981, with about 175 participants, including Planet Drum people Peter Berg, Judy Goldhaft, and Robert Watts. In one committee session, Peter Berg reported on the first meeting of the Fourth World Assembly in England. I was sitting in and I remembered a passed OACC I resolution that I had introduced (at OACC I) calling for the convening of a "congress of congresses". I suggested to the group, why not call for a North American Bioregional Congress?

Everyone seems affirmative (including Peter, who at this point did not mention -- I don't know why -- his wonderfully written call in 1975 for a continental bioregional congress, *Amble Towards Continent Congress*, which I had not heard of when I made the suggestion for NABC I at OACC II).

Right then, I wrote up a resolution calling for the convening of the first North American Bioregional Congress (NABC I) and OACC II's support for it, which passed. Immediately after OACC II, I began work coordinating the organizing of NABC I, along with the ongoing work of OACC, and the preparations for OACC III. Thus, the whole OACC network got behind NABC I, and it was the Ozarks people, along with help from Kansas Area Watershed (KAW) Council and others, who pulled it off.

In order to better carry out all this bioregional work, I proposed to the NLF Board that a "Bioregional Project" of NLF be created. The board approved the Bioregional Project with startup funding, in July l982.

A number of great people from Lawrence, Kansas had come to OACC II, got inspired, and in May l982 convened the first Kansas Area Watershed (KAW) Council. KAW was

the first of more than a dozen bioregional congresses and councils whose formation was in varying degrees inspired by OACC.

OACC III, held in early November 1982, convened about 185 folks, this time from all over the "U.S.", and we had the first NABC I planning meetings.

1983 saw the convening of OACC IV, with about 230 people attending, again from all over, many coming for major NABC I planning meetings. The date of May 1984 was nailed down for NABC I. Meanwhile, more bioregional congresses had begun, including the Great Lakes Bioregional Congress (GLBC), Ocooch Bioregional Network gathering (now the Driftless Bioregional Network), Hudson-Ontario, with new stirrings in Katuah, Cumberland Green, and Wabash. At both OACC III and OACC IV, we met many great people from outside the Ozarks who came and then went on to help start new congresses and bioregional groups.

NABC I convened in late May 1984, attended by over 200 people from around Turtle Island, including Native American nations, and folks from some other continents. It was held near Kansas City north of the Ozarks at a place called Camp Doniphan. Our first, and I think, most significant resolution ever passed was the one from the Native and Land-Based Peoples Committee affirming all native treaty and sovereignty rights, returning Turtle Island to the Native people of this continent. The rest of the body of consensed resolutions (published in the NABC I Proceedings) constitute the beginning of an ecological constitution for North American and a plan for future human habitation here. (See here for my reflections on NABC I).

NABC I also set the precedent for the heroic daily publishing of the *Voice of the Turtle (VOT)* newsletter of NABC, providing an ongoing record and log of the evolving of the Congress, and *VOT* has gotten more extensive and accomplished with each Congress.

Besides drawing together the Bioregional movement, NABC I's Green Movement Committee and its declaration engendered the founding of the U.S. Green politics movement. The August 1984 St. Paul founding meeting of the Green Committees of Correspondence was put together principally by four of us from the NABC I Green Movement Committee, working directly off the energy generated by that committee and NABC I.

NABC I's last Plenary retained the Bioregional Project as the organizing office for NABC II, and it delegated control over the organizing process to a 28-member Steering Council.

After 5 months of hard work, not a little inter-project dissension, and the expenditure of much resource, the NABC I Proceedings were published by the Bioregional Project in December 1985. We decided that the finished product was worth the effort, but we were nearly done in by it!

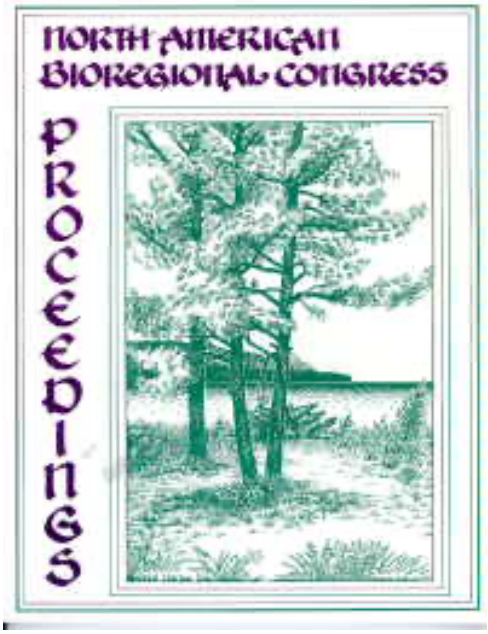
The NABC II Steering Council meeting in Topeka was sponsored by KAW Council in October. The Topeka meeting accepted the offer of the Great Lakes Bioregional

Congress (GLBC) to host NABC II in the fall of 1986, and NABC II organizing began in earnest in fall of 1985 with a major push by the Bioregional Project office.

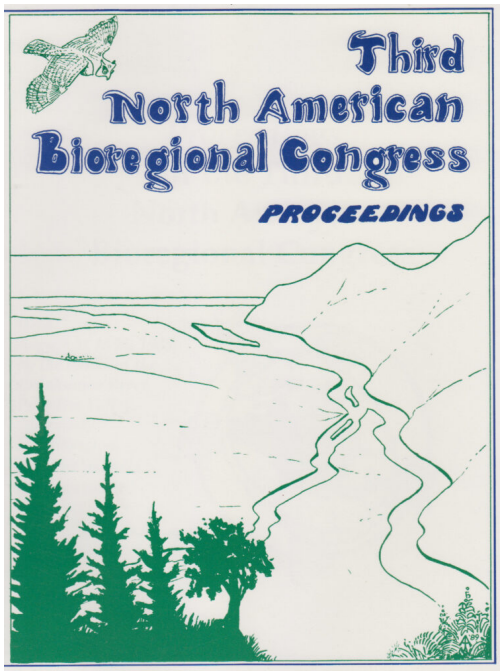
NABC II was held in a beautiful nature camp on the shores of Lake Michigan, Camp Innisfree. One of the prime functions that NABCs have served is to give the opportunity for significant aspects of the earth-centered mosaic to get together in an energizing context. NABC II hosted a council of Native elders and leaders, which was very important to them. It was at times also an epic test of consensus, so transcendently facilitated by Caroline Estes (who facilitated NABCs I, II, and III), with the consensus process proving its power and significance.

Probably the most important workshop there was the one dealing with racism. It was the start of a transformative movement within NABC which grew strong with the Native People and People of Color Committee and the People of Color Caucus at NABC III.

The vibrant contingent from the Bridge River community of the North Ish Bioregion (of "British Columbia") offered to do NABC III, and they indeed did in a wonderful fashion.



Since there are still a lot of copies of the NABC II Proceedings to be sold, I'm not going to say any more about it here. I hope you will go a buy a copy. It's a fine publication. Same with the NABC III Proceedings.



NABC III (August 1988) was among other things a great cultural celebration with strong participation from native people and people of color, people from Mexico, the presence of the great 1000 year old western red cedars of the temperate rainforest and snow covered mountains, the feel of Pacific ocean reaching far inland into North Ish, the representation of other species in the Congress, the nightly presentations by the bioregions in the longhouse, the rare thunderstorm and the Full Moon All Species Ball, the feasting on salmon, altogether just amazing. Significant among consensed resolutions was one of the Native People and People Color Committee mandating their one third participation in the number of members of the NABC IV and subsequent steering committees. Again, check out the Proceedings of NABC III.

This brings us up to the present and NABC IV here in the Gulf of Maine. Meanwhile, OACC continues on. We had OACC's tenth anniversary congress last year, and planning is going on now for OAK XI, September 20-23. Y'all come!

(Since this article was written, NABC V convened in May, 1992, in the Texas Hill Country, where the name "NABC" became the "Turtle Island Bioregional Gathering". As of now (July, 1994),TIBC VI is being organized for August of this year.)

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