

# The responsible use of entheogens in the context of bioregionalism

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## Abstract

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The use of entheogens tends to particularly thrive in the western regions of North America, in places also characterized by a strong ecological ethos, sometimes expressed as *bioregionalism* (i.e., Vancouver, Portland, San Francisco). Although entheogens and bioregionalism coincide and arguably have some significant things in common, there has been, to date and in practice, very little explicit connection between these two phenomena. More precisely, there is little evidence that users of entheogens are guided or influenced much by bioregional thought, or by related ecological values and frameworks. The academic literature on this topic is virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, there are some relevant ethical considerations regarding the use of plant-based entheogens (including fungi) outside of the geographic areas in which they were grown. This article explores various ways in which this apparent disconnect may be problematic, and discusses possible connections which, if pursued, could foster more responsible use of entheogens from a global and ecological perspective. An overview of bioregionalism and related concepts is offered next. Following that, some of the issues and impacts raised by non-bioregional uses of entheogens are discussed, and the article concludes with some thoughts on approaches to reconciling these problems.

**Keywords:** entheogens, bioregionalism, ethics, animism, drug tourism

## Introduction

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The methodology used to gain knowledge on the variety of psychedelics used, the monetary costs, and the cultural and social milieu in which they are commonly used was ascertained through informal conversations with approximately 50 anonymous people who use psychedelics on the West Coast of North America. Primary locations that data were gathered included Vancouver and Roberts Creek, British Columbia, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon. The data referred to in this paper were gathered from roughly 2010 to 2013, although the author has been informally

researching this area for 25 years, first and foremost in British Columbia.

## **Overview of bioregionalism and related concepts**

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A bioregion is an area that can be defined by ecological or geographic boundaries:

Bioregionalism has a number of characteristics and these include a belief in natural, as opposed to political or administrative, regions as organizing units for human activity; an emphasis on a practical land ethic to be applied at a local and regional scale; and the favoring of locally and regionally diverse cultures as guarantors of environmental adaptation, in opposition to the trend towards global monoculture (Alexander, 1996).

Kirkpatrick Sale (1984), an originator and proponent of bioregionalism, says that we must become “dwellers in the land” and that we must “come to know the earth” in the places in which we live. He quotes E.F. Shumacher to define the quintessence of bioregionalism:

In the question of how we treat the land, our entire way of life is involved. We must somehow live as close to it as possible, be in touch with its particular soils, its waters, its winds. We must learn its ways, its capacities, its limits. We must make its rhythms our patterns, its laws our guide, its fruits our bounty.

Bioregionalism can perhaps be best described as a philosophy or sensibility. Ralph Metzner (1995) writes:

The primary values, from a bioregional perspective, are not ‘property rights’ and ‘development’ but the preservation of the integrity of the regional ecosystem, the viability of the biotic community, and maximizing economic self-sufficiency within the region.

Although bioregionalism has not crystallized in its full political vision (the re-drawing of political boundaries along ecological or bioregional lines), it remains a persistent alternative undercurrent, an important component of the broader environmental movement. Indeed, it can be argued that bioregionalism’s focus on all things local and regional anticipated or at least exerted an important influence on debates that eventually unfolded more in the mainstream – in particular, free trade, globalization, local foods and ecological footprint. And in many ways the roots of bioregionalism, in eco-philosophical terms, extend deeper than those of other environmental frameworks. For these reasons, it is argued that bioregionalism provides an important framework within which to consider the ecological, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of entheogen use, embedded in place or elsewhere.

Furthermore, Metzner clearly states the parallels between bioregionalism and

entheogens. In *Green Psychology*, he makes the assertion that the renewed ceremonial and ritual uses of entheogenic plants are a symptom of an emerging grassroots paradigm shift towards more holistic thinking in terms of ecological issues and values. He states:

I would argue that at a time when global techno-industrial culture is leading to massive erosion of biodiversity, worldwide ecosystem destruction, and profound social and economic disintegration, there are a number of cultural movements that are cautiously and purposefully moving toward the articulation of an ecological worldview and a bioregional, sustainable lifestyle. Among movements with similar values and assumptions I would include the revival of interest in herbal, homeopathic, and natural medicine; shamanic practices; bioregionalism; deep ecology; ecofeminism; social ecology; environmental ethics; ecopsychology; ecotheology; green economics; and the neopagan revival (Metzner, 1999: 8).

While Metzner makes the explicit connection between sustainability, bioregionalism, and entheogenic use, he seems to view them as mutually supporting practices. This paper makes the observation that current use of entheogens among psychonauts and seekers on the West Coast of North America is not always so and sometimes rather to the contrary.

## **Ecological footprint and the 100 mile diet**

Environmentalism and, more particularly, bioregionalism, are umbrella terms that cover many related concepts and initiatives, two of which are ecological footprint and the 100 Mile Diet. Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees conceived the notion of an ecological footprint, defining it as:

The total area of land required to sustain an urban region (its 'Ecological Footprint') is typically at least an order of magnitude greater than that contained within municipal boundaries or the associated built-up area. In effect, through trade and natural flow of ecological goods and services, all urban regions appropriate the carrying capacity of distant 'elsewheres', creating dependencies that may not be ecologically or geopolitically stable or secure. ... Such macro-ecological realities are often invisible to conventional economic analysis yet have serious implications for world development and sustainability in an era of rapid urbanizations and increasing ecological uncertainty (Rees, 1992: 121).

More simply stated, the Ecological Footprint is a measure of the impact put on land and water in a very particular region by its population. Essentially this measurement is a means to help people and societies delve into notions of sustainability and develop the understanding that we must live within nature's limits and carrying capacity (Wackernagel & Rees, 1996).

Perhaps inspired to some extent by the concept of an Ecological Footprint, the 100

Mile Diet was conceptualized in order to increase food security and to reduce social, environmental, and economic costs associated with importing and consuming foods that cannot be locally grown in a particular region or season. Smith and MacKinnon (2007) established a 100-mile radius from their residence in which they were to source their food for one year (2005-2006) and this is an example of bioregionalism applied to food systems. Some Diet benefits include reducing one's carbon footprint, eating healthier by reducing intake of processed food, weight loss, awareness of food systems, stimulating the local economy, and creating jobs. Some Diet challenges include learning how to preserve local food in season, changing eating habits, and potentially adopting a plant-based diet in some locations where meat and dairy items are not produced.

Depending on the context, food-based movements such as the 100 Mile Diet (exemplary of bioregionalism) and environmental concepts such as the Environmental Footprint may be quite distinct or strongly interconnected, but in most instances they are highly complementary. For example, the concept of bioregionalism is being applied to all kinds of consumer activities and "buy local" campaigns are ubiquitous whether applied to locally sourced building materials, food, tourism, entertainment, and clothing.

Although it appears that the concepts of bioregionalism and the Ecological Footprint have been accepted most wholeheartedly in the sphere of food security, these concepts have not been equally accepted by psychonauts (entheogen users who seek self-knowledge). This is because many psychonauts are not often consuming entheogens grown in their bioregion and are inadvertently expanding their Environmental Footprint. Paradoxically, this is not reminiscent of the 100 Mile Diet nor the associated concepts of bioregionalism and sustainability that Metzner couples with entheogenic consumption and shamanic practices. As an aside, it is worthy of note that the 100 Mile Diet is not necessarily concerned with the spiritual implications of food while this is a relevant consideration that pertains to entheogens. This consideration will be discussed later in this article.

### **Issues, impacts and consequences of non-bioregional use of entheogens**

Contemporary uses of plant-based non-indigenous entheogens leave sizeable footprints that involve ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual considerations that may contradict the intentions of psychonauts and the paradigm of moving towards more sustainable communities. Some key considerations involve the inordinate amount of resources used in transportation, cultural appropriation, the commodification of plant medicines and altered states of consciousness,

overharvesting and the possible displacement of traditional plants and their spirits. It is argued that at least some of these undesirable impacts and consequences could be avoided or minimized if users ingested only locally grown plant-based entheogens, plant-based analogues or synthetic versions of plants that are not available locally. The extent to which psychonauts are aware of the implications of their use is unclear, as there is very little discussion of this topic in the entheogenic discourse.

It can be generally observed that here is a recent surge of entheogenic ceremonies in North America, in particular with considerable activity in the western coastal regions. In many instances, sacred indigenous plant-based entheogens, primarily ayahuasca (and also including iboga, peyote and psilocybin), are imported from distant geographic locations to serve the needs of those seeking cognitive enhancement and spiritual (healing) experiences. The frequency and high participation rates of non-psychonauts in these kinds of ceremonies are a relatively new phenomena, as are the ceremonies themselves. It is possible that these neo-traditional ceremonies have been taking place for some time yet it appears that these once lesser known practices have entered the cultural mainstream and the number of ceremonies and people partaking in them have increased significantly (personal communications with 50 anonymous interviewees). Information about ayahuasca ceremonies is ever-present in the mainstream media and climate as evidenced by an article in *Vanity Fair* in 2011 entitled “Letters from the Amazon” by Ted Mann. The article makes reference to an ayahuasca ceremony in a northern Los Angeles house, to ceremonies in the Amazon, and to the author’s personal experience in a ceremony. The article certainly delves into the realms of ayahuasca culture and tourism, giving the sense that these experiences are commonly shared amongst everyday people, as opposed to the rather select realm of psychonauts.

Based on the author’s anecdotal understanding of these ceremonies, and particularly those in British Columbia, they include the use of ayahuasca, iboga, peyote and psilocybin (personal communications with 50 anonymous interviewees). Some of the neo-traditional ceremonies involving peyote and ayahuasca are structured on traditional indigenous practices (i.e., the Native American Church) and others have been adapted to the sets and settings of North American culture (cross-cultural Vegetalismo) (Tupper, 2009). These ceremonies are referred to as neo-traditional because they are being held outside of their traditional geographic boundaries and are often presided over by neo-shamans (Tupper, 2009).

Psychonauts and seekers alike are to a great extent ingesting entheogens from a global market, rather than ingesting locally grown plant-based entheogens. For example, it is now possible to procure ayahuasca from Peru, peyote from Mexico,

and psilocybin mushrooms from Canada all in the same day. While ingesting these psychoactive plants (and fungi) all at once is not likely or advisable, it is possible, and raises some questions about the local use of non-indigenous entheogens. This conundrum is common but is almost ironic in the sphere of entheogen use. Ostensibly, one result of ingesting entheogens in a ceremonial or therapeutic context is that people may ultimately be more aware of the interconnectivity and the sacredness of life, sometimes referred to the internal and external reality of mystical experience (Griffiths, Richards, McCann & Jesse, 2006). As a result of this awareness, psychonauts may try to lead more balanced lives that have fewer negative impacts on others and the planet. “The worldview of shamanism is that health equals balanced relationships with all living things” (Gray, 1995: 173). Yet the considerations of Ecological Footprint so far appear to be rarely, if ever, applied to the use of entheogens in neo shamanic and neo traditional practices.

One of the most obvious impacts is the inordinate amount of resources used in harvesting and transporting entheogens. Our globalized transportation systems require various inputs such as fuel, labour, and vehicles and the result is often a large Ecological Footprint. While these transportation systems are already in place to serve other means, it does not diminish the amount of total resources used to transport entheogens globally. Also implicit in the discussion of imported plant resources is the problem of overharvesting. Some ethnobotanists assert that the answer to overharvesting in indigenous habitats is the propagation of non-indigenous plant-based entheogens in native habitats; yet this scenario can also be problematic. Although propagation may appear to be a more benign scenario, there is the risk that foreign plants may become invasive when introduced into native landscapes. In many instances, long-term time frames are needed to assess how well introduced species are adapting to native habitats. Conversely, others might advocate for non-native plants to be grown in controlled environments to lessen the chance of proliferation or accidental cross pollination. However, if entheogens are being grown in controlled and artificial environments such as greenhouses or in cultured tissue, they require large amounts of resources for successful propagation and harvest; inputs may outweigh outputs and Ecological Footprints are being expanded.

Another justification for cultivation and use of plant based entheogens in non-indigenous habitats is that humans are indeed part of nature and like animals are spreading the spores and seeds of entheogenic plants globally. This assertion does hold some possibility if it were not for the fact that animals tend to habituate in certain bioregion(s) (based on seasonal migrations and other natural processes). Unlike humans, animals do not have a global habitat. Due to modern advancements

in transportation networks, one can travel the globe and create multiple waste streams while attaining a seemingly vital worldly education. It is arguable that if one needs to consume a plant-based entheogen that cannot be sourced locally, a synthetic version or indigenous plant-based analogue might present a more ecologically sound alternative.

Some have asserted that plant-based entheogens such as ayahuasca “want” to be spread all over the earth to multiply their reach and “wake up” earth’s inhabitants to the message of honoring her, each other, and ultimately the unity consciousness woven between us (McKenna, 2005). In response to this message, ayahuasca is being bred in non-indigenous places such as Hawaii and Costa Rica. Not only is this being done to spread the spiritual message of the plants, it is also being done to save the dwindling plant resources in their indigenous locales (partially as a result of increasing drug tourism).

In addition to the ecological issues raised previously, there are a number of social and cultural implications to ingesting non-indigenous plant based entheogens, such as ayahuasca. Stresses such as drug tourism and the global marketing of plant-based entheogens are putting considerable strain on indigenous communities. (Dobkin de Rios, 2009). In her 2008 book with Roger Rumrill, Marlene Dobkin de Rios discusses the issue of drug tourism:

[Drug Tourism] has been around for more than 40 years and has been getting worse each year. Westerners take tours throughout areas of the Amazon and experience ‘borrowed mysticism’. The drink ayahuasca is given to them by new, often false shamans – so called ‘technicians of ecstasy’ – charlatans who are on the lookout to profit from altering their clients’ consciousness (p. 2).

They elaborate that drug tourism is taking place as a result of social alienation and Western cultural norms:

...the urban tourist is on a never-ending search for self-actualization and growth. In this postmodern period where people no longer produce their own food, where the family has broken down, where there is a significant absence of community tradition and shared meanings, individuals are wracked with feelings of low self-esteem and confusion about values. They are compelled to fill the emptiness with the experience of receiving something from the world. Why not a mystical experience with divinity (pp. 69-70) ?

They further go on to quantify the monetary exchange that vastly differs in value between the West and in the traditional cultures of the Amazon:

Modernization and cultural change over the last century have destroyed the material base of many Amazonian traditional cultures. Commercial shamanism in Peru has become a system, where foreigners are given a powerful plant psychedelic at a cost of \$1,000-\$1,500 per week during a

visit, compared to the \$20-\$30 cost for local people (p. 71).

Drug tourism is a global phenomenon, particularly in the Amazon Basin where tourists are looking for a “genuine” ayahuasca experience. While Dobkin de Rios primarily speaks of ayahuasca, she clearly illustrates some of the impacts of drug tourism that include con “neo shaman” and the exorbitant commoditization of culturally sacred ceremonies.

Cultural appropriation is implicit in the discussion regarding drug tourism and bioregionalism; this is yet another consideration. Cultural appropriation “assumes the existence of power differentials between the source culture and the privileged authoritative position of the borrower culture” (Tupper, 2009: 123). It could be argued, for example, that neo-traditional ayahuasca, iboga, peyote, and psilocybin ceremonies practiced in British Columbia are forms of cultural appropriation. These ceremonies are sacred in indigenous cultures and arguably cannot be easily transferred to North American culture with the same reverence and meaning by neo-traditional shamans and psychonauts. Tupper (2009) speaks to the ways that cultural appropriation can manifest itself:

(cultural appropriation) undermines the integrity of the community whose culture is appropriated; and it has an impact on the cultural object itself (for example profanation of a sacred practice). It also permits inappropriate distribution of material rewards (namely financial gain) to the individuals doing the appropriating; and it fails to acknowledge the legal sovereignty over a kind of intellectual property (p. 124).

While this article cannot do justice to the ways in which drug tourism and cultural appropriation is taking place in neo-traditional ceremonies, ingesting locally harvested or synthesized entheogens that do not require the guidance of a shaman or the sacred ritual of a traditional indigenous ceremony may avoid issues of cultural appropriation (and drug tourism).

## **Animism and animaphany**

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With respect to the cultural and spiritual considerations regarding non-indigenous plant entheogens, one could pose the question: “What do the plants themselves have to say?”. While this may seem a ridiculous question to some, it may be a tangible area of inquiry to those who have taken entheogens, those who revel in nature, and those who believe in animism.

J.E. Lovelock wrote *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth* in 1979 and suggested that perhaps the Earth has agency. He speaks of this hypothesis, “in which Earth’s living

matter, air, oceans, and land surfaces form a complex system which can be seen as a single organism and which has the capacity to keep our planet a fit place for life” (p. x). Lovelock follows up by stating “occasionally it has been difficult, without excessive circumlocution, to avoid talking of Gaia as if she were known to be sentient” (p. xii).

Furthermore, Lovelock also speaks of the inherent knowledge contained within Gaia that is ineffable:

Among several difficult concepts embodied in the Gaia hypothesis is that of intelligence. Like life itself, we can at present only categorize and cannot completely define it. Intelligence is a property of living systems and is concerned with the ability to answer questions correctly. We might add, especially questions about those responses to the environment, which affect the system’s survival, and the survival of the association of systems to which it belongs (p. 146).

Andy Letcher, likely influenced by Lovelock, calls meetings with the spirits or souls inherent in entheogens – magic mushrooms in particular – “animaphany” (2007: 87). This kind of animistic thinking fundamentally challenges the cultural ontology of experience. The animistic discourse contends that all natural objects, such as plants and stones, have spirits or essences that exist outside of our ordinary awareness. Letcher states that to some people psilocybin mushrooms “facilitate the perception that of plants as being in some sense conscious, aware, and inspirited” (2007: 90). What is it that happens to these spirits when they are transported and consumed outside of the geographical areas in which they originated?

What can be said about the displacement of plant spirits and could there indeed be such a thing? In the shamanistic tradition and animistic discourse, it is not the shamans that do the healing, it is the spirits of the plants (Letcher, 2007). Could it be that entheogenic plants used outside of their indigenous habitat are displaced? Would this change their effectiveness or fundamental structure? Does the physical travel that they endure affect their healing potential?

To add some context to these questions, it might be useful to refer to the unrest of souls or spirits whose previous physical bodies are kept in places that are geographically unfamiliar or were disposed of in ways that are disrespectful. The repatriation of ancestral remains by indigenous peoples, such as the Haida, is one such example. One of the reasons for the repatriation of ancestral remains is that by doing so, displaced spirits can finally be at rest.

The main goal... is to bring home and rebury our ancestors with honour and respect. As long as the remains of our ancestors are stored in museums and other unnatural locations, we believe that the souls of these people are wandering and unhappy. Once they are returned to their homeland

of Haida Gwaii, and laid to rest with respect and honour, their spirits can rest, and our communities heal a bit more (Collison & Collison, 2002: 8).

Does this kind of spiritual displacement also occur when entheogenic plants and fungi are consumed in geographic areas in which they are not grown? While these questions can not be decisively answered, they are examples of deliberations about the spiritual considerations of ingesting entheogenic plants outside of the geographic locations in which they were grown and in which traditional and neotraditional ceremonies take place.

## **Concluding thoughts**

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Clearly, traditional entheogenic uses and practices are evolving into new forms. A recently published paper argues that the International Narcotics Control Board may criminalize “legitimate cultural practices outside their alleged ‘original socio-economic context’” (Tupper & Labate, 2012). To be clear, the present critique of contemporary uses of plant-based entheogens in no way suggests that only bioregional approaches to entheogenic uses should be legal. Rather, it merely argues that perhaps there are less ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual impacts when only indigenous plant-based entheogens are ingested.

We live in a time of continual fast-paced change and development devoid of shared values, including the worth of self-knowledge. As a result, people are dislocated and are feeling as though they need a respite from the bombardment of industrial values such as materialism and consumerism (Alexander, 2000). It may be that the proliferation and popularization of neo-traditional ceremonies is a response to the spiritual and cultural longing for shared values, self-knowledge, and a sense of unity in the times that we live in (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). In trying to attain a level of elevated consciousness and understanding, are psychonauts actually acting in ways that are disrespectful of plant spirits, indigenous cultures, and the biosphere in general? Are psychonauts participating in yet another folly of an industrialized, materialistic, and consumer-based culture?

The question “Is it ethically responsible to use only locally grown plant-based entheogens?” is not a not simple one. It may be possible that the ingestion of entheogenic plants, outside of their geographic areas of origin, are both dishonoring and nurturing to the planet and to Western culture at the same time (through the impacts outlined in this paper and through the benefits of experiencing self-knowledge and unity consciousness inherent in most entheogenic experiences respectively). Furthermore, in the future a bifurcation point could make it more

apparent as to what the “ethical” path is. While this assertion may be simplistic, it acknowledges the unknown, especially with respect to the spiritual dimensions of bioregionalism. With this acknowledgement it is sensible to adopt a precautionary principle approach because we inhabit a fragile interconnected web of life and need to consider the long-term consequences of transporting, propagating, and consuming sacred plants and fungi from around the world.

Even though the concept of eating locally is well supported by many, it is acted on by too few. Comparatively, only a small fraction of the population chooses to explore non-ordinary states of consciousness and the deliberation regarding entheogens and bioregionalism may seem peculiar. Nevertheless, this consideration will be timelier as psychonauts’ forays into cognitive enhancement become a more accepted and diverse practice, both for therapeutic and medical uses (Fadimann, 2011; Roberts & Hruby, 2002).

A bioregional approach to using entheogens provides a way to address the issues raised in this paper and it is worthy of note that psilocybin mushrooms grow in almost all parts of the world. Does this fact suggest a message the plant (fungi) spirits may be trying to convey? It is indeed if one seriously considers the truth of animaphany and the assertions made about the earth having its own agency (Letcher, 2007; Lovelock, 1979; McKenna, 2005).

In conclusion, this article has sought to explore the ethical way forward with respect to ingesting local plant-based entheogens or synthetic analogues given the potential impacts previously discussed. Perhaps a further deliberation of what is ethical requires more listening to what the plant spirits are trying to teach us (and how we can learn from respectful dialogue with one another):

...it is surely safe to say that the path of sanity, perhaps survival, is to regain the spirit of the ancient Greeks, to once again comprehend the earth as a living creature... we must listen again to the two great teachers, one ‘the marvelous system of living nature’ and the other ‘the traditional wisdom of mankind’, teachers we have ‘rejected and replaced by some extraordinary structure we call objective science’... (Sale, 1984).

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