

Fixing the Future on PBS

David's Travelogue: Bellingham, Washington

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For the record, I had not been in a hot tub for about a decade. But there it was, in all its steaming glory under the stars, on Lummi Island -- one of the San Juan islands -- off of Bellingham, Washington. Since no camera was present, I decided to steal a moment. While soaking in the darkness, checking out Cassiopoeia (relax, it's a constellation) thoughts naturally turned to globalization, as they do in these situations. I wondered if globalization is like a law of physics, that it is a rule that cannot be broken, that economic relationships are inevitably far-flung, nearly intergalactic, no matter what?

That question is being put to the test in Bellingham, where a network of people and businesses called Sustainable Connections is working on a way to attenuate the pull of globalization by nurturing regional and local economic relationships. Does this work? Does it make the community healthier, better off? That's what we're here to find out.

Fishing for answers

After my soak in the hot tub, I meet Riley Starks, owner and operator of the The Willows Inn. We're skipping the large chain hotels in favor of a locally-owned lodge. Starks has got a heck of an oven in his kitchen (I can only imagine what the Yo Mamas caterers in Austin could do with a serious oven like that) the women at Yo Mamas would love to see this.) produced by a guy on the other side of town. More on that oven later. At the moment, Starks is roasting a salmon pulled from the bay within sight of the Inn, which will soon become the most tender, succulent, basil and lemon salmon I have ever tasted.

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That salmon was caught in a sustainable way by Lummi Island Wild, which uses a method called reef net fishing, pioneered by local native-American populations. They don't troll around using fossil fuels looking for these fish. They put spotters up on a crow's nest perched atop small, anchored platforms. When a school of salmon cruises toward the rigs, the signal is given and a bunch of men and a woman or two start huffing and tugging, pulling at the nets for all their worth. Nets filled with hundreds of pounds of gleaming, silvery salmon. Sometimes a solar-powered wind lends assistance. It's weirdly labor-intensive in this modern age; three fish spotters and six other folks yanking at the nets at the same time. But "labor intensive" means jobs for people, not machines.

The reef netting system depends on more than hard labor. It depends on trust. Trust that all the folks out there on the bay are really keeping the process environmentally friendly, by obeying catch limits to keep salmon populations healthy and sustainable. Trust by customers that all the promises made about these gorgeous fish are being fulfilled and making them worth the extra expense.

Lummi Island Wild is part of Sustainable Connections, which is all about asking everyday people, as well as businesses, to try to give first dibs to economic activity that is local and environmentally sustainable. Among the effects is that Bellingham is a bit like Austin -- there are a lot of custom enterprises that you don't see everywhere else, such as a local, organic flour mill.



In Bellingham, it is decidedly not only the Birkenstock set that's into this alliance. Michelle Long, executive director of Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, told me that the organization she heads up represents the real economy with members ranging from manufacturers and retailers to construction workers and farmers. "Our members want to have a profitable business, they want to provide a good living wage to their employees, they want to work with others that share their values because they care about the future of this place," she said. "We have hippies and we have some real conservative businesses."

My homemade pizza

I see it in practice when I meet with Keith Carpenter, founder of Wood Stone, a Bellingham company that makes high-end ovens for places like California Pizza Kitchen and people like Wolfgang Puck.

When Carpenter, who is a member of Sustainable Connections, was looking to expand his manufacturing operations, he got some seriously competitive bids from countries in Asia. In most places that would be the end of the story and the work would have been farmed out overseas.



But Carpenter looked for another way. He was able to purchase some high-tech robotic gear from Finland and hired several dozen new employees in his own community to operate the stuff. Why not go cheaper overseas? Carpenter says he wanted the jobs in Bellingham, because he lives in Bellingham. His goals are both profit for himself and profit for his city.

I get to profit from my trip to Wood Stone myself by conquering a long-standing personal deficit -- my inability to correctly use a pizza peel (that giant spatula that professionals use to scoop up the uncooked pizza and toss it into the oven). I am, truth be told, a pizza maker. My dough, derived from a family recipe imported from Naples, is pretty decent. A bit of fresh mozzarella or its smoked cousin scamorza, a light coating of tomatoes and some basil and we're done. Except for one thing: I have never, in all my years of trying, managed to use a pizza peel. Every time I make pizza, it sticks to the counter, with or without flouring the surface or using cornmeal.

At Wood Stone, the corporate chef put me straight with the peel. The secret is picking up the dough to form it and stretch it held above the counter. The dough is never pressed down into the surface where it would stick. When the pizza has reached its correct shape and circumference, it is laid gently on the floured surface where the toppings are applied with sensitivity and respect. Under these circumstances the pizza peel slides easily under the uncooked pizza and we're in. Thirty years it's taken me to learn this.

A homemade hybrid

No rental hybrid cars were readily available in the Bellingham area, so we were able to catch a ride in an amazing loaner hybrid. Some very brilliant students at Western Washington University had been trying to win what's called the Automotive X Prize, for the team that could produce the best super-duper efficient vehicle. Practically using the

aforementioned pizza peel, they shoehorned me into the passenger seat of this hybrid race car the students had produced. Even the body, which to my eyes looked like something off a factory assembly line, had been produced from carbon fiber by hand. Their engine was based on the hybrid engine you find inside a Honda Insight. But they had re-engineered many of the systems around it, achieving, the students said, way over 100 miles a gallon. There were even indications the engine could top 170 miles a gallon but some errors in the pit nixed the student's chance of proving that number.

My brief, highly fuel-efficient ride was certainly snappy, as in almost neck-snapping. Why work with such passion on a project like this? One student told me: "Honestly, if you really think about it we need to change. Like humanity needs to change right now. Like our society needs to change. We can't keep burning this fuel. It's going to run out. My generation especially needs to get fired up about this and actually do something about it."

Fun coincidence for me and my crew on our way home: We have a last night in Seattle ahead of an early flight and we find the nearest restaurant to our hotel, a waterfront place called Anthony's. Nice place. As we wait for the hostess to look up a table in what is for our crew a random restaurant, I notice the poster over her head. It's a display touting Lummi Island Wild salmon. Our Bellingham friend's catch is right there on the menu and the salmon is, as they say, as tender as mother's love.

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My next stop on this journey to find out solutions for fixing the future is Portland, Maine to find out more about time banks - a modern-day form of bartering - where members get credit for the services they exchange with other members (and beat the IRS too).

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