

Crossing borders. Bioregional identity and governance across Cascadia

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Abstract

Situated between ecological theory and territorial governance, the Cascadia bioregion provides a valuable lens for understanding how bioregionalism shifts from an ethical-political sensibility to an operational framework. In this transboundary setting, ecological boundaries, place-based identities and collaborative governance meet established jurisdictions, sometimes productively, sometimes in conflict, opening questions about what an ecologically grounded territorial paradigm can realistically achieve. Cascadia operates as a laboratory of bioregional governance, where civic networks and megaregional strategies demonstrate the potential and limits of translating bioregional principles into practice. Within this dynamic, Conservation Easements (CEs) emerge as crucial legal mechanisms mediating between private landownership, collective interests and long-term ecosystem protection. By synthesizing insights, the study contributes to broader debates on bioregional planning, offering transferable models for integrating ecological coherence, community participation, and innovative mechanisms into contemporary territorial management.

Keywords: Cascadia, Transboundary Governance, Bioregional Identity, Conservation Easements

1. Introduction

Bioregionalism first emerged in North America as a place-based critique of the socio-ecological disruptions produced by industrial modernity. Although their intellectual and territorial influences were diverse, they converged more clearly during the countercultural movements of the 1970s, when the decline of the industrial paradigm and the rise of environmentalism fostered the articulation of bioregionalism as an explicit socio-ecological alternative (Ball, 1999; Flores, 1999). The work of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, who conceived the bioregion as a territory whose boundaries are best understood by its inhabitants, and the ecological thought of Gary Snyder, which articulated “re-inhabitation” as a practice of place-based dwelling grounded in Indigenous cultural knowledge, were foundational contributions (Berg and Dasmann, 1978; Snyder, 1969; 1990). A distinctive feature of the North American experience is the emphasis placed on the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human-nature relationship, in which nature is understood not merely as a resource but as a constitutive element of territorial identity (Thayer, 2003).

During the 1980s, authors such as Jim Dodge (1981) and Kirkpatrick Sale (1985) further systematised bioregional thought, while the North American Bioregional Congresses (NABC), established in 1984, provided a deliberative

arena for the formulation of shared bioregional policies¹, marking an early transition from countercultural critique toward more structured institutional forms. California in 1991 established the California Biodiversity Council (CBC) to coordinate agencies responsible for natural resource management, which drew on bioregional divisions closely aligned with watershed boundaries and nineteenth-century settlement patterns². Parallel watershed-centered initiatives demonstrate the potential of territorial management frameworks that integrate ecological continuity, community participation, and conservation objectives³.

Over time, bioregionalism progressively developed a dual character, functioning both as a grassroots movement advocating the devolution of authority to ecologically and culturally defined regions and as an emergent governance paradigm increasingly engaging with mainstream planning tools and policy frameworks. This duality generates a productive tension between integration within existing institutional systems and a more transformative orientation toward post-extractivist governance (Kemmis, 1990; McGinnis, 1999), a friction that continues to shape bioregional practice.

The Pacific Northwest region, commonly referred to as 'Cascadia', provides a paradigmatic context in which these principles can be examined. Extending from northern California to southeastern Alaska, it is defined by hydrological and ecological continuities that transcend the administrative boundaries dividing national jurisdictions. Against this backdrop, the study examines how bioregional principles are incorporated, whether explicitly or implicitly, into planning instruments and governance mechanisms within a complex transboundary setting. This requires analyzing how ecological boundaries, place-based identities, and community-driven practices of territorial care interact with heterogeneous regulatory systems and divergent political priorities.

Drawing from these assumptions, the paper proceeds in two steps. First, it analyzes Cascadia as a bioregional scale of governance, considering the construction of its ecological identity alongside the geopolitical and geoeconomic narratives that shape its development. Second, it examines Conservation Easements (CEs) as a tool that, though not explicitly rooted in bioregional theory, often perform functions aligned with bioregional principles, particularly in mediating between private property, collective interests, and the protection of ecological values.

The argument advanced here is that the governance gaps generated by Cascadia's political fragmentation cannot be addressed through formal institutional reform alone, and that CEs, precisely because they are voluntary, flexible, and legally binding, offer a way to act on bioregional principles where formal governance has stalled, as instruments that circumvent rather than confront jurisdictional deadlocks.

Methodologically, the article draws on qualitative documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) of planning documents, policy reports, and institutional frameworks produced by governmental and civic bodies in the region, complemented by academic literature on bioregionalism, territorial governance, and conservation law. For the CE analysis, a purposive case selection logic (Patton, 2002) guided the examination of nine initiatives representing diverse governance configurations and conservation rationales. Each was analysed across four dimensions: the nature of the instrument, the configuration of key actors, the operational mode, and the planning and governance implications. While existing studies have extensively theorised bioregionalism and documented CE practice in isolation, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining whether and how bioregional principles find expression in planning practice through instruments such as CEs, or to the diversity of governance configurations through which such alignments may emerge in transboundary settings.

2. Bioregion as a governance scale: the case of Cascadia

The transboundary Pacific Northwest region, commonly referred to as 'Cascadia', extends from northern California to southeastern Alaska and inland to the Yellowstone Caldera, structured by the Columbia, Fraser, and Snake River watersheds and by major mountain systems such as the Cascades and the Rocky Mountains. Administratively, it spans Washington, Oregon, most of Idaho and British Columbia, and portions of Alaska and northern California (Fig. 1).

The region forms a mosaic of high-value ecosystems characterized by substantial biodiversity and habitat continuity (Fig.2) and is widely recognized as an ecological hotspot with a long tradition of conservation and restoration

¹ On the NABC's role in shaping bioregional policies, see David Haenke, A History of the North American Bioregional Congress, Planet Drum / Bioregional Congress, available at: <https://www.r3-0.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/A-HISTORY-OF-NABC-HAENKE.pdf> (last accessed: 10 November 2025).

² On the California Biodiversity Council (1991), see: <https://resources.ca.gov/Initiatives/California-Biodiversity-Council> (last accessed: 10 November 2025).

³ For an example of watershed-based governance in the United States, see the Lake Champlain Basin Program: <https://www.lcbp.org/> (last accessed 25 November 2025).

practices (Apostol and Sinclair, 2006). These ecological criteria, the alignment of watershed systems, orographic continuities, and biodiversity gradients, constitute the foundational framework upon which the bioregional interpretation of the territory would later be elaborated.

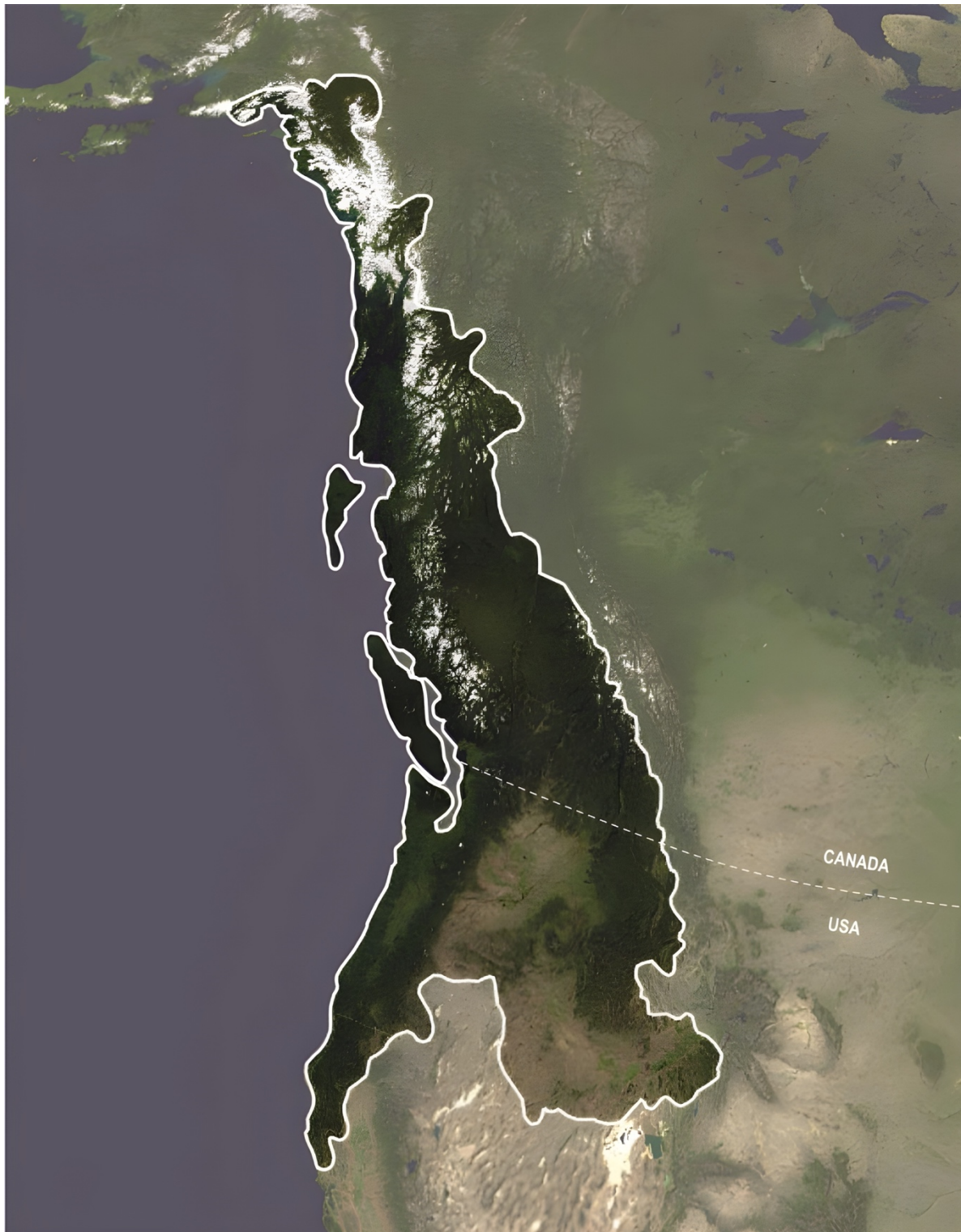


Fig 1: The transboundary Cascadia bioregion (source: cartographic elaboration by the author, based on sources from CascadiaNow! Seattle, 2015, www.cascadianow.org)

With an estimated area of 1.38 million km² and approximately sixteen million inhabitants⁴, the region hosts a complex settlement structure dominated by the Vancouver-Seattle-Portland corridor. This axis, commonly referred to as 'Main Street Cascadia', concentrates more than half the population, supported by integrated infrastructure and a technology-oriented economy. The designation itself signals how it has permeated institutional, economic, and governance discourses, a diffusion that, as will be discussed, is not unrelated to the cultural legitimacy produced by the bioregional movement. Beyond the metropolitan centres, rural and Indigenous communities maintain closer ties to local ecosystems, while the urban system shapes mobility, land use, and resource management.

The name derives from the Cascade Range, whose designation originates from Scottish botanist David Douglas's descriptions of the Columbia River Gorge in the 1820s (McArthur, 1925).

The bioregional interpretation of the territory, however, emerged much later. In the 1970s, Seattle University professor David McCloskey used the name Cascadia to describe a region defined by ecological rather than political boundaries. His later delineation of seventy-five ecoregions (Fig. 3) built on the geological work of Bates McKee (1972) and highlighted ecological continuities across political borders (McCloskey, 1989).

Cascadian bioregionalism emerged in the early 1970s within the North American environmental movement through collaborations among researchers, activists, artists, and community groups. The paradigm that took shape proposed governance models inspired by ecological and communitarian principles and promoted the protection of natural resources, the development of sustainable local economies, and the cultivation of shared cultural symbols (Artibise, 1996). The idea was formally consolidated with the first Bioregional Congress from 1986, which aimed to build a political identity grounded in ecological rather than national boundaries (Cascadia Bioregional Congress, 1986).

However, Cascadia does not constitute a recognized institutional entity in any legal or formal political sense. It has no government, no parliament, no administrative boundaries established by international treaties, nor any form of legal personality recognized by the nation-states whose territories it encompasses. It exists, rather, as a socially constructed entity whose relevance has been progressively articulated by intellectuals, activists, and civil society organisations since the 1970s (McGinnis, 1999).

Nevertheless, within the geographical area corresponding to the bioregion, political processes and forms of inter-institutional cooperation have developed (Alper, 1996; Cappellano *et al.*, 2021), independently or in parallel, that merit analytical distinction from the bioregional movement, even if they are not entirely unrelated to it. Several of these initiatives have adopted the label 'Cascadia' primarily for territorial branding purposes, their mandates remaining predominantly economic and infrastructural rather than bioregional in orientation⁵. Nevertheless, as the literature on regional identity construction observes, cultural movements and place-based discourses contribute to shaping the symbolic field within which institutions operate and name themselves (Kemmis, 1990). Within this framework, the bioregionalist movement may be understood as a background condition that has conferred upon the name 'Cascadia' cultural legitimacy, without directly determining its institutional trajectories. Bioregional belonging appears in cultural production (music, visual arts, literature), shared symbols such as the Cascadia Doug flag (Baretich, 2014), sports cultures like the 'Cascadia Cup' (Wagner & Shobe, 2017), and rituals such as 'Cascadia Day'⁶.

These identity expressions extend into organisational projects sustained by a civic ecology that advances bioregional values in dialogue with public authorities. The organizational landscape around this identity reveals a broader dynamic in which civil society actors go beyond advocacy, actively shaping territorial arrangements through their internal structures and practices, operating across distinct yet mutually reinforcing functional registers (Table 1).

⁴ Source: Cascadia Department of Bioregion (<https://cascadiabioregion.org/>)

⁵ Key institutional expressions include the Cascadia Mayors Council (1996), a cross-border forum of city mayors; the Cascadia Innovation Corridor (CIC, c. 2016), a public-private initiative integrating the innovation economies of Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland; and the Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER, 1991), a statutory intergovernmental body covering five U.S. states and several western Canadian provinces. Although PNWER does not employ the toponym 'Cascadia', it operates across the same territory within the same logic of cross-border integration.

⁶ Cascadia Day is celebrated annually on May 18th, the anniversary of the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. It was inaugurated in 2012 on the initiative of geographer David McCloskey and is now coordinated by the Cascadia Department of Bioregion as part of a broader Cascadia Culture Week (see Cascadia Department of Bioregion, n.d.).

Table 1. Overview of principal Cascadia bioregional organizations

Organization	Founded	Mission	Key actions and projects
Cascadia Institute	early 2000s	Establish the conceptual and cartographic foundations of Cascadia as a bio-cultural bioregion	Production of maps of the Cascadia bioregion; development of bio-cultural frameworks integrating ecology, geography, and regional identity; academic and public outreach through publications and lectures
CascadiaNow!	2005	Build organisational infrastructure and civic capacity for grassroots bioregional initiatives	Fiscal sponsorship of food sovereignty projects, watershed restoration programmes, and place-based economic initiatives; coordination of community networks across Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia; hosting of educational resources and events promoting bioregional civic engagement
Cascadia Underground	2017	Independent media collective producing journalism and cultural commentary on bioregional themes from a social justice and racial equity perspective	Production of independent journalism, analysis, and cultural commentary on bioregional themes; documentation and promotion of the Cascadia Doug flag as a symbol of inclusive regional identity; amplification of marginalized voices within the Pacific Northwest bioregional discourse
Cascadia Department of Bioregion	2018	Produce governance-relevant knowledge and symbolic legitimacy for Cascadia as a unit of public discourse	Publication of policy documents, open-access cartographies, and ecological frameworks; organization of Cascadia Day and Cascadia Culture Week; production of bioregional data and advocacy materials in a format mirroring official governmental output
Regenerate Cascadia	2023	Advance community resilience and ecological restoration at watershed scale	Development of bioregional capacity-building frameworks integrating food sovereignty, disaster preparedness, and regenerative land stewardship; management of a bioregional regeneration fund articulated around watershed boundaries

This mapping reveals a differentiated civic ecology in which organisations perform complementary functions and collectively sustain bioregional initiatives without reliance on public funding or supranational recognition. The bioregional project also entails significant cultural and ethical implications. It presents the bioregion as a potential expression of “ecological citizenship”, an idea in which belonging is rooted in shared responsibility toward ecosystems rather than in administrative jurisdictions. The construction of such an identity is, however, challenged by political fragmentation between Canada and the United States and by marked internal socioeconomic asymmetries. The notion of Cascadia as a “state of mind” (Henkel, 1993) captures the symbolic cohesion of the region while simultaneously obscuring persistent imbalances and uneven distributions of power.

These tensions contribute to divergent interpretations of Cascadia and produce two main paradigms. The first draws on 1970s ecological thought and imagines the region as an autonomous entity shaped by ecological sustainability and by critiques of industrial models. The second paradigm, emerging in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) era beginning in 1994, adopts a geoeconomic perspective and reframes it as a competitive megaregion integrated into global markets. This geoeconomic shift commodifies nature as aesthetic and economic asset, reinforced by an asymmetrical border regime in which the U.S. portion of the bioregion concentrates most of the population and economic resources. Competition between Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland adds further complexity to the prospect of a cohesive regional governance framework (Sparke, 2000). Despite these challenges, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of multiple initiatives that attempt to structure governance around ecological processes, settlement patterns, and territorial interdependencies rather than administrative jurisdictions. The Cascadia Vision 2050 report (Cascadia Innovation Corridor, 2020), though developed without explicit reference to bioregional theory, reaches a partially overlapping diagnostic conclusion. Challenges such as congestion, housing pressure, and greenhouse gas emissions, the report argues, cannot be addressed within existing administrative boundaries, requiring a megaregional scale of intervention that largely coincides with what bioregional thought has long identified as a meaningful territorial unit.



Fig. 2. Topographic relief map of the Cascadia bioregion, highlighting the ecological continuity along the Pacific margin of North America and the interplay between major mountain systems, river valleys (Columbia, Fraser, Snake), and insular landscapes that together delineate a coherent transboundary ecological region (Source: author's elaboration based on cascadia.ecotopia.today).

This megaregional perspective stands in a productive tension with the bioregional approach's foundational emphasis on self-governance, local self-determination, and bottom-up civic participation. Yet this tension is less intractable than it appears. Both frameworks share the premise that territory is defined by ecological and social continuities rather than administrative fiat. What differs is scale and actors, not the object of governance, a distinction that reflects the multi-scalar nature of socio-ecological systems rather than a contradiction in principle. This scalar differentiation aligns with polycentric governance theory, which suggests that institutions operating at multiple scales can reinforce one another when oriented toward shared goals (Ostrom, 2010). From a critical geographical perspective, scale is a socially produced relational frame rather than a fixed territorial container (Swyngedouw, 1997). In this context, this compatibility is reflected in a pluralist governance landscape in which megaregional strategies and community-based self-organisation proceed in parallel, occasionally converging around shared ecological objectives such as climate adaptation, biodiversity connectivity, and watershed protection (Abel et al., 2011), without requiring unified governance architecture.

Portland illustrates this principle most concretely, as a metropolitan area where convergence between scales has emerged through the interaction of regional political initiative and grassroots mobilisation, rather than elite consensus alone (Abbott, 2015). Portland's metropolitan governance framework, anchored by Metro, the only directly elected regional government in the United States, has instituted instruments such as Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs), open-space conservation strategies, and regional greenway networks. These tools have constrained local land-use decisions, discouraged sprawl, and protected agricultural and natural resources (Adler, 2022), measures that align closely with bioregional principles of ecological connectivity and community self-determination. Yet these tools did not emerge from technocratic planning alone, but were partly demanded, legitimised, and refined by civic movements that had long articulated a place-based vision of ecological stewardship (Stephenson, 2021). Grassroots coalitions, ranging from neighbourhood associations to environmental groups, actively lobbied for growth containment and open-space protection, translating these community values into political pressure that institutional actors could not ignore (Shandas and Messer, 2008).

The governance landscape described above reveals a fundamental disjuncture. Cascadia's ecological coherence and shared territorial identity generate strong incentives for coordinated stewardship, yet the region's political fragmentation, jurisdictional complexity, and asymmetries of power constrain the capacity of formal institutions to act at the scale that ecological processes demand. In this context, the question arises of how governance gaps can be bridged without requiring unified regulatory authority or supranational institutional architecture. It is precisely here that CEs become analytically relevant.

3. The role of Conservation Easements (CEs) within a bioregional governance perspective

Within Cascadia's complex governance landscape, characterised by ecological coherence, political fragmentation, and the coexistence of grassroots initiatives with formal institutional structures, Conservation Easements (CEs) emerge as adaptable mechanisms whose operational logic, while not explicitly grounded in bioregional theory, proves broadly compatible with its principles and amenable to their spatial and formal expression. Although not statutory planning instruments, their relational design allows them to operate as tools of land governance that mediate between private property rights, collective ecological interests, and multi-scalar planning frameworks. Because they embed stewardship commitments in legally binding form, CEs can complement broader strategies for protecting socio-ecological systems over the long term.

Legally, CEs take the form of voluntary, perpetual agreements through which landowners restrict specific development rights in favour of a qualified holder such as a land trust, a public agency, or a nonprofit organisation authorised to monitor compliance (Brewer, 2003; King and Fairfax, 2006). Their contemporary configuration was consolidated by the Uniform Conservation Easement Act (UCEA, 1981), adopted across almost all U.S. states and the District of Columbia⁷. The UCEA formalised key principles including perpetuity, public benefit, and the recognition of qualified holders, thereby transforming what was once a private-law device into a governance tool capable of balancing individual rights with collective environmental objectives while remaining compatible with diverse territorial contexts (McLaughlin, 2004; Cheever, 1996). Each CE balances restrictive covenants prohibiting incompatible activities with reserved rights permitting sustainable practices such as agroecology, controlled forestry, or limited private access (Cantley, 2014). Perpetuity and monitoring mechanisms ensure long-term

⁷ While CEs as formalised by the UCEA are a distinctly U.S. legal instrument, functionally equivalent mechanisms exist in other jurisdictions within the bioregion. In British Columbia, conservation covenants registered under Section 219 of the Land Title Act perform an analogous role, enabling landowners to voluntarily restrict development rights in perpetuity in favour of a qualified holder, with comparable monitoring and enforcement provisions.

enforceability unless ecological or legal changes render the original purpose unattainable in narrowly defined circumstances (Kay, 2016).

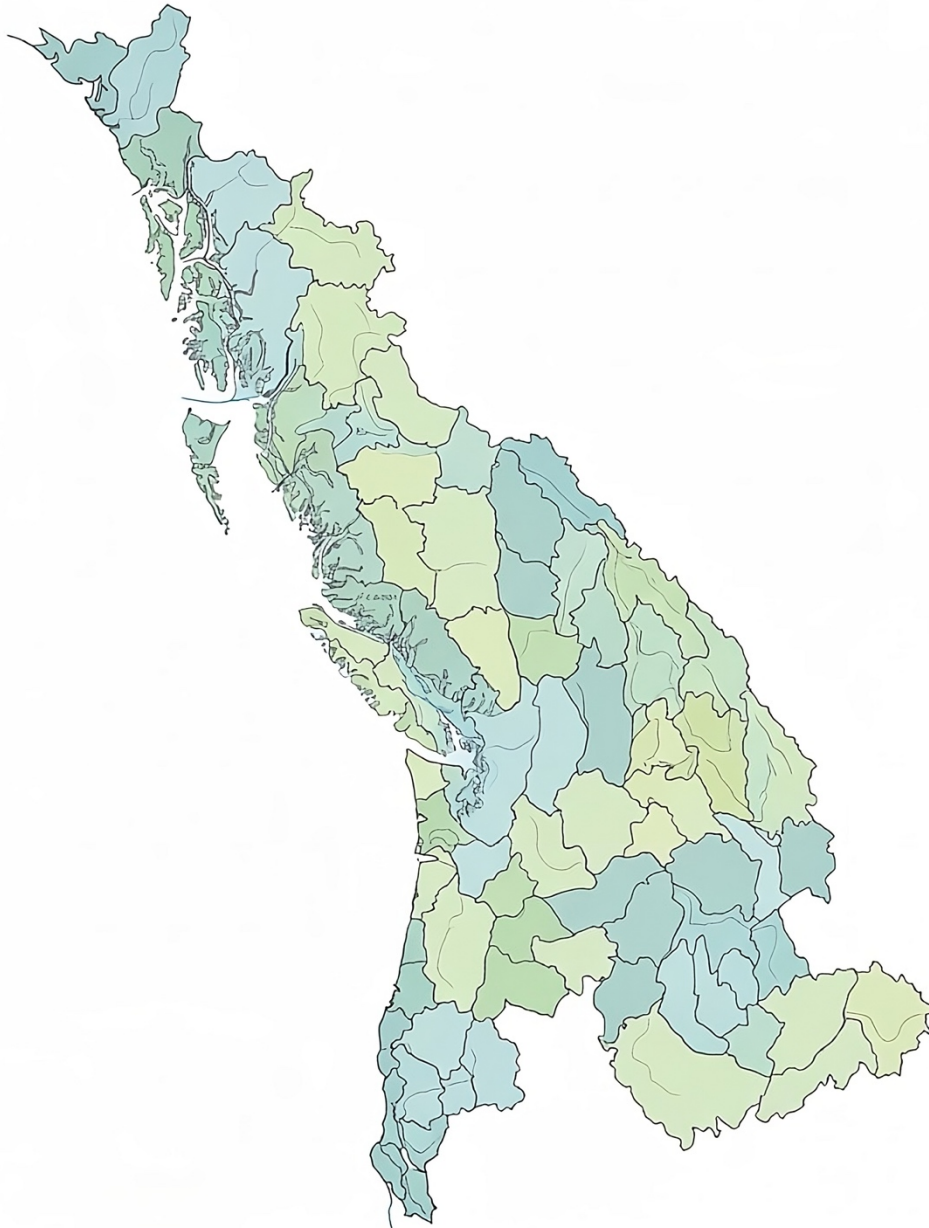


Fig.3. Representation of Cascadia's subdivision into 75 ecoregions (source: author's elaboration based on McCloskey (1989).

CEs have nonetheless attracted significant criticism. Several scholars have raised concerns about the privatisation of conservation, noting that CE-based approaches may reinforce existing patterns of land ownership and concentrate stewardship capacity among wealthier landowners, thereby excluding communities that lack the legal and financial resources to engage with formal conservation frameworks (Fairfax et al., 2005). Further critique points to the risk of perpetuity clauses becoming ecologically counterproductive under conditions of rapid environmental change, when land uses frozen by decades-old agreements may no longer align with shifting ecosystem needs (McLaughlin, 2004). The argument advanced here is not that CEs are sufficient instruments for bioregional governance, but that, when embedded within participatory frameworks and coordinated with public planning strategies, they can perform governance functions that more rigid statutory instruments cannot, particularly in multi-jurisdictional contexts where formal regulatory harmonisation remains politically unattainable.

In Cascadia, CEs resonate with bioregional principles by coupling long-term legal commitments with participatory management processes attuned to local socio-ecological realities. This alignment is particularly visible in the expanding role of land trusts. In particular, Community Land Trusts (CLTs), originally focused on equitable land and housing access, have progressively incorporated ecological restoration and corridor protection into their mandates. Operating within frameworks centred on consensus and democratic participation (Korngold, 2013), these organisations mediate between institutional priorities and local knowledge, reframing conservation as a collaborative and adaptive process. Land trusts, however, are not a Cascadia-specific phenomenon but are part of a long-standing Anglo-American civic and legal tradition, with deep roots in the United Kingdom, where the National Trust, founded in 1895, represents the earliest institutionalised model⁸, and in the United States, where land trust activity expanded considerably from the mid-twentieth century, supported by federal tax incentives and the progressive consolidation of conservation law (Brewer, 2003; Merenlender et al., 2004). What distinguishes the geographical area corresponding to the Cascadia bioregion is not the instrument itself but the density and ecological ambition of the land trust network that has developed across the Pacific Northwest, and the degree to which such instruments have been integrated into governance discourses and planning strategies⁹.

CE activation unfolds along a continuum shaped by the relationships between landowners, civil-society organisations, and public authorities. A first mode originates from private and voluntary initiative, in which landowners independently negotiate agreements with land trusts to restrict development rights, agreements that may be recognised ex post by local and regional plans as contributing to ecological networks, open-space systems, or peri-urban greenbelts. A second mode is publicly promoted or mandated, whereby public agencies may identify strategic areas for conservation, such as prime farmlands, ecological corridors, or aquifer recharge zones, and seek to extinguish development rights through Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) or Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programmes, integrating CEs into land-use strategies at varying degrees depending on institutional priorities. A third, increasingly prevalent mode is collaborative, involving hybrid forms of co-production wherein public agencies, land trusts, and civic organisations jointly define priorities, negotiate agreements, and integrate CEs within metropolitan and regional conservation strategies.

Their integration into formal planning systems takes place across multiple scales. Federally, financial and fiscal incentives encourage landowners to adopt CEs when they serve a demonstrable public benefit. At the state level, CEs contribute to the implementation of State Comprehensive Plans, harmonising local and regional actions and reinforcing strategic objectives related to resource protection, ecological connectivity, and land-use conflict mitigation (Bengston et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2023). At the local level, they become operative components of Comprehensive Plans and zoning ordinances, often in combination with overlay districts designed to impose additional protection standards on environmentally sensitive areas (Porter, 1997; Levy, 2017). In this way, CEs help stabilise land uses over the long term, contain urban sprawl, and reinforce the ecological coherence of peri-urban landscapes.

Empirical evidence from Cascadia reveals diverse applications of CEs that extend beyond their traditional role in land protection¹⁰. CEs are deployed through negotiated agreements between landowners and holder organisations, including land trusts, tribal nations, municipal and regional governments, and state conservation agencies, that permanently restrict incompatible land uses while retaining private ownership. Operational modalities vary considerably, ranging from agreements accompanied by monitoring obligations, restoration support, or affordability covenants to others embedded within broader metropolitan planning frameworks backed by voter-approved public funding. Across configurations, CEs prove capable of bridging the gap between voluntary conservation commitments and statutory planning objectives, functioning as flexible instruments that can pursue landscape-scale connectivity, housing equity, and cultural stewardship goals without requiring public acquisition or unified regulatory authority (Table 2).

⁸ The National Trust (UK, 1895) is widely regarded as the earliest institutionalised model of civic land trusteeship. See: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/the-history-of-the-national-trust> (last accessed 26 February 2026).

⁹ The density of land trust activity in the Pacific Northwest is documented by the Land Trust Alliance, which coordinates conservation initiatives across the region. See Land Trust Alliance (n.d.), Pacific Northwest Resilient Landscapes Initiative, <https://landtrustalliance.org/what-we-do/our-programs/climate-solutions>

¹⁰ The categorisation draws on nine documented initiatives selected to represent the diversity of governance configurations and conservation rationales: Forterra, Washington Farmland Trust, Vashon-Maury Island Land Trust, Columbia Land Trust, San Juan Preservation Trust, Nisqually Land Trust, The Nature Trust of British Columbia, Intertwine Alliance, and Metro Portland Regional Government. The assessment draws on official organisational reports, public documentation, and programme descriptions available through the respective institutional sources.

Depending on socio-ecological conditions, actor configurations, and operational goals, CE applications can be grouped into three principal categories:

1. Collective land tenure and equitable access, developed primarily by Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to counteract land speculation, stabilise community land practices, and expand long-term access to land and housing.
2. Ecological and cultural landscape stewardship, understood as a broad set of practices aimed at maintaining, protecting, and enhancing landscapes shaped by ecological processes and long-standing cultural relations, including traditional land-use practices and Indigenous forms of territorial care;
3. Metropolitan and regional governance, encompassing strategies that support adaptive management of ecological networks, farmland protection, and the containment of metropolitan expansion, often through coordinated regional planning frameworks.

Table 2. A sample of CE mechanisms and cases in the Cascadia bioregion

Organisation	CE Instrument / Nature	Key Actors	How it operates	Planning & governance implications
Collective land tenure and equitable access				
Forterra Land Trust (Greater Puget Sound region and Cascade foothills, WA)	Voluntary perpetual CEs on farmland, forestland, wetlands, and urban parcels; combined with community real estate interventions to prevent displacement and support affordable housing	Forterra board, private landowners, tribal nations (Yakama Nation, Muckleshoot Tribe), King County, municipal governments, Africatown Community Land Trust	Negotiates perpetual CEs with landowners; monitors annually; acts as interim land buyer to prevent community displacement, transferring land to community-controlled organisations	Integrates ecological CE and community equity within a single framework; extends CE beyond habitat protection to address gentrification and land access; scalable model for contexts under development pressure
Vashon-Maury Community Land Trust (King County, WA)	CLT combining affordable housing with agricultural/ecological easements	CLT board, King County government, local farmers and residents, Washington State housing finance agencies	Acquires land via purchase/donation/public transfer; CE binds land to affordable use; agricultural parcels are leased with stewardship conditions	Demonstrates CLT-CE integration for housing affordability and ecological stewardship; replicable model for rural/peri-urban areas under development pressure
Washington Farmland Trust (Skagit Valley, Whatcom and Pierce)	Agricultural CEs permanently restricting development rights on farmland; Buy-Protect-Sell	Washington Farmland Trust board, private landowners, farmers from marginalised	Purchases CE at time of sale, reducing acquisition cost for incoming farmers; acquires high-priority parcels outright, extinguishes	Combines farmland protection with equitable access for new-generation and minority farmers; CE as tool for food

Counties, WA)	transactions reducing land cost for incoming farmers	communities, Black Food Sovereignty Coalition, Tulalip and Stillaguamish Tribes, Washington State Conservation Commission	development rights, then leases or sells at agricultural value; annual monitoring	sovereignty and rural resilience; supports Tribal land recovery alongside conventional conservation
Ecological and cultural landscape stewardship				
Columbia Land Trust (Columbia River region, WA/OR)	Voluntary perpetual CEs on private forestland, riparian corridors, agricultural land; monitoring agreements	Columbia Land Trust staff, private landowners, Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife, tribal nations, federal agencies	Landowners negotiate CE terms with the Trust, retaining ownership and specified use rights while permanently restricting incompatible development; Trust monitors annually, may provide restoration grants	Protects habitat connectivity across WA/OR border; aligns with salmon/migratory species recovery plans; demonstrates cross-border CE application at bioregional scale
San Juan Preservation Trust (San Juan Islands, WA)	Voluntary, perpetual CEs on island farmland, shoreline, and forest parcels; purchase and donation of fee-simple conservation lands	Trust staff and board, island landowners, San Juan County, Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, private donors	Negotiates tailored CE terms reflecting island ecological values; acquires fee-simple title where CE insufficient; coordinates with county planning to align protected parcels with open-space designations	Protects ecologically sensitive island landscapes from development; CE portfolio contributes to connected protected areas; supports county open-space plans
Nisqually Land Trust (Nisqually River watershed, WA)	Voluntary, perpetual CEs on riparian and agricultural lands in the Nisqually watershed; Land Trust as CE holder; fee-simple acquisition also deployed	Nisqually Land Trust staff and board, private landowners, Nisqually Indian Tribe, Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, federal agencies	Negotiates CE terms with landowners; priorities defined with Tribe's habitat recovery plans; CE-protected parcels form riparian corridor from Mount Rainier to Puget Sound	CE model structured around tribal conservation priorities; translates Indigenous knowledge into binding private-land restrictions; watershed-scale habitat connectivity
The Nature Trust of British Columbia (Fraser River watershed)	Conservation covenants (BC Land Title Act equivalent of CE) on private farmland, riparian corridors, wetlands,	Nature Trust of BC staff, private landowners, Sq'ewlets and other First Nations, BC	Negotiates perpetual conservation covenants restricting incompatible development; monitors annually; coordinates with First Nations on	Functional equivalence of BC conservation covenants and US CE; protects salmonid and

and Lower Mainland, BC)	and coastal forest; perpetual, voluntary, annually monitored	Ministry of Environment, Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, federal agencies	culturally significant sites including Harrison-Chehalis Wildlife Management Area	migratory bird habitat in the transboundary Fraser watershed; bridges provincial governance and First Nations stewardship
Metropolitan and regional governance				
Intertwine Alliance (Greater Portland–Vancouver region, OR/WA)	Network-based coordination of parks, natural areas, and CE-protected open spaces across municipal and county jurisdictions; Regional Conservation Strategy as planning framework	Intertwine Alliance coordination staff, Metro, Portland Parks & Recreation, Vancouver (WA) Parks, county governments, land trusts, nonprofit conservation organisations	Multi-stakeholder platform maps conservation priorities; facilitates joint acquisition/CE placement to fill regional greenway gaps; endorsed by Metro	Bridges civic initiative and institutional planning across WA/OR border; CE-based coordination at metropolitan scale without unified regulatory authority; reinforces ecological connectivity as a shared planning objective
Metro - Portland Regional Government (tri-county Portland region, OR)	Publicly mandated CE acquisitions through voter-approved bond measures; integration within the Urban Growth Boundary framework	Metro elected council and staff, Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development, tri-county governments (Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas), land trusts, private landowners	Identifies priority areas via ecological scoring; acquires land/development rights via purchase/CE/PDR funded by bonds; partners with land trusts for stewardship; integrates acquisitions into the regional greenway and habitat connectivity network	Most institutionally consolidated CE application in bioregion; links CE to democratic mandate, statewide planning, and growth management; scalable model for public CE programmes within statutory frameworks

CE = Conservation Easement; CLT = Community Land Trust; PDR = Purchase of Development Rights; UGB = Urban Growth Boundary.

Cross-case analysis of the nine initiatives along the four analytical dimensions reveals several recurrent patterns that carry implications beyond the Cascadian context. Regarding the nature of the instrument, all cases deploy perpetual agreements restricting private land use in favour of conservation or community objectives, but the degree of legal complexity varies considerably, from relatively straightforward agricultural easements and affordability restrictions to multi-party agreements integrating tribal conservation priorities, federal habitat recovery plans, and state funding mechanisms. About actor configuration, the most ecologically ambitious cases consistently involve Indigenous nations as co-definers of conservation priorities, underscoring traditional ecological knowledge as a legitimate governance input. About operational mode, cases embedded within public planning frameworks and backed by democratic mandates, such as Metro Portland's bond-funded programme, demonstrate the greatest capacity for landscape-scale impact, suggesting that the voluntary character of CEs need not preclude institutional consolidation when civic mobilisation and statutory planning converge. Finally, regarding

planning and governance implications, the cases collectively demonstrate that these instruments can function as connective tissue within polycentric governance architectures, linking individual parcels to regional ecological networks without requiring unified regulatory authority. This last finding is perhaps the most significant for bioregional governance theory, as it suggests that legal instruments operating at the micro-scale of property rights can, in aggregate, produce governance effects at the macro-scale of ecological corridors and watershed systems.

4. Conclusions

The Cascadia experience constitutes an emblematic expression of the bioregional paradigm, demonstrating how territorial organisation can be reconfigured through ecological and relational logics rather than through conventional geopolitical boundaries.

Governance is shaped by a polycentric constellation of institutional actors, Indigenous nations, civic organisations, and academic institutions, all engaged in shared resource management, a configuration that enables the translation of ecological, cultural, and economic interdependencies into concrete governance initiatives. This case study also illustrates how bioregionalism can evolve from a countercultural critique into a conceptual and operational framework for territorial governance. Ecological interdependencies, metropolitan pressures, and jurisdictional fragmentation generate tensions, but also open opportunities for institutional innovation. Structural challenges persist nonetheless, including power asymmetries between U.S. and Canadian components, geoeconomic competition among metropolitan nodes, and the risk of ecological narratives being co-opted into territorial branding. Within this governance landscape, CEs represent a key legal device capable of supporting coordinated decision-making among heterogeneous actors. Their long-term, negotiated structure enables the stabilisation of land uses consistent with regional ecological objectives and strengthens linkages between individual initiative and public goals, particularly when implemented through Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and other civic organisations.

The Cascadian experience also foregrounds a fundamental theoretical nexus within the bioregional approach, namely the tension between regional planning and local self-determination. While these two orientations might appear contradictory, the evidence from Cascadia suggests their potential compatibility. When institutional arrangements operate at multiple scales and converge around shared ecological objectives, megaregional visions and local autonomy can prove mutually reinforcing. Wherever bioregional approaches are developed, the challenge lies not in resolving the tension between megaregional coordination and local self-determination in favour of one or the other, but in designing polycentric architectures capable of sustaining both.

Transboundary bioregional governance remains a comparatively rare phenomenon. Several analogous experiences exist, each illustrating different forms of cross-border ecological governance. In Europe, the Alpine Convention (1991) and the Carpathian Convention (2003) provide multilateral frameworks for transboundary environmental management across national borders, operating primarily through intergovernmental agreements and state-led coordination mechanisms. In North America, the Great Lakes governance regime, involving two federal governments, eight U.S. states, and two Canadian provinces, offers a long-standing example of transboundary ecological management structured around a shared hydrological system (Sproule-Jones et al., 2008). In Australia, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority represents a further variant of watershed-scale governance across internal jurisdictional boundaries. What distinguishes Cascadia from these cases is not the existence of transboundary ecological cooperation per se, but the combination of three elements that co-exists in this territory. First, a bioregional identity that has been constructed and sustained over decades through cultural production, civic mobilisation, and organisational infrastructure. Second, a civil society dense enough to translate that identity into planning knowledge and governance capacity. Third, the documented use of a private-law instrument, the CE, to bridge individual land tenure, community stewardship, and regional ecological objectives without any supranational architecture in place.

This combination has no direct parallel, which makes the Cascadian case analytically distinctive rather than merely illustrative.

Ultimately, the Cascadian case offers significant insights into international debates on bioregional planning. Treating watersheds and ecological corridors as operational units, and combining voluntary with statutory instruments across scales, Cascadia demonstrates how flexible governance models can be built around ecosystem processes. These findings are not merely context specific. The analytical framework developed here offers a lens for investigating analogous governance experiments elsewhere, wherever ecological coherence and political fragmentation coexist and where the limits of formal institutional reform create space for more flexible regulatory and conservation tools.

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