

# THE ISH RIVER MAP STORY

*This original map-poster is about place & spirit.  
Every map tells a story, and there's also a story behind the map.  
This story tells how the place came to its new name....*

## What the Map Shows...

This hand-drawn map shows the major rivers, watersheds, and waterways of the Puget Sound/Strait of Georgia inland sea region.

The story told here is the beginning of that wonderful "water-world" stretching north to Alaska. It shows a unique ecoregion stretching from the high edge of the mountains to the low center of the sea. Most importantly, it shows the natural landscape as a whole, and names this ecoregion for the first time.

We live here in a great bowl of green waters. From the crestlines of mountain ranges on either side, "many rivers flow down to an inland sea." These waters are shaped like a giant waterbird arcing in flight to the northwest. Its body is Puget Sound, its wings the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the great Fraser River, and its long curving neck is the Strait of Georgia, heading north to Alaska.

Living in the lowlands, you can see the place as a whole--glint of light off open waters, feel "The Wall" rising in back of you all around. Mountains frame the place--you can reach out to touch the crest of the Cascades to the east, the B.C. Coast Range to the north, the Vancouver Island Ranges to the northwest, and the Olympics to the west. Along this high boundary, the map shows several of the defining peaks: the great white looming gods Mts Rainier and Baker, and Glacier Peak, Garibaldi, Golden Hinde, and Olympus.

This map features major rivers pouring down from mountains to the sea--for example, the Fraser, Chilliwack, Nooksack, Skagit, Stillaguamish, Skykomish, Snohomish, Snoqualmie, and so on. Their watersheds function as ecosystems, and, in creating habitations, offer an organizing principle for life here.

The map also shows the intimate intertwining of landscape & seascape in an intricate crenellated glacially carved coastline. Indeed, land & sea weave together here in great streaming cycles.

Hard rock islands rise from dark depths of "the Inner Sound," ground drowned mountain tops, surfacing for a breath of air, like great whalebacks floating in a vast emerald sea.

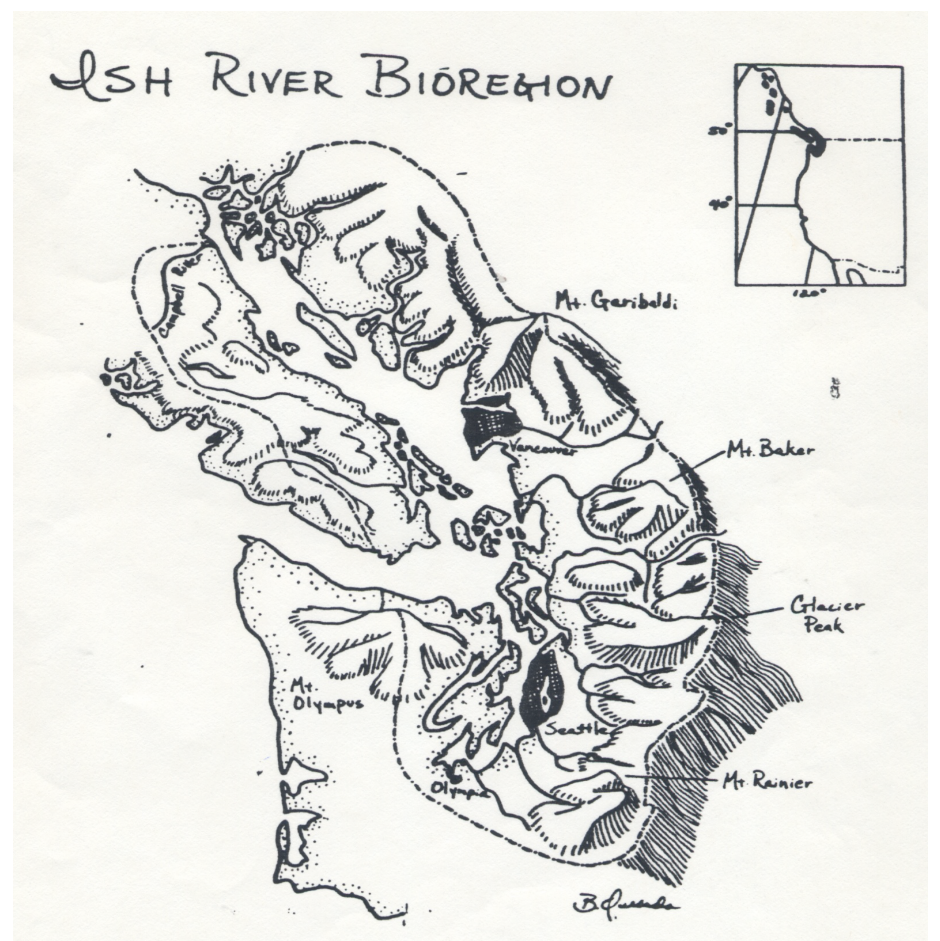
Ish River, like Cascadia, is poised on the verge of Mountains and the Sea. Great Western valleys like the Willamette center on their rivers, but this place is all Edge.... And this Edge is alive! bursting with energy from every pore.... Such relentlessly dramatic dynamism shines thru the map image: one can almost feel the surge and flood of tidal currents, pulse of whitewater pounding down from glaciers, continuous rising and falling rhythms of mountains and sea in this great bowl of waters....

**Mountains-Rivers-Islands-Sea & Sky** is the song this place sings.... On many levels of life-processes, then, the Ish River Country functions as a whole. But the decisive factor making this place a coherent and distinctive ecoregion is a *shared dynamic unity of formation*, as seen in the glaciations which carved out the face of this place. The source of the ice still remains, patiently waiting, in the huge high Homathko, Waddington, Pemberton, and Lillooet Icefields of the southern B.C. Coast Range. And what was cut bodily away from the north and bulldozed south by the glacial plow was dumped in the mud-bays of the South Sound around Olympia. Hence, North and South ends of Ish River stand forth as twins (reversed images of one another), born of the same mother.

## ... & What It Signifies

In sum, Ish River Country is one of the freshest and most diverse places on earth, a pulsing field or matrix of richly packed dynamic ecosystems. The significance of this map bioregionally is that it unites three key elements: (1) a **map** of the whole bowl or basin from high to low, regarded as (2) an **ecoregion**, composed of many related ecosystems, with its own internal dynamics weaving land and sea together, whose character is expressed in (3) its own distinctive **name**. **Map-Ecoregion-Name**--the unity called out in this innovation represents a unique contribution to regional culture.

Ecoregions are "rooms in the house" of a bioregion. In its wider context, from the beginning Ish River has found its place as an integral member (figure 2) of the 75 ecoregions of Cascadia.



1. Ish River and Cascadia were named bioregionally together for the first time by McCloskey in a 1985 letter to RAIN magazine (Portland). In reprinting the letter, Planet Drum made this first sketch of Ish River in 1985.

## The Story Behind the Map

This map invokes the spirit of place. Created by David McCloskey, it was first presented at a gathering in Bellingham in 1987. Graced by the calligraphy of Robert Sund, this poster features the preface to his *Ish River* book of poetry. In seeking to evoke the special character of this place, the map-poster played an interesting role in seeding a new ecoculture here. This story tells how the place came into its own new true name....

The story begins with a local group of environmental thinkers and activists in the 1980's called "bioregionalists." (A bioregion is a "biogeographical province" including Ecology and Culture). Bioregionalists strive to overcome the loss of place in Ecology and Community by helping reground people in the full life of the wider places we inhabit, for instance, by embracing watersheds as our prime natural address.

As proxies for ecosystems, watersheds came to play a central role in regional environmental management. The deepening environmental crises of the time with degraded habitats and fragmented ecosystems meant that many species, symbolized by "owl & salmon," became endangered. But agencies responsible for protection often managed each species and each system separately. For the standard "categories & functions" bureaucratic approach decontextualizes ecosystems and communities, dismembering the matrix-giving life into separate "components," thus undermining the integrality of the very places we seek to restore.

To overcome such deep loss, we took a strong stand to move toward an integrative approach rooted in watershed and place-based management. Thus, calling attention to the importance of watersheds composing the whole bowl of green waters was the first goal of the Ish River map.

As things became "stuck," to creatively "break the frame" we judged the best way forward was to help people reground their lives within the life-matrix of the place, so they would know, love, and care for their place as their home.

Thinking in terms of watersheds and bioregions, and how to begin to evoke a new place-based ecoculture here, we moved toward cultural creativity. We wrote, gave talks and slideshows,

served on local boards, organized conferences, etc. We made maps to help orient people to, and identify with, the deeper life of their wider places. Appealing to hearts as well as minds, we began to “sing the rivers” ringing the inland sea like a whitewater necklace. Everywhere we went we showed folks how to sing their place, and “call people home.”

Searching for evocative imagery, in the late 1970s and early '80s David McCloskey and a group of friends began reading local and regional poetry. Initiating a region-wide decades long search for those who “sing the place,” McCloskey was the first to speak of “Cascadian Poetry.”

We discovered many fine strong voices from all over the Cascadia bioregion. Vibrant non-academic artistic sub-cultures emerged about the same time in the Skagit delta, Olympic Peninsula, Olympia, B.C., etc. On the Peninsula those who had lived “*Working the Woods and Working the Sea*,” for instance, showed a special attunement to, and wonderful articulation of, the place, spirit of place, and commitment to creating a new placed culture; Tom Jay’s “Salmon of the Heart” essay inspired many.

Among those we encountered was Robert Sund. Robert had written two main books of poetry: *Bunchgrass*, about working in the wheat country of the Columbia Plateau, and *Ish River*, about his homeground in the Puget Sound area.

In our quest for names more grounded in place than staid colonial commemoratives such as “Puget & Georgia,” we fell in love with Sund’s introduction to *Ish River*. He told us later that he came up with the verse because he wanted a Japanese-type stamp for his paintings. The old stamp-maker master asked him the most basic questions, “Who are you? And, where are you from?” So Robert thought hard, and came up with the classic,

*“I live in the Ish River country/ between two mountain ranges  
where/many rivers/run down to an inland sea,”*

a perfect description of who and where we are here.

And the name “Ish,” of course, comes from the river names themselves, which come from the Coast Salish, the first inhabitants of the region. “Ish” means “people of the river,” and that’s whom we wished to become, so we adopted Robert’s placename as a new name for our ecoregion.

Hence, the title of the map-poster as with Sund’s book loops back to the rivers themselves, and thence to the First Peoples of the place. In this way, Ish River becomes a name true to the spirit of place.

We made friends with other poets as well, including the self-styled “Ish River Poets,” and featured them on stage at the Saturday night celebration of the “First Cascadia Bioregional Congress” at Evergreen in Olympia in 1986—namely, Tim McNulty, Tom Jay, Doug Dobyns, and, of course, Robert Sund.

The following year we organized the “Ish River Bioregional Confluence” at WWU in Bellingham, drawing people from southern British Columbia as well as the states, and the wider movement was launched. (“Confluencing, rather than “Conferencing,” was our new idea modeled on many rivers flowing together to form one sea, as well as becoming “fluent” in the language of place).

In 1988, we followed that up by co-sponsoring with B.C. folks the great Third North American Bioregional Congress held near Squamish, B.C., taking Sund and Tom Jay with us. We helped introduce celebratory culture into the bioregional movement.

Success in these efforts shows a deep cultural resonance: convergence of (1) longing for a new life at home here, with (2) a creative calling out of an authentic song—new and true—with (3) a widening embrace of the inspiring symbolic power of the “new song.”

In a rapid burst of cultural creativity, only five years passed from publication of *Ish River* in 1983, our letter to RAIN magazine in 1985 and Planet Drum’s spontaneous sketch of “The Ish River Bioregion” (figure 1) for the first time from our description. Then onto our “Ish River Bioregional Confluence” in 1987, and its culmination in the related Continental Congress (NABC III), sponsored by the same folks, in B.C. in 1988. And this cultural resonance continued spreading outwards, like a deep spring overflowing....

For the Ish River map, my artist wife, Marsha McCloskey, and I crafted and produced the map, and I got Robert to do the fine calligraphy which helps make it such an appealing poster. It is doubly fitting that the title and preface should appear here under Robert’s own hand on the map of the place he helped name.

Further, the fact that “The Father of Cascadia” (McCloskey) and the Adamic poet-namer of this place (Sund) collaborated creating this map-poster only increases its historical value.



2. A section from the “Ecoregions of Cascadia” map created by David McCloskey in 1994 showing the nested context of the “Ish River/Salish Sea” ecoregion in relation to contiguous ecoregions of the larger bioregion of Cascadia.

The influence of our 1987 Confluence radiated out to other circles. For instance, David Henry of the Padilla Bay Nature Center sold our map for years, championing the Ish River approach in education programs. Bioregions, Ish River, and Cascadia found a receptive audience among younger scientists and environmental managers looking for an integrative whole-systems approach. In this fertile atmosphere, some used the “Ish River” appellation, while others came to favor “Salishan” or “Salish Sea,” and so on.

We planted the seed, and helped create a receptive cross-border audience, moving thru the first two stages of cultural innovation and diffusion. The third stage—institutionalization—moved from informal channels to formal structures thru slow percolation. Several cross-border initiatives emerged, such as the new Georgia Basin-Puget Sound Joint Task Force, which early on borrowed the “Ish River waterbird” image and featured a version of our map in their initial 2002 report. They held “Salish Sea” conferences in 2005, 2007, and 2009. The First Nations “Coast Salish Conference” held a “Salish Sea Conference” in 2005, etc., and the rest, as they say, is history.

Credit for pushing hard for adoption of “The Salish Sea” as a way of finally grasping the inland saltwaters as “an integrated estuarine ecosystem,” goes to Bert Webber, a marine biologist at WWU in Bellingham, who began calling the area “The Salish Sea” in 1988, after our 1987 gathering there. He persisted for decades, finally winning official recognition from both sides of the border in 2009.

In short, the story behind this map is of visionary bioregionalists, seeking to call forth a new ecoculture here, working hand in hand with poets to evoke a grounded spirit of place, and then professionals, to embrace the whole place that we can now truly call “Home.”

### Future Promise: Restoring the Whole Bowl

Our story becomes a tale of two names, with different realities. How does the Salish Sea relate to its progenitor, Ish River? Drawing attention to “The Salish Sea” as an “integrated estuarine ecosystem” is surely good, but the gain comes with a loss. For attention has been shifted away from the larger landscape dynamics which generate and feed that marine ecosystem, as in the massive FreshWater Discharge (FWD) rushing down “The Wall.”

So, as a general term overlaying the marine system, Salish Sea is related but not the same as Ish River, and the former does not replace the latter. For an ecoregion, expressed in terms of the Ish River Country, contains many different ecosystems working together, including the marine. Hence, Salish Sea and Ish River are complementary—their relation is that of ecosystem to ecoregion, as part to whole.

It’s time for the promise of this map to be fulfilled. We hope that this story helps lead us forward in embracing the inter-woven dynamism of “the whole bowl” of Ish River land & seascapes working together, and to evoke a new culture of our homeplace....

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Cascadia Institute

See also: [robertsundpoets.house.org](http://robertsundpoets.house.org) [padillabay.gov](http://padillabay.gov) [epa.gov/salish-sea](http://epa.gov/salish-sea)  
[wwu.edu/salishseaconference](http://wwu.edu/salishseaconference) map: [wwu.edu/stefan/salish\\_sea](http://wwu.edu/stefan/salish_sea)  
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[waconnected.org/transboundaryanalyses](http://waconnected.org/transboundaryanalyses)

Sheila Harrington & Judi Stevenson (w/ Briony Penn),  
*Islands in the Salish Sea: A Community Atlas*, 2005