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Book Review: This Place on Earth

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## **This Place on Earth: Home and the Practice of Permanence by Alan Durning**

Alan Durning is a writer and social analyst who worked with Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C., and travelled extensively studying environmental problems in various regions of the Earth. On one such trip, an old woman living in a small village, after telling him her ancestors' stories, asked him "and will you tell me stories of your place?" Durning was stunned when he realized he had no authentic stories of his *place* because he was placeless, an intellectual who was hired to visit many places but not to become part of them.

Durning resolved to leave Washington, D.C. and return to his roots in Pacific Northwest. He moved to Seattle, Washington and in 1993 he founded Northwest Environment Watch, a not-for-profit research center. The mission of Northwest Environment Watch is to foster an environmentally sound economy and way of life in the Pacific Northwest.

*This Place on Earth* is a personal account of Durning's decision to return home to the Pacific Northwest bioregion. It is also an essay in which Durning argues for public policy changes that are necessary to move the Pacific Northwest towards becoming a sustainable society rooted in the bioregion.

Durning claims that "the Pacific Northwest is the greenest part of the richest society in history. If Northwesterners cannot build an ecologically sound way of life, it probably cannot be done. If Northwesterners can, they will set an example for the world. They will demonstrate how to transform a prolific but self-destructive economy into something that can last."

Durning recounts the history of extractive logging, mining, farming, grazing and fishing in the Pacific Northwest over the past century. The exploitation of nature's bounty provided the basis for the "wealth" of the Pacific Northwest. Durning argues, however, that nature's bounty was abused during the past century. Many artifacts - cities, dams, highway systems - created from the "wealth" derived from nature's bounty, do not serve basic human needs and do not serve the interests of wide sustainability in the Pacific Northwest.

He argues that cities in the Pacific Northwest can become more sustainable, and liveable, by introducing drastic changes in automobile use, changes in construction of residential dwellings, and reduction of birth rates and immigration rates to the Pacific Northwest. He also offers practical principles for revising the tax structure to offer incentives to businesses and consumers to change their patterns of behaviour towards those that support sustainability.

Establishing and maintaining a limit on human population is vital to any program that attempts to move a society toward sustainability. Durning describes, in detail, his own vasectomy and makes common sense recommendations for sex

education in the schools, birth control, and immigration policies.

In his concluding chapter, on politics, Durning says we need a reinvention of politics. "There is a yawning chasm between what is politically possible and what is achingly necessary." He advocates "plain old grass-roots organizing." But he admits that "other methods of social change have their place as well, including everything from big-stakes lawsuits to consensus-based community dialogues. The main thing is to root politics in place."

Durning is an effective voice in the growing bioregional movement, a movement that emphasizes the importance of place in developing communities committed to sustainability.

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