

## Maximizing the Edges between Social and Ecological systems Towards Regeneration May East

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The following edited extracts are taken from the transcript of a longer talk she presented during the World Goodwill Seminar on 6 November 2021 on the theme: Imagination and Social Regeneration. A video of the full talk is available at: [worldgoodwill.org/video#me](https://worldgoodwill.org/video#me) ; further information on the theme and the seminar at: [worldgoodwill.org/regeneration](https://worldgoodwill.org/regeneration).

The Climate Conference, COP26, is taking place right now, just around the corner in Glasgow and over the last week I have been immersed in a field of pledges and negotiations, with a combined sense of warnings and optimism, danger and hope, anger, and momentum.

While there are many projections from climate science of scenarios for the future, we can synthesize these into two scenarios. Transition is going to happen, either we are going to design it, or we are going to be victims of it.

I am reminded of Rumi who said that there are a thousand and one ways of kneeling and kissing the earth. So too are there a thousand and one ways of designing this transition.

In ecological science, the transition or edge between two distinct biological communities is known as the ecotone. The word is a linguistic blend derived from the Greek *eco*, which is *oikos* or environment and *tonos* or tension, meaning a place of high intensity where ecologies are in tension. The ecotone concept was first used by the ecologist Frederic Edward Clements in 1905 in the US. Typically, he noticed there was much more biodiversity in the transition zones than either of the ecosystems themselves. Later, Bill Mollison, the founder of permaculture, claimed that an ecotone tends to be species rich, with resources from both environments providing unique ecological niches, creating conditions for new species to emerge.

This is called the edge effect. And one of the principles of regenerative designers working with ecological systems is to maximize edges, because by maximizing edges, you maximize diversity, maximize life vitality, and viability. Over the years I started working with the impact of the edge effect on social systems and I have recently published a scientific paper, attempting to describe a new concept of sociotones, or society's intention.

The hypothesis is that just as it is possible to maximize the diversity and productivity found in the edges between neighboring biological communities, it is also possible to create a more significant edge effect in society between different social groupings, with diverse worldviews, power structures and intentions.

We have been working with sociotones in various projects in different parts of the globe, and out of this experience three principles can be observed in operation. The first is that sociotones offer a way of looking at a society in terms of potentials rather than problems. They can be seen as pregnant fields creating conditions for the emergence of unique patterns of meaning and belonging which are just at the verge of precipitation. In sociotones we see the inherent ability for something which has not yet manifested to evolve or come into being. It is a way of conceptualizing the gap between what something is and what it could be if it realized its purpose.

Regenerative practitioners maximize evolutionary potential through a process of imaging: mentally place themselves within a living system so that it can be seen and experienced from the inside, as it really is: alive and working. Using this method in sociotone work, we design for the evolution of a society's intentions by developing the intrinsic and extrinsic conditions that enable the human and natural living systems to become agents of their on-going evolution as partners in a larger co-evolution.

A second principle of sociotones work engages with the Law of Three. Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana, said that all movement occurs while it is being inhibited. The "dance of change" is the inevitable interplay between forces producing innovation and growth and forces conserving stability. From this biological perspective, in order for anything new to be created, there are always three forces present. There's the activating force, the restraining force, and the reconciling force.

There's lots of this activating force, initiating action, right now live in our streets. Then you have the restraining or the receptive force, which is the receiver of the action, and which is endeavoring to define, refine, and limit the activating force. And then you have the reconciling force which is independent of the two other forces and which is endeavoring to bring them in to relatedness or harmony.

It's very important that we understand that the ability to make change is directly related to the ability of imaging. Ability to value and hold the activating and restraining forces in one's mind simultaneously while working to discover appropriate reconciling forces.

A third principle active in the sociotones is that serendipity thrives on alertness. The English novelist, Horace Walpole, coined the term 'serendipity' to describe the incidental discovery of something valuable. It appears as an unexpected, brilliant result, created through a combination of effort and luck, joined by alertness and flexibility: looking for something and finding something else.

The field of sociotone, where the edges of diverse social intentions coincide, is full of surprises, and causing something unexpected to happen is a process of enactment rather than luck. So, while doing edge work within societies we increase the chances of accidental discovery by

being alert and curious. One of my realizations over time has been the importance of dancing between the rational, concrete mind and the intuitive abstract mind, so that when you stop dancing, you are able to interpret, these new matrixes of meaning. And that can help give new directions to society.

Ecotones and sociotones can be seen as complimentary concepts, with shared characteristics, but also important differences. While there is an accumulated body of science dated from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding ecotones, maximizing life by maximizing the edges between ecosystems, sociotone is a new concept emerging as a response to the multicultural society of an unequal globalized world.

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