

Lesson 4 Book Excerpt**Regeneration**

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Living nonextractively does not mean that extraction does not happen: all living things must take from nature in order to survive. But it does mean the end of the extractivist mindset—of taking without caretaking, of treating land and people as resources to deplete rather than as complex entities with rights to a dignified existence based on renewal and regeneration. Even such traditionally destructive practices as logging can be done responsibly, as can small-scale mining, particularly when the activities are controlled by the people who live where the extraction is taking place and who have a stake in the ongoing health and productivity of the land. But most of all, living nonextractively means relying overwhelmingly on resources that can be continuously regenerated: deriving our food from farming methods that protect soil fertility; our energy from methods that harness the ever-renewing strength of the sun, wind, and waves; our metals from recycled and reused sources.

These processes are sometimes called “resilient” but a more appropriate term might be “regenerative.” Because resilience—though certainly one of nature’s greatest gifts—is a passive process, implying the ability to absorb blows and get back up. Regeneration, on the other hand, is active: we become full participants in the process of maximizing life’s creativity.

This is a far more expansive vision than the familiar eco-critique that stressed smallness and shrinking humanity’s impact or “footprint.” That is simply not an option today, not without genocidal implications: we are here, we are many, and we must use our skills to act. We can, however, change the nature of our actions so that they are constantly growing, rather than extracting life. “We can build soil, pollinate, compost and decompose,” Gopal Dayaneni, a grassroots ecologist and activist with the Oakland, California, based movement Generation, told me. “We can accelerate, simply through our labor, the restoration and regeneration of living systems, if we engage in thoughtful, concerted action. We are actually the keystone species in this moment so we have to align our strategies with the healing powers of mother earth—there is no getting around the house rules. But it isn’t about stopping or retreating. It’s about aggressively applying our labor toward restoration.

That spirit is already busily at work promoting and protecting life in the face of so many life-negating and life-forgetting threats. It has even reached the creek where I used to take hikes during my pregnancy. When I first discovered the trail, I had thought that the salmon that still swam in the stream were there purely thanks to the species' indomitable will. But as I met and spoke with locals on those walks, I learned that since 1992 the fish had been helped along by a hatchery a few kilometers upstream, as well as by teams of volunteers that worked to clear the water of logging debris and made sure there was enough shade to protect the young fry. Hundreds of thousands of pink, coho, chum, and chinook fry are released into nearby streams each year. It's a partnership of sorts between the fish, the forest, and the people who share this special piece of the world.

So about two months after my son was born, our little family went on a field trip to that hatchery, now being powered through micro turbines and geothermal. though he was so small he could barely see over the sling, I wanted him to meet some of the baby salmon that had been so important to me before he was born. It was fun: we peered together into the big green tanks where the young fish were being kept safe until they grew strong enough to protect themselves. And we went home with a "salmon alphabet" poster that still hangs in his room ("s" is for smolt).