

Rainbows Amidst the Rivers: Nested Micro-regionality in North-Eastern New South Wales

PHILIP HAYWARD AND CHRISTIAN FLEURY

University of British Columbia and University of Caen Normandy

*Well, she grew up on northern rivers
Coloured birds sang her out of bed each day
She made friends with wild creatures
They were her dreaming, her study and her play*
Paul Kelly, 'Northern Rivers' (2022)

Introduction

The far north-eastern corner of New South Wales (NSW), a region commonly referred to as either the Far North Coast (FNC) or Northern Rivers (NR), has a particular status within NSW, Australian and international social imaginaries on account of its rich environmental assets and the lifestyle and cultural characteristics commonly associated with it (typified by the lyrics to Kelly's song that preface this article). The first-named author's extended residence in the region from 2000–2021 and participation in community groups and public forums indicated that these senses of place are shared, to varying extents, by its residents but are also juxtaposed with and/or opposed by others who have different senses of locale and region. This is unsurprising, as such perceptions are highly contingent on socio-cultural, political and spiritual identities and inclinations, some of which can be more easily aligned with dominant regional identity projections than others. The concept of regionality is itself a complex and contingent one, and this article explores this complexity with regard to an area that has strong senses of and identifications with place(s) and shifting demographics that are modifying these. This case study indicates how physical, administrative, experienced and otherwise imagined regions can co-exist (in overlap) in a manner that allows a compound identity to operate in local communities.

Regionality: An Overview

In recent decades, geographical, environmental, social scientific and political discourses have engaged with the notion of regions in various ways, leading to focussed scholarly study, not least in the dedicated journal *Regional Studies*. There is a degree of tension between schools of thought that see aspects of physically defined regions as substantially determining senses of regionality amongst their human populations on account of the specificity of experience in the region and those that stress the imagined nature of regionality. The concept of bio-regionality is one of the former approaches. Thayer, for

instance, identifies ‘unique’ regions defined by natural boundaries that have distinct ‘geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character(s)’ and posits that these can support ‘unique human communities’ (3). Significantly for this article he identifies watersheds as one such natural boundary system. With particular relevance to concepts of the Rainbow Region (RR) developed further below, Thayer asserts that ‘most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to take place.’ Other schools of thought stress the imagined experience of regionality as being of greater significance. Söderbaum, for instance, asserts that regions are brought into being and ‘held together by historically contingent interactions, shared beliefs and identities, norms and practices’ (36). Expanding on this, Agnew characterises a region as a geo-social ‘classification device’ that ‘typically conjures up the idea of a homogeneous block of space that has a persisting distinctiveness due to its physical and cultural characteristics’ (8). Turning to the concept’s ontology, Agnew asserts that regions are perceived to objectively exist even if this necessitates ‘a prior requirement to think that the world is divided up in this way’ (8). Related to this, he identifies that

This combination of a claim to real existence and the necessity for prior thought so as to define a region has caused untold problems for those trying to have their regionalization schemes accepted as more ‘real’ than others. It also leads to the opposition in contemporary geography between those who claim the mantle ‘real’ for their regions and those who regard all regions as mere inventions of an observer whose definitions say more about the political-social position of that observer than the phenomena the regions purport to classify. (8-9)

This article takes the approach that modern constructions and representations of regionality—and rural instantiations of this in particular¹—substantially rely on both bio-regionality and an external conceptual template that enables their social articulation *as* regions. Studies of regionality—such as those advanced in the journal *Regional Studies*—occur on a spectrum that ranges from the international (e.g., ‘The Arab World’) to the highly local. In what follows, we contribute to studies of regionality by demonstrating complex aspects of its local formation by addressing a particular region that comprises a composite of bioregional catchments with a micro-region nested within it. Within this focus we examine the different ways each region is perceived and constructed and how each operates. This illustrates that contrasting versions of locality can co-exist within singular spaces in a manner that can both complicate and enrich singular definitions of regional identity.

While this article specifically focuses on regional identity articulations in mainstream Australian settler society and administrative discourses, it is of considerable relevance that the FNC/NR’s distinct topography, climate and hydrology have long provided a hospitable

base for the region's Indigenous people. Indeed, the traditional lands of the Bunjalung, Gumbainggir, Nganyaywana and Ngarabal nations occupy an approximately similar area to FNC/NR (albeit crossing over into southern Queensland) (Figure 1a). Due to the area including several Indigenous *nations*,² there is no single Indigenous name for the region and—as pertinently, for the purpose of this article—there also does not seem to be any sense of the FNC/NR as a distinct region within Indigenous spatial awareness, aside from its potential status as an aggregate of the territories of the aforementioned language groups. This also relates to the manner in which contemporary Indigenous consciousness of regionality within and across the broad FNC/RR region is complex in combining awareness of and identification with pre-colonial Indigenous *nations'* territories and the dispersed and intermingled status of those Indigenous communities that occupy particular locations in Wardell,³ Ballina and Lismore and are more generally dispersed across the region. This (intermingled) community's sense of regionality within and across FNC/NR and with regard to the RR and its counterculture merits detailed research, which is beyond the parameters of this article.

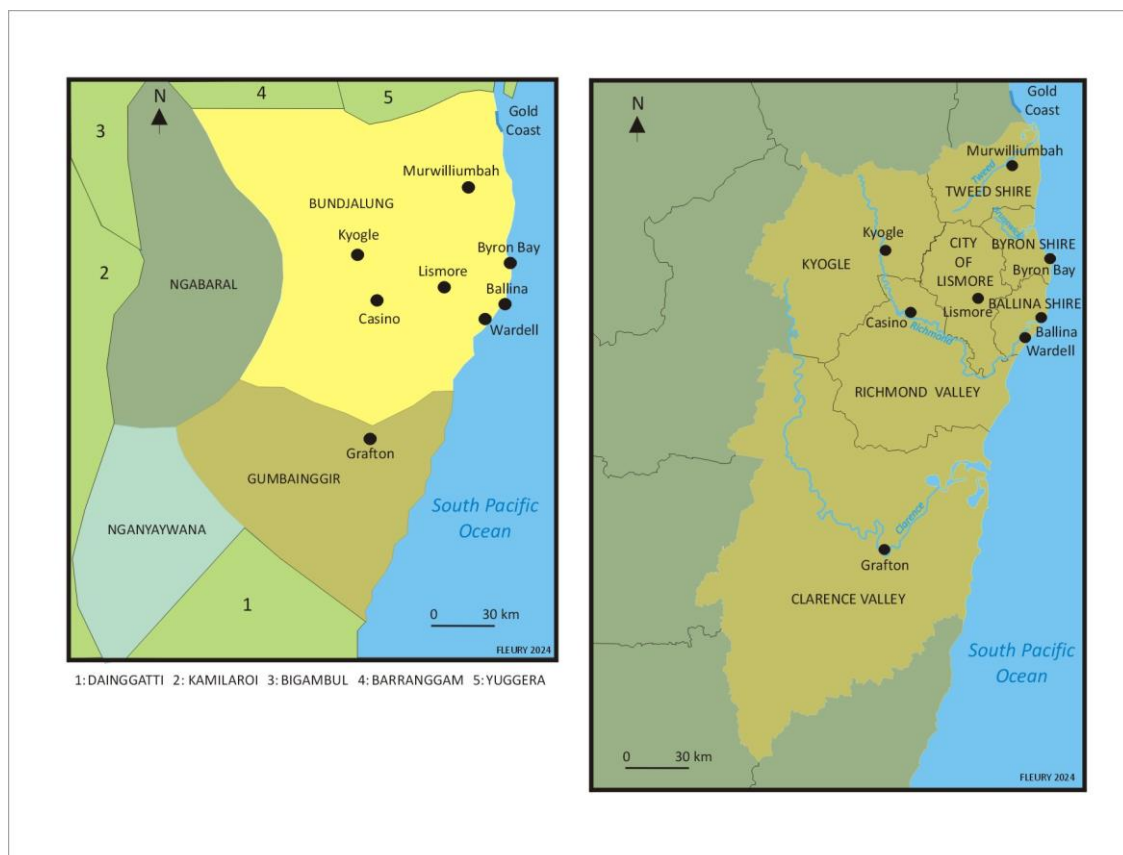


Fig. 1a (left) Map of the boundaries of Indigenous communities in FNC/NR at the time of British invasion and early settlement in the late 1700s and early 1800s (with present day town names added for orientation)

Image credit: Christian Fleury

Fig. 1b (right) Map of the current Far North Coast/Northern Rivers administrative region

Image credit: Regional Development Australia, <https://rdasydney.org.au/regions/northern-rivers/>

Far North Coast/Northern Rivers

While they refer to the same region, the alternative modern names for the main area profiled in this article signify different aspects of it.⁴ The term 'Far North Coast' (FNC) is simply descriptive, reflecting the location of the region in the far north of NSW and its nature as a coastal strip with adjacent hinterland (Figure 1). The maximum distance from the coast to the elevated Dividing Range is about 75 kilometres and most settlements are in the eastern coastal portion of the area. The term 'Northern Rivers' (NR) came into use to describe north-eastern NSW in the late 19th century.⁵ While it is also descriptive, it is premised on different features of the same area (i.e., its rivers) and, as pertinently, an aggregation of some of these catchment areas that closely conforms to the currently articulated boundaries of the region within the area of the modern state of New South Wales.⁶ Contemporary travellers driving the coastal route between Sydney and Brisbane experience the defining riveriness of the region as they traverse the motorway bridges that cross the south and north arms of the Clarence River, the Richmond River, the Brunswick River and finally the Tweed. In terms of the issues concerning the 'reality' of regions advanced by Agnew, it is notable that FNC/NR exists as a clearly delineated bureaucratic and cartographic entity (as represented in Figure 1b). The region is recognised by Regional Development Australia (RDA), through its Northern Rivers Regional Economic Recovery Plan 2025 and by the NSW state government, which mandated a Far North Coast Regional Conservation Plan in 2010. Reflecting this, the terms FNC and NR are commonly (and interchangeably) understood and frequently used in print, radio, television and online media.

Since European invasion and settlement in the early-to-mid 1800s, the FNC/NR region has been known for its agricultural production, including such subtropical crops as bananas, sugarcane, and macadamias (whose ranges commence in its south and extend northwards), and for timber and a substantial dairy industry. Indeed, the region's profile was heavily agricultural until the Aquarius Festival⁷ was held in Nimbin in May 1973. After the festival, a number of attendees stayed on and formed alternative lifestyle communities that acted as magnets for similarly minded individuals from elsewhere. The aggregate of these communities and the places they were centred in became known as the Rainbow Region (RR), and RR values are commonly acknowledged to comprise compassion, inclusivity, environmental care,⁸ acceptance of marijuana use,⁹ sex positivity and a range of 'New Age' sensibilities that include profound distrust of mainstream science and medicine.¹⁰ In many regards, RR sensibilities and the constitution of the RR exemplify the aspect of bioregionalism identified by Aberly whereby the latter is 'a body of thought and related practice that has evolved in response to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner to the region-scale ecosystems in which they are irrevocably imbedded' (13). Similarly, the countercultural RR community that was catalysed by the festival exemplifies his characterisation that 'there is no official bioregional program

or ideology; rather, there is an evolving dialogue about a set of ideals and ideas continually tested by practice and, as would seem proper, continually inflected by the particularities of diverse places and cultures' (9).

Given its centrality to regional identity formation, the term 'rainbow' merits discussion. To begin with, there is a pleasing symmetry in that all three names for the regions discussed in this article derive from water: *Far North Coast*, *Northern Rivers* and the *Rainbow* Region (the latter being a phenomenon generated through the perception of light refracted by and dispersed through water vapour). These characterisations also neatly relate to Agnew's distinctions between areas that can be considered as objectively 'real,' by dint of demonstrable characteristics, such as (but not confined to) their physical aspects (e.g., coasts, rivers, etc.) and those that might be considered to be the product of observation and perspective (8-9). The rainbows that abound in the frequently rainy and misty FNR/NR region *are* 'real' but only exist perceptually. There are also complexities to the origin and referent(s) of the term 'rainbow' in the region. Local atmospheric phenomena are, in all likelihood, one referent but there are also other potential associations. One of these is the close association of rainbows with 1960s/70s counterculture (Libes), when they were embraced by artists and rock musicians.¹¹ The rainbow picked up further countercultural associations when it became a gay pride symbol in San Francisco in the late 1970s (Baker). It subsequently spread internationally and is now commonly deployed to symbolise and celebrate LGBTQI+ culture. It has a particular resonance in the RR given the significant LGBTQI+ population of the area and the high profile annual Tropical Fruits event held at Lismore Showgrounds. In this context it is also somewhat ambiguous. As long-term resident Kevin Markwell has commented: 'You are never quite sure when a rainbow flag is flying from someone's gate or shop that they are signifying LGBT identities or they are signifying living in the rainbow region' (personal communication, 23 February 2024).

While there was no evidence that the original countercultural pioneers in the region were aware of it, there is also a local Indigenous story that represents the Rainbow Serpent as having created the Richmond River in the ancestral 'Dream Time.'¹² In this manner, associations of rainbows and rivers complement local Indigenous heritage, and RR culture can thereby be seen to embrace the former (as suggested in Figure 2). But complicating this aggregation of associations, the term 'rainbow' also has a more negative connotation for local Indigenous people on account of the *HMS Rainbow*, captained by Henry Rous, being the first British vessel to enter and travel up the Richmond River, recording information about the terrain in 1828 that prompted its subsequent exploration and settlement by British colonists and the alienation of Bundjalung people from their ancestral lands.



Fig. 2 Nimbin Chamber of Commerce's 'Welcome to Nimbin' logo (2013), showing a rainbow sky, the Southern Cross constellation, the sacred Indigenous landmark Lillian Rock and a roundel rendition of the Aboriginal flag

Unlike the clear delineation of the FNC/NR region in official maps (such as Figure 1b), Internet searches conducted for this article surprisingly uncovered no maps of the RR and, similarly, no precise characterisations of its area. This underlines the extent to which the RR is very differently constituted *as* a region than the FNC/NR, a factor that also underlies the issues we refer to in subsequent sections. Reflecting this aspect, the names and spatial associations of the formally recognised and informal regional entities are rarely conflated, with the principal exception of the logo of Northern Rivers Community Gateway organisation (Figure 3), whose *rainbowness* is apparent.



Fig. 3 Northern Rivers Community Gateway logo (2024)

The term 'Rainbow Region' came into use the mid-to-late 1970s to refer to the area around Nimbin. One of the earliest press accounts we uncovered referred to the area as the 'Rainbow Nimbin region' (Hueneker), but that compound designation is rarely used today. While there is a historical and present-day 'heartland' to the RR, socio-cultural manifestations of what might be termed RR consciousness and sensibilities have

subsequently diffused across a broader area of FNC/RR. This spread has been complex. Internal beliefs and convictions are not easily perceived by outsiders and are often only perceptible in interaction with groups and communities. The public manifestation of various aspects of RR beliefs, cultural pursuits and representations such as rainbow signs and artwork (e.g., Figures 2 & 3), texts, cuisine, café culture and performance events are easier to discern but also extend original core RR beliefs into broader contexts. This also points to something of a bifurcation (or an expanded spectrum) of RR culture in that the original countercultural movement established around Nimbin was (and continues to be) based on a rejection of capitalist-consumerist culture. In subsequent years this was increasingly accompanied by alternative lifestyles whose convictions and/or practical livelihood strategies did not involve an outright rejection of capitalism. Indeed, in the hands of many entrepreneurs (and, later, social media influencers), aspects of RR culture were exploited for economic advantage. As a result, perceptions of the core and periphery of the RR are complex and often polarised. A lively stoush occurred, for instance, on the Rainbow Region Flickr site in 2006 when Byron Bay was left out of an initial characterisation of the RR and when a variety of list members weighed in and called for other places to be included or omitted (much to the exasperation of the moderator, who sought a consensual characterisation).

The RR's 'alternativity' and its successful promotion in tourism marketing has also led to significant demographic changes in FNC/NR. This is nowhere so marked as in Byron Bay. The small coastal town was a centre for whaling between 1954 and 1962 and then began to attract surfers on account of its reliable surf breaks. The impact of the Aquarius Festival rippled through to Byron Bay, and it became a centre for coastal, leisure-based recreation and related lifestyles and attracted international backpackers on this account. The locale and commercial opportunities it presented saw a rise in affluent migrants purchasing property in and around the town. This, together with the rise of Airbnb letting, has squeezed many less affluent counterculturalists out of property rental (let alone purchase), changing the character of the area. Indeed, to many locals with countercultural orientations (or even merely resistant to what might be perceived as over-commercialisation and seasonal over-tourism), Byron Bay typifies aspects of what areas of the RR have *lost* since the FNC/NR became a fashionable region. This squeezing out of a lower income demographic has led to several developments. There has been a marked rise in homelessness in Byron Bay (particularly experienced by older women) and a movement of people, initially to what real estate retailers have marketed as the 'Byron Bay hinterland'—areas such as Bangalow, Mullumbimby and villages such as Coorabell. More recently, as purchase and rental costs have increased in these areas too, there has been movement to areas around Lismore and Ballina. Byron Bay is therefore double-faced, simultaneously representing RR values and history as well as exemplifying their takeover by tourism and affluent in-migration.

Lismore has different dualisms. The city's two biggest employers are the dairy cooperative NORCO (which can be seen to represent the area's traditional rural-agricultural orientation) and Southern Cross University, whose activist-oriented Law School, strong Biosciences departments and history of supporting art and music education have some degree of alignment to RR culture. While not so thoroughly colonised by institutions and businesses oriented to RR sensibilities as those predominating in Nimbin or Mullumbimby, Lismore has always had establishments that have served to promote RR sensibilities and to link the town to the Nimbin heartland. In the case of the latter, the long-running Rainbow Wholefoods (Figure 4), established in the late 1990s on Terania Street, on the road out to Nimbin (but now operating from rural Coffee Camp area) and Caddie's (now closed) café in central Lismore (Offord) exemplify this. Opinion about the status of Lismore differs across the RR. The first-named author recalls, for instance, being received suspiciously at a community meal in the village of Main Arm (west of Mullumbimby, in deep RR 'heartland') when he was introduced as being from Lismore. Countering this, long-term Lismore resident and community activist Kristin Den Exter mobilised many of the previously discussed rainbow associations to assert:

Lismore is definitely the beating heart of the Rainbow Region ❤️—we even have a rainbow pedestrian crossing and of course we are home to Tropical Fruits—can't get much more rainbow than that! I used to have a small acreage at Richmond Hill—overlooking Boatharbour—we called it 'Rainbowland.' The river of course being the Rainbow Serpent—so it is part of the Dreaming... which is the past the present and the future. #alwayswasalwayswillbe (personal communication, 22 February 2024)



Fig. 4 Rainbow Wholefoods former Lismore outlet (2020)

Whatever debates there may be around Lismore's position, there is substantial consensus that a number of areas of FNC/NR are 'beyond the pale' of the RR. The first-named author never heard anyone argue that anywhere south-west of Lismore was in the RR;

indeed, Casino, a traditional farming town known for its annual Beef Week, is commonly regarded as constituting a polar opposite to RR lifestyles. While not disdained to quite such an extent, the settlements along the B91 road that runs north from Casino through Kyogle and up towards the Queensland border are also seen to be at the far western fringe of the RR (with one significant exception, discussed below).

Another factor concerns what might be termed ‘event charging.’ One significant example of this is The Channon, a small village 20 kilometres north-west of Lismore and 17 kilometres south-east of Nimbin. The casual visitor would not necessarily notice much *rainbowish* about it in terms of obvious signs of the presence of alternative lifestyles, but it has a distinct presence and identity as a RR entity through the monthly Channon Markets, well-known for local craft products, food and beverage stalls, fruit and vegetable outlets, plant sales and featured musical performers. The event crystallises the RR in situ by aggregating members of rural communities (of various degrees of alternativity), patrons from the villages around Lismore and tourists and visitors from outside the immediate area. Other areas have been charged by singular events, such as the small settlement of Bentley, some 25 kilometres north-west of Lismore. The area came to national prominence in early 2014 when a group of concerned residents and activists came together to obstruct access to an intended coal seam gas drilling site in what became known as The Bentley Blockade (see Ricketts & Kia). A colourful selection of protestors—fronted by the so-called ‘Knitting Nannas,’ a group of mature women devoted to peaceful resistance to attempts to degrade the environment—held the line against developers. Despite repeated threats by the authorities, the protestors stayed in place. A crisis point occurred in mid-May, when a substantial group of police (significantly sourced from outside the area) were martialled to intervene. At the last moment, the police cancelled the mobilisation, and the planned drilling operation was also abandoned. The extent of the victory over the fracking industry achieved global attention, particularly amongst environmental activists, and put Bentley firmly on the map as a sacred site of RR environmental action.

Aggregating various characterisations—and notwithstanding polarised opinions about Lismore’s centrality or marginality to the RR—it is possible to sketch an approximate map of the RR’s manifestation within FNC/NR (Figure 5). It should be noted that this overlays the very differently constituted bureaucratic-cartographic entities of the FNC/NR and the local government areas within it shown in Figure 1b. In presenting this map we do not assume a monolithic (or even majority) RR identity for the population of the area but, rather, a discernible presence of RR sensibilities across the region. The area is also decidedly patchy, in that there are areas where RR identity is very evident (such as Mullumbimby-Main Arm) and others where it is decidedly less so (such as around Goonellabah’s retail and industrial areas). The circular shape of the region is not a cartographic conceit; it was, rather, an uncanny surprise that emerged when we identified boundary points and sketched a perimeter.

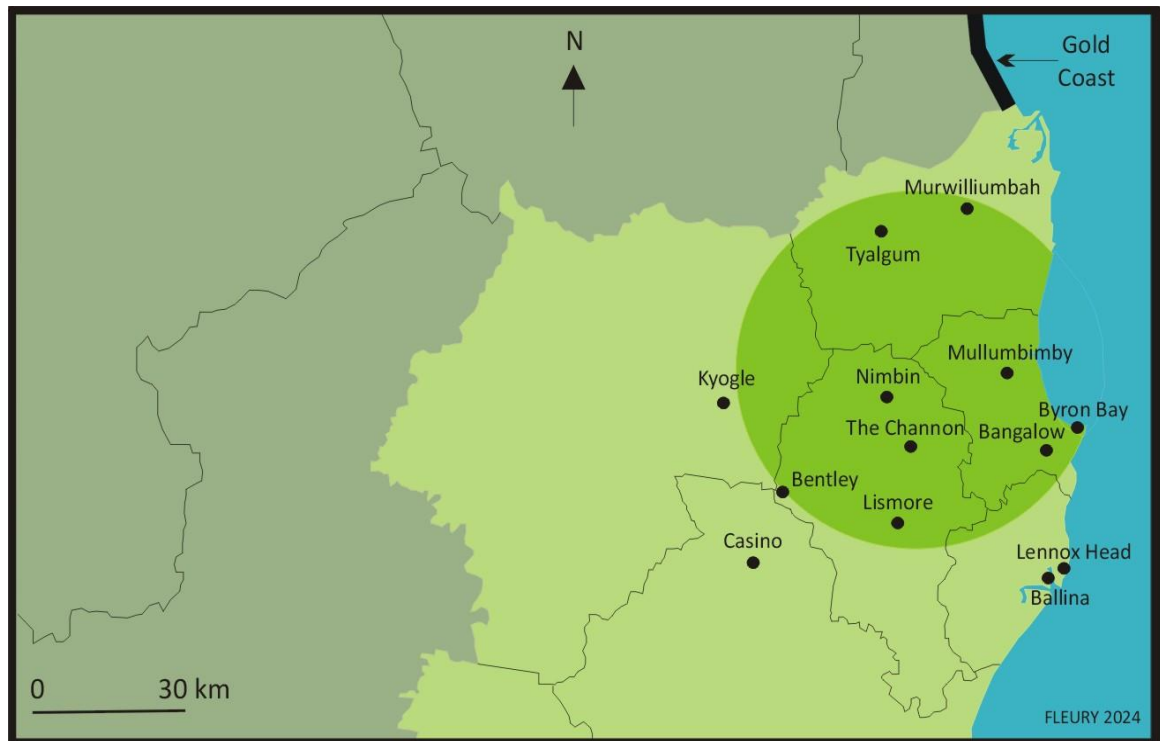


Fig. 5 Map of Rainbow Region within Far North Coast/Northern Rivers region

Image credit: Christian Fleury

Cultural communities, their beliefs and mythologies are also represented in institutions informed by them and by related imaginings. In this regard, the Crystal Castle, located seven kilometres south-west of Mullumbimby, is a commercial temple to a range of the New Age sensibilities that inform RR culture. Its website identifies it as ‘a magical sanctuary’ and it offers customers the opportunity to stand ‘between two of the tallest crystals on earth,’ sit in ‘an ancient amethyst cave’ and ‘wander through the tranquil Shambhala Gardens and rainforest.’ Other attractions include the opportunity to take photos of your aura and participate in ‘crystal sound healing.’ Its heavy-handed New Ageism and obvious commercialism (such as a website section entitled—with no evident irony—‘retail therapy’) distance it from traditional RR sensibilities and are primarily orientated to tourists. There is also a pronounced localism to its operation. It offers ‘local residents’ a substantial discount but ‘local’ in this context doesn’t mean resident in the RR area identified in Figure 5 but, rather, just residents of Byron shire.

Reflection

Retracing previous inquiries about regional identity, the first-named author contacted a number of long-term residents to discuss their perceptions. Local historian Adele Wessell offered a precise position on nomenclature:

I prefer ‘Northern Rivers’ to ‘Rainbow Region.’ It centres the rivers and is more inclusive of Bundjalung land—from the Clarence to the Logan and all the rivers in between. ‘Far North Coast’ uses Sydney as its point of reference; so the ‘far’ was helpful in becoming a self-organising community but Sydney shouldn’t be the reference point for our identity. I do think names matter in terms of identity because community matters—understanding catchments, geography, history—and I’d say the alignment more closely connects to rivers. (personal communication, 23 February 2024)

Long-term resident Kevin Markwell also shared a preference for NR over RR, alluding to the patchiness of the RR’s presence in FNC/NR discussed above:

I don’t often think of us living in the ‘Rainbow Region.’ I always say we live in the Northern Rivers. Perhaps because we live closer to Kyogle and I can’t recall ever seeing anything that referred to the rainbow region in the Kyogle district. Obviously plenty of rainbows in Nimbin and to a lesser extent Lismore. I can’t remember seeing much rainbowness around Bangalow and not around Casino. The various townships and villages in the NR region are each so distinctive and different and I guess some embrace the Rainbow Region concept more than others. (personal communication, 23 February 2024)

It is also worth noting that names for regions also change. Some are highly personal, some are fleeting and some stick. ‘Cal,’¹³ a resident of the region since 1994, commented that ‘in recent years I increasingly think I live on the “Northern Floodplains”—that’s the defining factor of how I think of the area’ (personal communication, 24 February 2024). This is as accurate a characterisation of the low-lying areas around the Richmond River as any other, and if further inundations follow the 2022 major flood event that afflicted Lismore and Ballina, the term may well gain traction.

The discussions advanced in this article focus on the significant differences between regions firmly defined and delineated in bureaucratic-cartographic discourse and those that are perceived to exist on account of a package of physical spaces, experiences, lifestyles, prevalent beliefs and visual and performative representations of these. While the FNC/NR region objectively exists in official discourse, the RR represents a circular patchwork of varying degrees of strength and depth that has been woven across a particular area of the former. Its micro-regionality does not preclude alternative regionalities or suggest a definitive (or even, necessarily, majority) identity, just that a region is perceived to exist, has ‘persisting distinctiveness,’ is named and has key clusters that confirm its ‘reality’ (Agnew 8). In terms of Söderbaum’s characterisations, the RR is a classic example of an area constituted and held together ‘by historically contingent interactions, shared beliefs and

identities, norms and practices’ (36), and it is one that will endure as long as such socio-cultural beliefs and practices continue and continue to be publicly asserted.

With serendipity appropriate to the ‘magic’ of the RR, the first-named author wrote the initial draft of this article while staying adjacent to the Richmond River over a warm, drizzly week in February 2024, when rainbows abounded and when the ‘coloured birds’ referred to by Paul Kelly at the start of this paper sang in the interludes between showers. The subtropical romance of this situation was palpable but was also profoundly undercut by public reflections on the second anniversary of the major regional floods. A report of a meeting of Byron Shire Council on 16 February 2024—where locals reported their despair at continuing displacement and homelessness—was published in the *Byron Shire Echo* under the simple headline: ‘Once known as the rainbow region’ (Lovejoy). Shortly after, the NSW Auditor-General released a scathing report on the inadequacy of government provision of accommodation for local residents left homeless by the floods. On this occasion, the riveriness of the RR trumped the rainbows and offered a more compelling characterisation of place in line with Cal’s characterisation of the area as the ‘Northern Floodplains.’ It did not however dispel or discredit the rainbowness, just placed it in perspective. Places—such as regions and micro-regions—exist in multiple dimensions and within multiple discourses, and understanding their articulation is key to understanding human perceptions of and engagement with locality and community.

NOTES

¹ While metropolitan regions often originated as areas defined by physical boundaries, the process of urban sprawl has often them to expand over such boundaries (across rivers, across drained marsh lands, up on to elevated areas etc.) in a manner that has diminished the relevance of such physical boundaries to senses of regional identity.

² We italicise the term because the ‘nation’ is a western concept that only vaguely approximates to the distinct linguistic-cultural communities that co-existed across the continent at the time of colonisation.

³ Wardell is now the location of many members of the Indigenous community that formerly lived on Cabbage Tree Island until it was abandoned following the 2022 inundation of the lower Richmond River flood plain. At time of writing, the island is being redeveloped as a flood resilient community with the support of the NSW Reconstruction Authority.

⁴ While the two names used in this article currently refer to the same area, there is a complex history of related terms referring to both the current region and sections of it. Prior to World War One, for instance, a LGA named the Northern Rivers District Council

administered the area around Lismore, on the (singular) Wilsons River. A compound term was used in 1935 when a single LGA identified as the ‘Far Northern Rivers Areas County Council’ was proposed for the Clarence, Richmond and Tweed areas (*Daily Examiner*, 1935); and in 1952 the Clarence River County Council was rebranded as the Northern Rivers County Council (*Daily Examiner*, 1952). Despite these variations, the current FNC/NR designations appear to have been fairly stable and unambiguous since the 1980s.

⁵ In the late 1800s/early 1900s it was used in both singular and plural form—e.g., ‘Northern Rivers Districts’ (plural) (‘Native,’ 1892) or ‘Northern Rivers District’ (singular) (Ashton, 1904).

⁶ The Tweed River constitutes the north-eastern border of NSW, splitting the river’s catchment area between NSW and Queensland.

⁷ The Nimbin Aquarius festival was the 4th in a series of biennial arts festivals organised by the Australian Union of Students. The first was held in Sydney in 1967, the second in Melbourne and the third in Canberra.

⁸ See Bible for a detailed discussion of the environmental movement in the region.

⁹ An aspect made manifest in the annual Nimbin Mardi Grass festival, which is promoted as a tourism event, despite issues concerning the legality of its central product (see Visit Lismore 2024).

¹⁰ Reflecting this, the RR—and the area around Mullumbimby-Main Arm, in particular—became known as the Australia’s ‘anti-vax capital’ (Smee) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹¹ Evident in band names such as The Peppermint Rainbow and Richie Blackmore’s Rainbow. The Rolling Stones also released their 1967 single ‘She’s a rainbow’ with a rainbow festooned sleeve and Jimi Hendrix’s posthumous 1971 album (and related making-of film) was entitled *Rainbow Bridge*.

¹² See one account of this online at www.ballinahistoricalsociety.org.au/bundjalung-nation.

¹³ A pseudonym: the individual works for an LGA in Northern Rivers and did not wish to be directly quoted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Alison Rahn and to various other informants and discussants for the views that have shaped this brief article.

WORKS CITED

- Aberley, Doug. 'Interpreting bioregionalism: A story from many voices.' In *Bioregionalism*, edited by M. V. McGinnis, Routledge, 1999, pp. 13–42.
- Agnew, John A. 'Arguing with Regions.' *Regional Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2012, pp. 6–17.
- Ashton, Mr. 'The Northern River.' *Clarence River Advocate*, 1904, p. 4.
- Baker, Gilbert. 'Rainbow Flag: Origin Story: The story behind How the Rainbow Flag was created.' 2019. <https://gilbertbaker.com/rainbow-flag-origin-story/>
- Bible, Vanessa. *On Common Ground. Cultivating Environmental Peace: A History of the Rainbow Region*. University of New England, 2016.
- 'Byron Bay.' *Wikivoyage*. https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Byron_Bay
- Byron Events. Lismore, 2023. <https://www.byronevents.net/towns/lismore.htm>
- Crystal Castle & Shambhala Gardens. https://crystalcastle.com.au/?gad_source=1
- Daily Examiner*. 'Far Northern Rivers Areas: Suggested County Council.' 20 August 1935, p. 4.
- Daily Examiner*. 'Northern Rivers County Council.' 25 June 1952, p. 2.
- Huenke, Klaus. 'Getting it together.' *Canberra Times*, 25 August 1979, p. 17.
- Libes, Kenna. 'Did hippies discover the rainbow? Tracking the emergence of rainbow motifs in Western European clothing, 1500-1900.' Brown University seminar paper, 2018.
- https://www.academia.edu/39738525/Did_Hippies_Discover_the_Rainbow_Tracking_The_Emergence_Of_Rainbow_Motifs_In_Western_European_Clothing_1500_1900
- Lovejoy, Hans. 'Once known as the rainbow region.' *Byron Shire Echo*, 16 February 2024.
- <https://www.echo.net.au/2024/02/once-known-as-the-rainbow-region/>
- 'Native.' 'Northern Rivers Districts.' *Northern Star*, 1892, p.5.
- NSW Auditor General. 2024. Flood Housing Response.
- <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/our-work/reports/flood-housing-response>
- NSW Government. *Far North Coast Regional Conservation Plan*.
- <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/biodiversity/10982fncrcp.pdf>
- Offord, Baden. 'Mapping the Rainbow Region: fields of belonging and sites of confluence.' *Transformations*, no. 2, 2002. http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Transformations02_Offord.pdf

- Regional Development Australia. *Northern Rivers Regional Economic Recovery Plan 2025*.
<https://www.rdanorthernrivers.org.au/recovery2025/>
- Regional Studies*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cres20>
- Ricketts, Aidan & Kia, Annie. 'Enabling Emergence: The Bentley Blockade and the Struggle for a Gasfield Free Northern Rivers.' *Southern Cross University Law Review*, 2018. <https://commonslibrary.org/enabling-emergence-the-bentley-blockade-and-the-struggle-for-a-gasfield-free-northern-rivers/>
- Smee, Ben. 'When Covid came to the anti-vax capital of Australia.' *The Guardian*, 14 August 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/aug/14/when-covid-came-to-the-anti-vax-capital-of-australia>
- Söderbaum, Fredrick. 'Rethinking the links between micro-regions and macro-regions.' In *Region-Making and Cross-Border Cooperation: New Evidence from Four Continents*, edited by Elisabetta Nadalutti and Otto Kallscheuer. Routledge, 2108, pp. 30–44.
- Thayer, Robert. L. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, 2003.
- The Rainbow Region. Flickr page:
<https://www.flickr.com/groups/rainbowregion/discuss/72157594181364884/>
- Visit Lismore. Nimbin Mardi Grass. <https://www.visitlismore.com.au/whats-on/event/Nimbin+Mardi+Grass/11931>