

On the Importance of Ecological Conscientiousness

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The Land Ethic is an ethics philosophy about how we humans ought to regard our relationship with land, which is to say more than just the soil, but rather encompassing all the flora and fauna which all rely on each other for health. Aldo Leopold wrote A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There in 1949. He begins by explaining that, at present, we regard land only as property, similarly to how Odysseus regarded his slave-girls. Odysseus murdered this slave girls when he returned home, and nobody questioned it because they were his property. Today that behavior in the western world would not do, and Leopold argues that in the same way that human chattels ceased being property and have been extended rights, so should land, too, be extended a right to exist. I would say that not much has changed in the attitudes in the more than half-century that has elapsed since Leopold penned his thoughts.

Leopold puts it this way: "To the laborer in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was the wilderness an adversary to the pioneer. But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to his life," (pp 188). Aren't most of us laborers in repose today? We are no longer an agrarian nation; we largely live in cities. The roads and homes have been largely built. As the population grows, new suburbs pop up, but modern machinery makes easy work of the raw land they now occupy. He says, "this is a plea for the preservation of some tag-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of their cultural inheritance," (pp. 188). I share his plea.

Leopold writes on the community concept. He states that "all ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.

His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate,” (pp 203-204). That, to me, is the crux of the argument. The Land Ethic, as I understand it, if we have a land ethic, is to understand that we humans are part of a greater ecological community, and that if we are ethical, we would cooperate with the other members of the community. Of course, Leopold goes to some effort to almost poetically describe our interwoven relationship with the land: from the history that he tells when he’s sawing through a good oak, to the explanation that goose flocks are families, to wildflowers possibly being able to restore the dustbowl, and so on, (*Figures 1 and 2*).

Leopold states that “conservation is a state of harmony between men and land” (pp. 207). Yet it’s true that “conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us,” (Foreword, pp. viii). I have seen this view reflected in my own family members, almost word for word. I disagree wholeheartedly that the land was created for us and that it is for our benefit. Nevertheless, that is a relatively new idea for me, so I suppose that should give hope to others already in the conservation movement, including myself. In my opinion, possibly the most important point that Leopold makes in the Land Ethic is in the importance of an ecological education, and the importance of being able to see beyond the economic value of land.

Importantly, Leopold states “The fallacy the economic determinists have tied around our collective neck, and which we now need to cast off, is the belief that economics determines *all* land-use. This is simply not true,” (pp. 225). Leopold also speaks on the American tendency to “relegate to government all necessary jobs that private land owners fail to perform,” (pp 212), relating to conservation. Personally, I think some big jobs, like this and like the matter of space

exploration (NASA), are best dealt with the pooled resources of a federal government. I have a deep and sincere love for the US Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. Leopold also implies no disapproval of this relegation, (pp 213). I am not a proponent of assigning this important work of conservation to the States, because here in Utah, for example, we see the state Disneylandify the lands, adding golf courses, zip lines, yurts, et cetera, as if to suggest that these lands are valuable, because there's room here for a golf course! Come on down! It's a mockery and degradation of the intrinsic value that I appreciate in the land. There remain many questions to be answered, and, of course, much work to be done.

My own conservation philosophy is like Leopold's. I see intrinsic value in things that are for what they are, living and nonliving; and, in fact, the more I learn about and become aware of my surroundings, the more I find to appreciate. I believe that we humans are the product of evolution, same as every other living thing. I believe that we have just as much a right to exist as any other living thing. I recognize that the sun will run out of fuel before the Earth's core solidifies, and at that time, of course, everything on Earth will die, if there is anything left living billions of years from now. So, at first, we did not exist, by many coincidences and laws of nature we came into existence, and by the same laws of nature, if not sooner by our own doing, we will cease to exist. In a cosmic sense, I do not think we matter at all. In the same breath, I feel a love and connection with the world around me and especially with the parts of nature that I experience, whether it be the sun on my face, the birds nesting in the trees on my property, the bees buzzing on my Virginia creeper (*Figure 3*), and, of course, with my family. Selfishly, I want to live and enjoy nature, and I want my children to live and enjoy nature, too.

Also, selfishly, I strongly desire to preserve the pristine places left on earth to be able to one day explore and discover.

In his book, Leopold states, “a land ethic changes the role of humans from conqueror of the land community to plain members and citizens of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such.” In practice, this looks like a change in attitude. It looks like the National Park Service Rangers educating their patrons on the importance of not contaminating the cave environments to protect the unique conditions and organisms that reside therein (*Figure 4*), in contrast to when the caves were first discovered and dance parties were held inside (*Figure 5*). In practice, respect for community looks like hikers exploring the backcountry practicing Leave No Trace with an understanding that we have a responsibility to protect our wild lands for their own sake, as well as for our posterity. In practice, I apply this ethic when I patronize and support conservation efforts such as those of the Wilderness Society and the Great Salt Lake Audubon. I apply this ethic when I pack an extra garbage bag so that I can pack out garbage left behind by other passers through of places I visit. And, most importantly, I practice this ethic when I teach my children and nephews the rules of Leave No Trace when we all go camping; when I lead them in nature hikes so they can observe and later sketch what they appreciate. That is, I spread the word about conservation and, hopefully, facilitate an appreciation and love for nature as it is.

Interestingly, Leopold stated that “the land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.” I would say that this is still largely the case among entrepreneurs and businessmen who have found a way to profit from the land. Disproportionately, these are the same people in charge of our government, all the way from the current President Trump, to

the lobbyists who seem to have the Congress in their pockets (<http://wilderness.org/blog/oil-industry%E2%80%99s-allies-congress-set-sights-alaska%E2%80%99s-arctic-refuge>). It is encouraging to see the growing number of supporters of the conservation movement, but it is certainly not enough. The momentum needs to grow in order to effect real change. We see people protesting to keep their lands protected from oil pipelines in North Dakota (<https://nyti.ms/2jB9NOp>). That is happening now, in 2017, and it has been a physical battle (<http://nbcnews.to/2feV99P>) to preserve what now is lost by executive order (<https://nyti.ms/2kobcsM>). In this case, both sides of the fight see the land for their economic value, yet one side would destroy the land for profit, while the other side would conserve the land for perpetual use of its natural resources. It is very clear to me which side has the ethical high ground, which side is right and which is wrong, but many people in power do not share my view.

In the Land Ethic, Leopold states that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” This speaks directly to the issue happening right now with the Dakota Pipeline. I completely agree with Leopold’s statement, and I have trouble understanding how someone can say otherwise. Leopold was not suggesting that the integrity of the biotic community supersedes the concern for the individual members. Rather, I think he was saying that if we work together with our environment we can have balance within the biotic pyramid that he describes (pp 214).

Leopold says that the land ethic is extending a community’s sensibilities to all members of the community, nonhuman as well as human. In my life, this looks like trying to first educate

myself as to where and when I am. I live in a desert environment, and from there I can understand what the local flora and fauna should look like, and from that place of information and knowledge I can make choices consistent with those facts. It means understanding the importance of some species as indicators of general health of the local ecology. I speak of bees and other pollinators, of course. So, this means being respectful and mindful to my human and non-human neighbors.

Leopold states that “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value.” I agree with that to a certain extent. I must acknowledge that not everybody is capable of such feelings and emotions. For those people, I hope they enjoy a strong enough ethic to drive their motivations. For me personally, aesthetics and ethics are a positive feedback loop. I’m not sure which came first, but I do feel good observing and discovering nature for myself, which enables my drive to a land ethic, which after actions and work does enhance my appreciation for the beauty of nature all over again.

In thinking about my own land ethic, at this point in my life, I think it emanates primarily from self-interest. I feel good when I’m outside. I feel good when I see my children play in a stream. I feel good when I help someone enjoy and learn about nature. I take my photographic trophy, and I view and share it with pride afterward. By the same token, I recognize that it isn’t all here for me. I happen to be aware here when this all exists, however scarce. I think that I truly see the value for others, human and non-human, which is why I do pack my garbage bags when I go outside. Nobody sees me do that, although I’m telling you about it now, and isn’t that

an altruistic thing to do? I do that out of responsibility for me, and for the birds and other critters.

Reading A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There by Aldo Leopold was a very useful exercise for me. It did not change my mind about anything, rather it reinforced and gave shape to my already held beliefs. I loved nearly all of it. On pages 165-166, Leopold talks about the gadget industry “padding the bumps against nature-in-the-raw;” and goes on to add “to cap the pyramid of banalities, the trailer.” I almost busted a gut laughing after reading that. Last weekend (18-21 February 2017) I was tent camping with my sister and nephews out at Simpson Springs Campground in the west desert. I love going out in the off season, because nobody else is out there. Well, on our last night there, wouldn’t you know it, a group of RVs hauling 4-wheelers came into camp, including an Apollo Burger food truck and an Ambulance (*Figure 6*), and they all left their generators running all evening, all night, and into the morning. I couldn’t believe the level of inconsideration to us, other campers, but also for the deer and other wildlife that surely was scared away because of the ruckus. I hated it! I mean, clearly we seek different things, them and me. After reading the Land Ethic, I felt a community with Leopold, and certainly others who also seek and pursue conservation for its own sake. I don’t need to understand exactly how a certain type of wildflower benefits me in order for me to love it and appreciate it and want to protect it. I did feel a pang of guilt when Leopold was discussing recreation. But I reconcile that, because being outside benefits my mental health and eases my anxiety. Camping and hiking lift my spirits, and in a very real way it fuels the rest of my life’s adventures, including my conservation efforts. I recommend this book to everybody. It makes me so glad to know that such efforts started before I was born, and that I can contribute to the

cause in which I truly believe. Aldo Leopold was a poet if he only ever wrote this, and it deserves to be read and propagated.



Figure 1: Importance of native wildflowers display at Wheeler Farm, presentation by USU Salt Lake Extension, May 2016. Photo credit: myself.



Figure 2: Utah Native Wildflowers at Wheeler Farm, Murray, UT, May 2016. Photo credit: myself.



Figure 3: Bees loudly buzzing around my Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) in my backyard, Salt Lake City, UT, June 2016. Photo credit: myself.



Figure 4 Ranger explaining the rules of the cave at Lehman Caves at Great Basin National Park, Nevada, July 2016. Photo credit: myself.



Figure 5 Tagging on the ceiling of Lehman Caves, done by the original cave explorers. Photo credit: myself.



Figure 6 Apollo Burger food truck and Ambulance out at Simpson Springs Campground in the Utah west desert 19 February 2017. Photo credit: myself.