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Leopold's Legacy: Reconstructing the Damaged Environment

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

“If the biota, in the course of eons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.” So wrote Aldo Leopold in his 1949 classic *A Sand County Almanac*. And so we were introduced to Carl Leopold, Cornell University biologist and son of the famous author, who spoke about his father’s “Land Ethic” at Binghamton University last April 17th.

Aldo Leopold, often hailed as the father of modern environmentalism solely on the basis of the *Almanac*, nonetheless made several other significant, though lesser known, contributions to conservation. In 1924, forty years prior to the first national Wilderness Act, Leopold’s efforts led to establishing the nation’s first designated wilderness of over a half million acres. He was also a co-founder of The Wilderness Society and in 1933 wrote the first textbook on game management.

But it is the *Almanac*’s Land Ethic for which Leopold is most remembered and about which his son had come to speak. Viewed in the context of history, the Land Ethic is but the latest step in the sequence of Western civilization’s major ethical achievements that began with the Old Testament Decalogue and the Golden Rule. Then in the 19th century Charles Darwin, through his books *The Descent of Man* and *The Origin of Species*, put man back into nature thereby broadening the meaning of kinship beyond human society. Darwin believed that as ethics evolved, all sentient beings would be included within the moral community. Leopold’s Land Ethic extends man’s ethical concern even further—to the “Land” which he saw as a community not only of animals, but of plants, waters and soils. In Leopold’s view the role of *Homo sapiens* should not be that of conqueror of the land-community, but rather as plain member and citizen of it.

Such ideas did not immediately attract a horde of book buyers despite many good reviews. By the early 1960s the *Almanac* had sold barely 20,000 copies. But it inspired Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which turned Leopold’s words into actions that alerted the public to the environmental dangers of pesticides. From then on the popularity of the *Almanac* has continued to increase, and now in its 31st printing total copy purchases exceed one million.

One great achievement of Aldo Leopold's philosophy was the creation of the scientific discipline known as "restoration ecology." Until Leopold's time there were only two choices for resource protection: either preservation, or reduced consumption. Leopold pioneered a third approach: the reconstruction of damaged environments. His personal experiment was the 13-year restoration of a soil-depleted farm in the sand country of central Wisconsin. There Leopold and his family planted more than 40,000 pines and uncounted hardwoods. Native grasses were restored from orphans found among railroad beds and cemeteries. It was from these experiences that Leopold, in the last year of his life, came to formulate the succinct expression of the Land Ethic: "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."

Carl Leopold has also put into practice his father's Ethic as it applies to environmental restoration through an experimental reforestation project in Costa Rica known as the Tropical Forestry Initiative. (For more information write to P.O. Box 285, Ithaca, NY 14851.) In essence, Carl Leopold hopes to demonstrate that once-cut tropical rainforest can be restored by planting and managing indigenous tree species.

A more visible consequence of the Land Ethic is the heightened concern about environmental quality throughout society. Carl Leopold points out that this concern now appears even within traditional religions in ways unimaginable in his father's day. The Christian Society of the Green Cross and the Jewish organization Shomrei Adamah/Keepers of the Earth are but two examples of this trend. But upon one important component of society Carl Leopold looks with dismay: corporate leaders who seem unconcerned with the destruction of what he terms "natural capital"—resources that have value simply through their existence, such as a standing forest. He suggests that the combination of alienation from nature and the indoctrination into our self-centered economic system are to blame for this behavior. Yet he could offer no suggestion for "reaching" these people.

May I suggest, that it is not the views of corporate leaders that must be changed, but rather the legal responsibilities of corporations. Corporate structure and purpose determine corporate behavior, not the philosophical views of CEOs.

Every CEO is charged with maximizing their company's profits which entails externalizing its costs to the extent permitted by law. If that requires fouling the air or water, or pushing a species toward extinction it must be done. To do otherwise would act against the short-term but essential goal of maximizing shareholder value. If citizens want "green corporations" they must translate the Land Ethic into regulations that prevent corporations from avoiding the costs of their pollution and destruction. Otherwise, at best, we will be left to attempt the restoration of wrecked ecosystems all over the planet.