

Steps to Sustainability

Part 11 of a Series:

Aldo Leopold and the Land Ethic

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Native American farmers built sustainable practices into their culture. For example, the famous Haudenosaunee “three sisters” farming method (Article 1 in this series) was both a practical way to produce nutritious food and to maintain the resource base. It was also an integral part of the sacred belief system.

In the 19th Century U.S. thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau created a “transcendental” view of nature, placing it within a spiritual framework. They passed on this heritage to John Muir, who eventually found himself unable to mount an effective defense against the more scientifically based “wise use” approach of Gifford Pinchot and his business allies (Article 10). It was the game management expert and ecological ethicist Aldo Leopold (1886–1948) who found a way to tie science and morality more closely together with his “land ethic.” Much of the thinking in our modern sustainability movement is a reflection of his synthesis.

Leopold was initially connected with Gifford Pinchot, the forester and “wise use” proponent. He graduated from the Yale School of Forestry that

had been endowed by Pinchot’s family. He took his first job in 1909 in the federal Forest Service led by Pinchot. His technical skills and aptitude for research led him to the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin. Despite his constant technocratic work, Leopold found himself moving philosophically towards John Muir’s idea of preserving nature for its own sake. While developing into one of the country’s established game management experts, Leopold came to realize that controlling predators such as wolves with a shotgun would only lead to deer overpopulation and starvation. In 1933 he helped to found the Wilderness Society, still today an important group in the sustainability movement.

Leopold expanded the North American idea of nature as the majestic beauty of mountains, waterfalls or canyons – somewhat of a legacy from John Muir and the Sierra Club hikers – to include nature’s more lowly swamps, marshes forests and prairies.

Leopold’s most important scientific insight for our modern sustainability movement was that humans live in interconnected

systems of soils, plants, and animals through which energy flows. Food chains direct energy upward, death and decay move it back down to the soil (Opie 1998:396–397; Leopold pp. 252 *et seq*). Leopold recognized this as the “biotic pyramid,” a phrase he felt was more informative than “balance of nature” (Leopold 1966 [1949]:251).

In his most famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949, Leopold set forth his vision. “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts....The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land” (Leopold 1966 [1949]:239). Leopold’s land ethic provides a philosophical link between ecology and social justice.

The word “ecology” had been coined in 1866 by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel, based on a Greek word for the study of the home (Opie 1998:406). Leopold brought ecology and ethics together by arguing that the land ethic “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from

conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (p.240). With conquest comes loss. He noted that Southwest Wisconsin’s top soils were “slipping seaward,” (p.244). Other ecological disasters-in-the-making were also examined. The land ethic is about human survival through knowledge of ecology and our proper place in the biotic pyramids we inhabit. As he put it in his most famous dictum: 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” (p.262). Although he did not realize it, Leopold had just set the stage for Rachel Carson.

Sources:

Leopold, Aldo. 1966 [1949]. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on conservation from Round River*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Opie, John. 1998. *Nature’s Nation: An Environmental History of the United States*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

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