

Land Ethic Has Long, Illustrious History

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our *Signs of Sustainability* series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainable-tompkins.org.

Native American farmers built sustainable practices into their culture. For example, the famous Haudenosaunee "three sisters" farming method (article one 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 Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), game-man-

agement expert and ecological ethicist, who found a way to the 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 which 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, Wis. Despite his constant technocratic work, Leopold found himself moving philosophically toward John Muir's idea of preserving nature for its own sake.

While developing into one of the country's established game-management experts, Leopold realized 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, which remains an important group in the sustainability movement.

Leopold expanded the North American idea of nature as the majestic beauty of mountains, waterfalls and 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 the 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. Leopold recognized this as the "biotic pyramid," a phrase he felt was more informative than "balance of nature."

In his most famous book, "A Sand County Almanac," published posthumously in 1949, Leopold set forth his vision: "All ethics so far

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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's land ethic provides a philosophical link between ecology and social justice.

The word "ecology" was coined in 1866 by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel, based on a Greek word for the study of the home. 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." With conquest comes

loss. He noted that southwest Wisconsin's topsoils were "slipping seaward." 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 Leopold said 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 does otherwise." Although he did not realize it, Leopold had just set the stage for Rachel Carson.

This is the latest in a series of articles on the history of sustainability. Richard W. Franke is professor emeritus of anthropology at Montclair State University, a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.