

Public Service Conference

Aldo Leopold and the Ripples of a Water Ethic in Wisconsin

This is an edited excerpt from an address by Curt Meine at Marquette University Law School's Public Service Conference, "Water and People," held February 26, 2010. Meine is director of Conservation Biology and History, Center for Humans and Nature, and a senior fellow of both the International Crane Foundation and the Aldo Leopold Foundation. He is author of *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*, published in 1988 by the University of Wisconsin Press.

Ripples on the water. It is a fitting image with which to consider the origins and expansion of a water ethic in Wisconsin, and around the world. And Marquette University is a fitting place. Père Marquette points the way for us, perhaps, from the university's official seal. We see him exploring Wisconsin's waters with his Native American guides, gesturing toward a far horizon that we might well imagine to be an ever-unfolding future. All of our forbears—native and missionary, explorer and immigrant—would carry their canoes over literal and figurative portages, making ripples in the ethical landscape of Wisconsin. All would, according to varied traditions, define the value of our inviting waters.

As we are meeting at a law school, it seems appropriate to read the concluding sentence of an obscure article on lakes and terrestrial ecosystems that Aldo Leopold wrote in 1941. Commenting on our penchant for modifying aquatic ecosystems, Leopold wrote: "Thus men too wise to tolerate hasty tinkering with our political constitution accept without a qualm the most radical amendments in our biotic constitution." It was, as Leopold noted in so many of his writings, so much easier to change the land (and its waters) than to change ourselves and our ethical norms.

Aldo Leopold's sense of an ethical regard for water began long before, during his boyhood along the Mississippi River in Iowa. It progressed through pioneering work in the vulnerable watersheds of the semi-arid American Southwest. It came together in Wisconsin in a quiet place called Coon Valley in the early 1930s. This badly eroded valley in western Wisconsin, typical of so many others in the region, became the site of the na-

tion's first watershed conservation demonstration project. Hundreds of farmers within the watershed committed themselves to stemming the degradation that their own forbears had brought on in the decades following European settlement. The result was a revolution in soil and water conservation. It would affect not only the Wisconsin landscape, but landscapes across the region, the nation, and the world. . . .

Leopold's ethical insights drew upon his decades of field experience, his appreciation of emerging scientific concepts, and his frustration with short-sighted economic and resource management policies. He finally summarized his concerns in "The Land Ethic," the capstone essay in his classic book, *A Sand County Almanac*. In it he expressed the fundamental lesson that he had learned through his career: that to address effectively our conservation needs, to realize the full range of cultural benefits from the land, to sustain our economy and communities, and to demonstrate respect for our fellow creatures, we as individuals and communities must assume responsibility for the health of the land as a whole.

It is useful to break down that summary and make a few points that connect Leopold's idea to our discussion here of water and ethics.

First: Leopold's definition of land was broad and inclusive, and water was an essential component of it. In his words, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, waters, plants and animals, or collectively, the land."

Second: Leopold saw the sphere of our ethical consideration expanding throughout history (however fitfully) and held that it must expand in the future to include the land. "The extension of ethics to the land," he wrote, "if I



Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation (www.aldoleopold.org).

Living on, learning from, and writing about the land and water, particularly in central Wisconsin, led Aldo Leopold (above and below) to become a central figure in building environmental consciousness.

read the evidence correctly, is an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.”

Third: Such an ethic entails responsibility for the healthy functioning of the entire biotic community. In one of his most elegant statements of the theme, he wrote: “Conservation is a state of health in the land. The land consists of soil, water, plants, and animals, but health is more than a sufficiency of these components. It is a state of vigorous self-renewal in each of them and in all collectively.” We might say it differently today. We would refer to the resilience of aquatic ecosystems. We can talk with much greater scientific precision about point-source pollution, polluted run-off, soil erosion, and sedimentation rates; species diversity, invasive species, and trophic cascades; altered hydrological regimes, excessive groundwater withdrawal, extreme rainfall events, and climate change. But in the end, it is still all about the health of the land as a whole, and water as a fine indicator of that health.

Finally: We live in a society that regards land first and foremost not as a community, as Leopold implored, but as a commodity. He wrote in the foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” Shall we treat water as a mere commodity, or shall we treat it as the essential ingredient that supports and determines the quality of life—of *all* life—in the larger community to

which we belong? Science informs our consideration of that question. But it cannot answer it. For that, we must turn to our ethical sources and traditions.

We are all part of a necessary, ongoing conversation about the physical, ecological, economic, cultural, and spiritual value of water, and what we as individuals and as a community ought to do with respect to that value. In living up to that obligation, we may take some encouragement from Leopold and what I have taken to calling the most important sentence that he ever wrote: “I have purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as ethics is ever written. . . .

It evolves in the minds of the thinking

community.” It is a remarkable thing when one ponders it: in an essay entitled “The Land Ethic,” Leopold notes that no one can in fact write an ethic. With that sentence, Leopold wisely liberated his own idea and invited everyone to participate in its further development. It is in fact a call to responsibility, a directive to all of us to bring to this vital work our own experience, background, insight, and knowledge. Aldo Leopold did not write the land ethic. You and I *are* the thinking and caring community. You and I “write” the land ethic by entering the conversation. It evolves through our commitment. And if we believe that water must be given greater respect and attention in that process of ethical development, then let us not wait. Let us go to the water’s edge and get about the task. ■



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