



Sporting Environment *with David Van Wie*

Living Up to the Land Ethic

Everyone has a hero, or so we say. My heroes are not your typical sports or military heroes, nor people who performed superhuman or ultra-courageous feats.

My heroes are people who change the way we think about the world, thereby making our world a better place. They are people who give society hope for a brighter future. Sometimes changing the way people think takes great courage.

So it should come as no surprise that many of my heroes have made great contributions to how we think about nature and the environment.

Voices for the Earth

My list includes Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt (a courageous leader for conservation who gets extra credit for traditional hero status), Rachel Carson, and many others who have been voices for the earth.

One of my greatest heroes is Aldo Leopold, who wrote *A Sand County Almanac*. Published in 1949, *Sand County* is considered a bedrock of the conservation movement and a stepping stone toward the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s.

I've been teaching *Sand County* in my environmental studies class at the University of New England. This summer I traveled to Wisconsin to visit the Aldo Leopold Center and see "the Shack" where he wrote *Sand County*.

Hunter and Fisherman

Leopold was a lifelong
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As corporate money pours into politics, it has become difficult to find political leaders who will stand up for the environment. We need hunters, anglers and outdoor sports enthusiasts to speak out for the land, the fish, the wildlife, the water and the air.



The author stands in front of The Shack where Aldo Leopold wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in the 1940s.

hunter and fisherman. He also was a forester and wildlife ecologist who authored the first textbook on "game management." He was appointed the nation's first professor of wildlife management at the University of Wisconsin.

During his early career with the US Forest Service and later at the university, Leopold was a leader in land conservation. He pioneered new forms of forestry, ranching and agriculture that featured a holistic watershed approach to protect soils, vegetation, habitat and water quality.

Sand Farm

In 1935, Professor Leopold bought a desolate, worn out "sand farm" near the Wisconsin River so he could put his land management

practices in place on his own property. His family planted trees and worked to restore native prairie vegetation. They turned an old chicken coop into a cabin, called the Shack, where Leopold eventually wrote his master work.

Part memoir and part manifesto, *Sand County Almanac* recalls Leopold's long career working to restore lands damaged by destructive management practices. In his most important essay, "The Land Ethic", Leopold expressed what many of us feel – that humans must consider themselves to be a part of the natural community around us, not separate from it.

He argued that the well-being of human society depends on the well-being of the physical and ecological systems

that support us. He recognized the value of keystone species and apex predators. He appreciated the essential roles that tiny unnoticed plants and creatures played in the complex web of life.

In a beautiful, lyrical style, Leopold conveyed his love for the natural world and his wonder at the mysteries of ecological systems. He then translated his love and wonder into an ethical framework of respect for animals, plants, soil and waters, which he called The Land Ethic.

A Moral Code

The Land Ethic is a moral code of conduct – a way to distinguish right and wrong actions – that grows out of our interconnectedness with the land and the recognition that humans and the land are

part of a singular community:

"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."

Leopold illustrated with example after example the disastrous consequences that occur when we fall short in this ethical code and instead exploit the land and our natural resources solely for their economic value.

Or when we fail to consider the sometimes predictable, but often unforeseen, impacts of our actions, like polluting the waters and the air, or draining wetlands that support a diversity of flora and fauna. Soil erosion, invasive species, and plant and animal extinction are but a few of the resulting consequences.

Elusive Ideal

Sadly, almost 70 years later, Leopold's Land Ethic remains an elusive ideal. Today, we still find our progress in environmental protection and land conservation compromised by those who are motivated more by self-interest and economic gain than by an appreciation of what is right and wrong for the natural systems on which we depend.

As corporate money has poured into politics, it has become harder to find political leaders who will stand up for the environment and wildlife. Despite the demonstrated success of our federal and state laws in cleaning up our air and water, we face

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Rangeley Region

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takes hunters into relatively-untouched hunting territory.

Bigwoods Birds

Late-season bird hunters can follow this same advice to find grouse in December. Grouse must fill their crop with gravel from the roads to aid in digesting whatever they're eating. Hunting the graveled paths makes sense if a hunter wants to bag a bird or two.

If the high ground and ridges contain beechnut trees, it would pay off to hunt the trails in these locations. By December, though, the snow cover probably inhibits the birds from foraging at ground level. Look for trails and roads that skirt swampy lowlands. The birds find thermal protection in the heavy cover of the lowland conifers and browse for available food sources there.

The same trails that follow the Cupsuptic

River, mentioned above, offer bird hunters miles of hunting opportunities. Especially note the swampy areas right down by the river itself, and focus any bird hunting in those locations. Where a road or trail intersects a branch of the stream, hike in along one side of the waterway and come back out to the truck on the other side.

Actually, if one takes a close look at the maps above Rangeley, a large percentage of the roads parallel streams or stick to the shoreline of standing water. It probably reflects the logger's way of working in the woods. Why would they build an extra bridge if they didn't have to? It would be simpler for them to just continue a path along side of the waterway, rather than keep crossing back and forth over the many streams and brooks in this region.



Peaceful white-tailed deer browse heavily before a big winter storm. *Clunie photo*

Hare Covers

Snowshoe hare find similar comfort in conifer swamps even before cold weather sets in. Hare hunters who follow the Canada Road north of that bridge can find loads of swampy hare cover where the road gets close to the river. Recent logging operations have also opened up a road on the west side of the river that takes hunters even farther back into prime hare hunting land.

The trails and roads around Jim Pond (Map 29, A-1) also allow hunters access into swampy territory conducive to

good hare populations. Tributaries to the North Branch of the Dead River have corresponding trails that parallel the waterways, with surrounding lowland. Dropping a rabbit dog in any of these frozen swamps could produce the desired barking music that hare hunters love to hear.

Plenty of lowland surrounds the Dead River near Grand Falls (Map 29, A-5). Hunters looking for more of the same swampy territory can follow the trails around Spencer Stream just north of there for more hare habitat.

Each of these systems of roads takes hunters way back into the wild woods of this region. Make sure to take precautions when traveling on these remote roads. Tire chains, four-wheel-drive, and a cell phone or CB radio must be carried to ensure a safe trip. For most of the way, a hunter must understand that they travel at their own risk. Wherever a hunter decides to travel in this region, play it safe and enjoy the beauty of the quiet system of logging roads and trails.



Sporting Environment

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continual assaults at the federal and state level from rollbacks of air and water pollution regulations to the unravelling of protections for wildlands and wildlife.

Despite the consensus among scientists and global leaders that we must halt and reverse emissions of greenhouse gases, the US government today is violating the Land Ethic by rejecting the ecological realities of climate change. Politicians are putting the earth's long-term well-being at risk in favor of short-term economic protectionism.

Losing Touch

As Leopold noted even in 1948, too many people see the land as "the space between cities on which crops grow." Our citizens and leaders are losing touch with the land. And a majority of the people alive today are too young to remember the stinking rivers, the smog and filthy air that were the norm in the 60s and 70s. We take too much for granted in our reality TV world.

Yes, a growing contingent is trying to promote sustainability by recycling, installing solar panels, going organic, and buying smaller cars and efficient houses. But their numbers are dwarfed by those who simply



Leopold's holistic watershed approach to land management has restored water quality and trout habitat.

greenwash their consciences, or remain oblivious to the impacts of our growing population and economy.

Our Own Connection

Many sportsmen feel a connection to the land and the ecosystems that support the fish and wildlife that are integral to our favorite outdoor activities.

Many of us love to hunt, fish, hike and photograph *precisely* because doing so accentuates and strengthens that connection. These activities immerse us in nature, forging a direct link to the life and death struggles and harsh realities of existence that



This osprey and fish illustrate Leopold's Land Ethic and reminds us of the interdependencies within our environment.

persist in parallel with our human world.

In these troubled times, we need hunters, anglers and outdoor sports enthusiasts to speak out for "the land." We must give a voice to the fish and wildlife and water and the air.

We, who understand our connection with the natural world, must be courageous enough to speak up to support strong environmental laws and protections.

We need to live up to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic more today than ever.

We need to be the heroes.

