Aldo Leopold: The Land Ethic

Jim Boyle. 6.10.04. FOR 111
Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic:

Challenges for Foresters
... and all Citizens in the 21st Century.
Aldo Leopold: *The Land Ethic*

“Ethic”
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“Land”
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“Land”
The Land Ethic

“The Ethical Sequence”

“The Community Concept”

“The Ecological Conscience”

“Substitutes for a Land Ethic”

“The Land Pyramid”

“Land Health and the A-B Cleavage”

“The Outlook”
“The Ethical Sequence”

“The extension of ethics to this third element (land) is, ... if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.”
“An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual.”
We are not just using the land, we are borrowing it from our grandchildren – from the next seven generations.
“The Community Concept”

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land.”
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“The Community Concept”...

“A land ethic...
cannot prevent
the alteration, management
and use of these ‘resources’,
but it does affirm their right
to continued existence,
and, at least in spots,
in a natural state.”
“The Community Concept” cont.

“In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to ... member and citizen of it.

It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”
“The Ecological Conscience”

“Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.” … an “ecological conscience” is not evident in part because, … philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it.”
“The Ecological Conscience”

“... philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial.”
“Substitutes for a Land Ethic”

“Stones instead of bread”

... 

“To sum up:

a system of conservation

based solely on self-interest

is hopelessly lopsided.” ...
A system of conservation based solely on self-interest ...

“... It tends to ignore, and thus eventually eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, and that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning.”
“An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations.”
“The Land Pyramid”

“An ethic presupposes some mental image of land as a biotic mechanism.

(JB: I think Leopold meant to convey the idea of “community” or “ecosystem”.)
“The Land Pyramid”

“We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”
The land pyramid...

“land as an energy circuit conveys three basic ideas:”

1. land is not merely soil.

2. native plants and animals kept the energy circuit open; others may or may not.

3. man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen.”
“The Land Pyramid”

“Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals.”
Aldo Leopold: *The Land Ethic*

… native plants and animals kept the energy circuit open; others may or may not.
... man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen.”
“Many biotas ... have already exceeded their sustained carrying capacity.”
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“Land Health and the A-B Cleavage”

“A land ethic, then reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land.
“Land Health and the A-B Cleavage”

“Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.”
“The Outlook”

"It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value.”
“... By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophic sense.”
"One of the requisites for an ecological comprehension of land is an understanding of ecology, and this is by no means co-extensive with 'education'; in fact, much higher education seems deliberately to avoid ecological concepts."
"The 'key-log' which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land use as solely an economic problem."
"Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. ...
“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.”
"The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as an emotional process."
“Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land, or of economic land use.”
"By and large, our present problem is one of attitudes and implements.

We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. ...
“... We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use.”
So, from the wisdom of Aldo Leopold in 1948, and from many others: Esthetics, understanding and technology - guides and tools for conservation of natural resources.
A land ethic can be a challenge and guide for all of us.
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A Land Ethic: Take-home messages.

1. Land is a collection of complex systems.
2. Humans, members of the community of land, should have an ethical relationship with land.
3. Knowledge of ecology and philosophical love for land are necessary for a land ethic.
A Land Ethic: Take-home messages.

4. An intimate knowledge of land is needed to live in it with love and respect.
5. Land systems can be abused with unexpected, undesirable consequences.
6. Simple “conservation methods” are not sufficient to nurture the land.
7. We must maintain, in some places, all components of the land system.
A Land Ethic: Take-home messages.

8. Land use should be based on both ecological and economic bases.

9. Education systems, philosophy and religion, in general, have not included ecology or a land ethic.

10. With education and a philosophical love for land, we can live as members of the community of land.
Forests drape glen and ridge,

Alders light green

Doug-firs dark,

Mist plumes floating life.
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