

## Leopold's Land Ethic

Published in 1949 as the finale to *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold's 'Land Ethic' defined a new relationship between people and nature and set the stage for the modern conservation movement.

Leopold understood that ethics direct individuals to cooperate with each other for the mutual benefit of all. One of his philosophical achievements was the idea that this 'community' should be enlarged to include non-human elements such as soils, waters, plants, and animals, "or collectively: the land."



*"That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics."*

This recognition, according to Leopold, implies individuals play an important role in protecting and preserving the health of this expanded definition of a community.

*"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 land."*

Central to Leopold's philosophy is the assertion to "quit thinking about decent land use as solely an economic problem." While recognizing the influence economics have on decisions, Leopold understood that ultimately, our economic well being could not be separated from the well being of our environment. Therefore, he believed it was critical that people have a close personal connection to the land.

*"We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in."*

### What Are Ethics?

People tend to use the term ethics in two different ways.

**Ethics help us decide how we ought to live.** In their most general form, we might say that ethics are the standards we employ (among other factors) to determine our actions. They are prescriptive in that they tell us what we should or ought to do and which values we should or ought to hold. They also help us evaluate whether something is good or bad, right or wrong.

Leopold's example: "A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it...it implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

**Ethics explain why things are important to us.** Ethics are also concerned with how and why we value certain things and what actions properly reflect those values. In this sense, ethics appear more descriptive. Just as it is possible for taste to be a neutral and descriptive term – appreciation for a work of art can be a matter of taste – ethics can operate the same way.

Leopold's example: "Sometimes in June, when I see unearned dividends of dew hung on every lupine, I have doubts about the real poverty of the sands...do economists know about lupines?"

From Dr. Michael Nelson, Professor of Philosophy, University of Idaho

*"The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."*

- ALDO LEOPOLD

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*Fostering the  
Land Ethic  
through the legacy  
of Aldo Leopold*

# Leopold's Land Ethic

## From "The Land Ethic," Leopold's final essay in *A Sand County Almanac...*

*"All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).*

*The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.*

*This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.*

*In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."*

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*"Aldo Leopold' land ethic is more relevant to the 21st century than when conceived in the early decades of the 20th. Solving global environmental challenges will require ecologically literate leader-citizens who embrace this ethic."*

DICK BARTLETT, CHAIRMAN,  
NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL  
EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION

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*Founded in 1982 by Leopold's children, the Aldo Leopold Foundation continues to manage the original Leopold farm and now-famous Shack, as well as serving as the executor of Leopold's literary estate.*

*Foundation programs in ecological management and environmental education are designed to increase our society's awareness and appreciation for the land.*

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