

ALDO LEOPOLD. THE LAND ETHIC.

If one is forced to discuss only one issue having to do with the Natural World that best describes Leopold's philosophy as well as his greatest contribution to conservation, I believe it would have to be the concept which he referred to as the "Land Ethic."

To greatly oversimplify his philosophy, it would be that mankind is only one species in a community of the land which for him includes all the other animals, the plants, the soils, the water, and man. All of the individual components of this community are important and their continued existence should be protected.

Leopold described his philosophy in various ways throughout his life. Here are some examples:

"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 use it with love and respect."

"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."

"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. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity".

"It is inconceivable to me that we can adjust ourselves to the complexities of the land mechanism without an intense curiosity to understand its workings and a habitual personal study of those workings. The urge to comprehend must precede the urge to reform."

"There must be born in the public mind a certain fundamental respect for living things, and for the epic grandeur of the processes which created them. Society must see itself not as the terrestrial end-result of a completed evolution, but as the custodian of an incomplete one."

Leopold was the first person to use the term "ethic" in the context of the way man treats the land. When we think of ethics, or morality, or philosophy, we tend to think of what is right or wrong in terms of man's relationship with his fellow man or with human society as a whole. Most modern people probably have some feeling of ethics or right and wrong in the way humans treat animals, hence the Humane Society. Certainly, the average American has an aversion to anything we might call cruelty to animals and probably considers such actions as morally wrong.

But Leopold took the concept two steps further. First, he believed that there were ethically right and wrong actions in the way man manages his land, meaning not only the animals, but the soils, water and plants as well.

And secondly, he believed mankind should be considered along with the other animals as being a part of the "land" or "community." He didn't mean to imply that mankind does

not occupy a special place in the universe, or even that his needs don't take priority over the other inhabitants. But he believed man should consider himself as a member of the total land "community" with which he has to co-exist in harmony.

I think all of this new philosophy is probably more easily accepted today than in Leopold's time, but that doesn't by any means imply that it is a universally accepted concept, far from it.

Leopold expressed his view of Conservation as part of the Land Ethic as follows:

"Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth. Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say you cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism."

"Conservation is a state of health in the land-organism. Health expresses the cooperation of the interdependent parts: soil, water, plants, animals and people. It implies collective self-renewal and collective self-maintenance."

"When any one part lives by depleting another, the state of health is gone. As far as we know, the state of health depends on the retention of each part of the full gamut of species and materials comprising its evolutionary equipment."

"Conservation means harmony between men and land. When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by the land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, we do not."

All food for thought.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.