

Aldo Leopold: The Tools of Land Management

Of all of the quotations of Aldo Leopold, the one heard most often at least from professionals in the areas of land management, range science, and wildlife biology, is “Game can be restored by the creative use of the same tools which heretofore destroyed it—axe, plow, cow, fire and gun.”

These words were written in the Preface of his first book, “Game Management,” published in 1933. Since these words were part of his book on game management, and since Leopold had just spent the past few years conducting game census studies for several Mid-Western states, and since he was an avid hunter, it stands to reason he would have been concentrating on game when he wrote it.

But he could very well have substituted the words “land” for “game,” and it would have still been true, because in order to restore game, one has to first restore the habitat, something Leopold tried to teach throughout his life.

The full quotation is as follows:

“The central thesis of game management is this: game can be restored by the ‘creative use’ of the same tools which have heretofore destroyed it—axe, plow, cow, fire and gun. A favorable alignment of these forces sometimes came about in pioneer days by accident. The result was a temporary wealth of game far greater than the Native Americans ever saw. Management is their purposeful and continued alignment.”

“The conservation movement has sought to restore wild life by the control of guns alone, with little visible success. Management seeks the same end, but by more versatile means.”

In the early settlement days, settlers obviously had to clear some trees in order to build their houses, for heat and cooking, and for various other uses, thus the axe. They also had to plow some land in order to plant food crops for themselves and their animals, thus the plow. They brought some livestock, usually more than just cattle but also perhaps sheep, goats, pigs and chickens, all of which had to be kept close to their homes, which grazed the land continuously.

While the settlers fought wildfires because the fires were burning up their animal feed, they also used fire to clear brush to make room for more grazers. And finally, the settlers had to protect their animals from predators, including the larger predators, wolves, bear, cougars, etc, and of course, they shot deer and other wildlife to help feed their families.

All of these activities combined to make for drastically different, and mostly poorer habitats for the native wildlife than were there originally.

Today, however, landowners who find themselves with less-than ideal native habitat have a wider array of tools to allow them to make changes to their land with the eye to

improving it. Today, also we have the benefit of the lessons learned in the past 100 years or so and also access to significant numbers of experts for advice on how to do it.

There probably won't be many landowners today that will be using an axe for anything other than perhaps splitting firewood. But there is a much larger number of tools to accomplish the same things—bull dozers, bobcats, chain saws, loppers, etc. to manage the growth of woody plants.

Most of the Hill Country is not suitable for plowing, although some is and many landowners have at least small areas where they can plant gardens or food plots. And of course, today one doesn't need a horse to pull a plow, there are lots of different sized machines for that. Also, these days the variety of seeds for planting is vastly larger than in the old days.

For some landowners, removing livestock, either permanently or for some time, may be the best thing they can do for the habitat. Some folks may need to bring back livestock temporarily.

There are times and places where controlled burns can be very beneficial, but it is not an activity to be conducted by anyone inexperienced.

Finally, modern landowners can do their part to manage the deer population by shooting, but most don't make much of a difference. Landowners can also help to reduce the number of feral hogs and exotic ungulates.

Leopold would probably be surprised at the variety of tools available to modern landowners to manage their land and thus their habitat. He might, however, be dismayed at the lack of effort by some to utilize these tools effectively.

Until next time...

Happy Holidays Everybody.

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