

Leopold: Thinking Like a Mountain

A few weeks ago, I wrote about how Leopold changed his views of predators in general and wolves in particular over the course of his life. One might say he started out in life agreeing with the general public's opinion of predators and ended up believing that nature required both predators and prey to maintain healthy habitats.

The quotations below were written in Leopold's later years, but described an experience he had many years earlier. For me and many other Leopold fans, the term "fierce green fire" in the quotations below have special meaning and are the basis for the title of a documentary film about Leopold's life.

Here is his story:

"My own conviction on this score date from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock."

"In those days we never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impossible slide-rocks."

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch the fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

"Since then, I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every tree defoliated to the height of a saddle horn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears and forbidden him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer heard, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers."

"I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in moral of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades."

Every time I read Leopold's description of the wolf dying, I think of my own "green fire" moment. I think I was around 12 or 13 when it happened. One day I went out into the pasture across the road from our house with my single shot .410, looking for "something to shoot." It was not unusual in those days and time, and in that place, for men and boys to go out looking for "something to shoot."

Anyway, presently a hawk came slowly gliding by fairly low, and I shot at it. Surprisingly, I hit it. When I reached the hawk, it was lying on its back with its talons held up high and spread out menacingly, and it hissed at me. I have never forgotten that moment, and I have regretted what I did ever since.

Obviously, there is no way practically, or biologically, for us to bring back the wolves or other big predators in the 21st century, but that means that man must be responsible for managing the prey populations. And we have not been very successful at it, thus the overbrowsed landscape with no replacement hardwoods.

Until next time...

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