

We Need Everyone to Develop an Ecological Conscience

What do I mean by Ecological Conscience? The phrase comes from the writings of Aldo Leopold, specifically,

“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...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.” From Leopold’s “A Sand County Almanac.”

Leopold used the phrase in the context of what we would call today land stewardship, or what we would consider the beneficial management of the land. The idea being that in order for a landowner to be a good steward of the land, he/she must have it in their head and their heart to maintain or improve the health of the land, to care about the quality of the habitat and the sustainability thereof.

It is not just about doing the right things or not doing the wrong things, but to have somewhere deep within the feeling that they are responsible for considering what is best, long term, for the land, the soil, the water, the plants and the animals. A lot of times people express this thought by saying they want to “leave this place better than I found it.”

And Leopold would say, if they have that feeling deep within, then that is evidence that they have an “ecological conscience.”

Of course, we all have a conscience, something that tells us the difference between what is right and wrong, how to treat each other, etc. Without it we would have anarchy.

The land is not the only other thing that people feel deeply about. I don’t know what to call it, but I expect that most people with kids have a similar deep-down conscience about always trying to do the best for their kids, over and above everything else.

As a Master Naturalist, we try to instill an ecological conscience in all new Master Naturalist trainees, and for that matter many other landowners we work with. And I can attest to many landowners throughout the Hill Country that demonstrate they have an ecological conscience in many ways.

Everything I have written above clearly implies this is something that only applies to rural landowners. But that is not the case, everyone does things that have an effect on the environment.

We all, everyone on this planet, require a whole list of ecosystem services for our daily lives, so the health and well-being of these ecosystem services is vital to our lives and thus it is important to all of us to take care of the ecology.

But almost a year ago, I wrote a column about ecosystem services. At that time, I called ecosystem services “Essential to Life but Almost Never Considered.” I am going to run it again next week, because I think it is an essential part of the argument that everyone needs to understand before I can finish the discussion about the collective ecological

conscience. We need to first understand how much the condition of the ecology affects our daily lives.

The important thing to know is that every one of us, even city dwellers who live in a high-rise in the city, do things every day that have an impact on the ecology somewhere, and almost no one gives it any thought. But if we had an ecological conscience, we should, and we would, give it more thought.

But I suggest that even those of us who think we have an ecological conscience in terms of our land, and we may indeed be good stewards of the land, may well be doing things in our daily lives that are detrimental to the environment in one way or another.

I sat down to make a list of everyday things that human beings do that can affect the ecology and it was a lot longer than I thought. That will be the subject of this column in two weeks.

We are living in a time when mankind has already caused a lot of environmental damage and continues to do so. The forces of destruction are increasing, not decreasing. So far, humanity has continued to adapt, but there is no guarantee we can continue to do so. The human population may have exceeded the carrying capacity of the earth.

To be continued over the next two weeks.

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@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.