Another Look at Leopold

Aldo Leopold, being one of the foremost important figures in the science of natural resources, has been evaluated and scrutinized by scholars and the general population alike. Leopold's final essay within the revolutionary book *A Sand County Almanac* would prove to be his most influential contribution in the budding science of conservation ecology. The purpose of this essay is to accentuate that Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic* is a decree of virtue, but was built from Aldo's belief in the rights of land. I will explore the evolution of Leopold's philosophy from a rights based (deontological) view to the virtues we now see in environmental ethics.

One could make an argument for Leopold's *Land Ethic* as the cornerstone of the newly emerging field of environmental virtue ethics; this approach would view the teachings Leopold passed down through generations as an example of a "state of character or states of character whose possession makes a person environmentally virtuous" (Hull, 2005, p. 90). But I posit that, as is pointed out by Birnbacher (1999), Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic* is more complex than virtue theory can explain; it is a "multi-layered structure combining a conventional anthropocentric ethics at the level of basic principles with a resolutely anti-anthropocentric and holistic ethic at the practice level" (p. 327). The virtues that Leopold penned in his literature were for a lifestyle, serving as a guide for humanity in our interactions with nature. Aldo Leopold wrote that his *Land Ethic* is "a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual" (1949, p. 203). Leopold was telling us that this new science of ecology was evolving so quickly at the time that long-term implications of actions could not be predicted. Aldo Leopold's ideas and philosophies were evolving as well.

J. Baird Callicott (1991), a well-known environmental philosopher himself, depicts Aldo to have been "emerging from the woods wearing the hat of Gifford Pinchot and speaking with the voice of John Muir" (p. 343). Curt Meine (1983) reported in his Masters of Science thesis that Leopold's opening description of Homer's *Odyssey* is an example of his understanding of the evolution within the ethical structure of men. We can find the greatest example of Leopold's maturing philosophy and a change in his personal behavior within his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain". In this essay, Leopold shares a personal story with his readers; as a young man in the desert Southwest, Leopold was shooting at a pack of wolves. Upon killing many, as was the practice of the time, he was able to reach one old wolf, then looking in her eyes Leopold saw how a "fierce green fire" was dying in her eyes. He realized after this event that man's relationship with the land was far more complex then he could have previously thought. Leopold was a graduate of the Yale School of Forestry, immersed in Pinchot-based forestry ideals, but it was at this juncture that he carved a different path, or rather, paths that converged with his evolving land ethic.

Virtues as explained by Kupperman (2009) must have "no set of necessary and sufficient conditions;" he further elaborates that one particular truth that must be followed is that "to be virtuous you cannot have frequent and recurring moral lapses" (p. 245). As we will explore in this essay, Aldo Leopold developed a moral understanding of the intimate and ever-dynamic existence of land, and in order to maintain what Leopold defines as harmony with land, humans must maintain an ethical relationship as well as an ecological conservation mindset within our role as a biotic member of the land community. The virtues Leopold found and then passed on to future generations were developed through the maturation of his own relationship with land and his thoughts on humans' relationship with land. To borrow Kupperman's (2009) definition, it

was often the "moral lapses," like watching a wolf die at his own hand, which made the biggest impact on shaping Leopold's virtues. One of the key questions posed by G. Hubbs (2014) of the virtue-theoretic approach is: "How is this action good for a person's life, taken as a whole, rather than considering the act in isolation from the person?" I believe this question is a core component of what Leopold addressed in the *Land Ethic*.

Throughout the *Land Ethic*, other essays, and notes, one can find examples of Leopold's belief in humans' right (duty) to uphold a high standard of conduct for land relations. After listing conflicting examples of "what and whom do we love," Leopold scorns our past actions of wastefulness. He then defines the limitations of a *Land Ethic* stating, "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" (p. 204). Rather than focusing on human rights, however, Leopold focused on the rights of the biotic community to exist and our role within this community. Holmes Rolston III (1991) in a response to Callicott's (1991) essay "The Wilderness Idea Revisited", points out that it is Leopold's belief in wilderness conservation as the essential right to a continued existence in a natural state (p.384).

I will further this idea and propose that Aldo was laying the base premise: If we have land that we reside upon, then it is our duty to preserve the integrity of the land's right to exist. Therefore, we, as humans and part of the biological community, should develop habits that cause such needed outcomes. Within his notes from *Round River* (1953) on conservation, Aldo states, "We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty of people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive" (p. 155). This "striving" leads to a development of repeated behavior, and behavior can thereby

evolve into a virtue – an intrinsic habit that appreciates, conserves, and protects the land because it is the right thing to do.

In this way, I would argue that Leopold's own *Land Ethic* evolved with time and experience in the growing field of ecology. What began as a belief that land has the right to exist and it is humans' duty to preserve it, transformed to a virtue – Leopold's "higher aspiration". He implores humans to see that all things in the natural community are interrelated, and that developing habits that serve the natural community are "right" because they serve humans as a part of it. One action has a ripple effect throughout the entire community, and eventually humans will experience that effect, whether it is deforestation, pollution, urban sprawl, extinction, or any other action affecting natural resources. Virtue theory best explains the climax of Leopold's argument with his often quoted, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (p. 224). This thinking paved the way for modern conservationists like Michael Nelson (1998) who states, "Long-lasting ethical change can only be affected by means of the modification of one's worldview, the way one conceptually visualizes the world" (p. 742). Further, using this "Leopoldian Rule", Shaw (1997) identified three such environmental virtues - respect, prudence, and practical judgment. For Leopold himself, these virtuous habits of preserving and protecting land deepened to a worldview of intimate relationship with the land.

In the *Land Ethic*, Leopold depicted his own set of virtues with the statement, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a higher regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense" (p. 233). Virtues of love, respect, and admiration describe a successful relationship – whether it be between humans

or humans and the land. Leopold's views stretched even further beyond the limits of virtue theory, where the "habit" of protecting natural resources transformed into a spiritual and philosophical connection. It is this connection that I, and many of Leopold's disciples, strive to achieve with their human and land community. For example, Leopold's own daughter, Nina Leopold Bradley (2002) speaks of her father's ideals on our needs as a species for shelter, clothes, and food. She states, "But he also realized that we need a great deal more if we are to lead sane and honorable lives; we need beauty, community, and purpose; we need "spiritual relationships to things of the land" (p. xii).

Leopold's *Land Ethic* is an attempt for all of us, specifically land owners, to operate in such a way that positive action occurs from the development of these intrinsic habits. I do not think it is coincidence that Leopold studied and wrote extensively about the value of wilderness, defining the parameters of the time as science, recreation, and wildlife. He wrote a plea, urging us to become "a militant minority of wilderness-minded citizens" available to join in fight to preserve not just the landscapes remaining, but also the cultural values that bind us to our land (p. 200). This was not Leopold's only plea within *The Sand County Almanac*. Within his final summary conclusion section, "The Outlook," Leopold mentions his title term *Land Ethic* five times while reiterating the conditions needed for a proper ethical relationship with land, and gives us guidance on how to develop our own relationships and deeper understanding of land. Aldo Leopold developed - through the evolution of his own philosophy from a rights-based to a virtue-based worldview - a *Land Ethic* where we recognize and acknowledge our reciprocal relationship with land. This real-world account of how Aldo Leopold, a man who has been referred to as a farmer/poet, hunter/preservationist, scientist/scholar, is a classic example that when ethics enter our lives and change our behavior, as Kupperman (2009) states, must "assign a

major role to virtue ethics" (p. 252). I believe that Leopold's interest in the ethical development of people, and the habitual actions we as land occupants develop in order to preserve the our relationship with land, jumped into the realm of virtue ethics from the time he shot the wolf in Arizona and pondered the "hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men" (p. 133).

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