Ethics for the Land—Guide for the Future

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In a culvert on the outskirts of Idaho City, an area surrounded by wild forest, four young wolves nestled, hidden from the hot summer sun. It was July of 2012, and, at three months of age, the pups, their mouths still lined with the milking teeth of un-weaned youngsters, were just learning to eat the meat that their mother brought from her daily hunts. Today, she was off somewhere among the Idaho conifers, in search of prey to carry back to her brood in their makeshift den. The pups waited comfortably for her return. Comfortably, that is, until several trappers -- dressed in the uniform of the United States Department of Agriculture -- approached the culvert, aimed rifles at the pups, and slaughtered every last one. The trappers were on a mission of predator eradication. As wildlife-advocate Lynne Stone angrily explains to *Harper's Magazine* journalist Christopher Ketcham, these were agents of "Wildlife Services" who heard tell of a sheep eaten by wolves near Idaho City. In response, they located the nearest wolf-den and eliminated its young residents without hesitation (Ketcham). Never mind that these four pups were too young to fell a sheep. They were predators in the making, and the U.S. government had ordered a warrant for their death.

Wildlife Services, operative for over a century, is a government agency tasked with eliminating predators -- wolves, coyotes, wildcats, bobcats, and foxes -- from the wilderness around ranch-lands, for the sake of American agriculture. The predator control it practices is highly invasive, disrupting natural symbioses within ecosystems, causing overpopulation of prey-species, leading to over-grazing, malnutrition, and the list goes on ("Agriculture's").

Wildlife Services has recently raised severe criticism: in 2013, *The New York Times* Editorial Board published an article accusing the agency of employing "old-fashioned" techniques and inflicting "broad and secretive damages." The article emphasizes the need for transparency and insists that "resolving wildlife conflicts need not involve indiscriminate killing" ("Agriculture's"). It came out on the heels of a study published in *Conservation Letters* that provides alarming evidence of the harm done by Wildlife Services: the slaughter of over two million animals in thirteen years, primarily carnivores, but including “non-target species” like eagles, songbirds, and even domestic pets (Bergstrom et al.). Both editorial and journal make compelling arguments against the continued existence of a predator control agency, but their influence has been negligible.

In February of 2016, nearly three years after *The New York Times* had its say, *National Geographic’s* Rebecca Bale penned a strikingly familiar article. It, too, rails against Wildlife Services: the agency that “specializes in killing wild animals.” It, too, accuses Wildlife Services of non-transparency: “ever heard of it?” Bale asks wryly. It, too, is written on the heels of another comprehensive study, “The Rogue Agency,” which reiterates that “lethal-control methods…bear unintended consequences” (Ketcham). Yet, despite these repeated efforts to enlighten the public, no one is particularly inclined to put an end to Wildlife Services.

Why is that? The answer is all too clear. Human beings, at least in industrialized nations, define our relationship with nature as one of conqueror and subject. Nature is a resource and we have a divine right -- a manifest destiny -- to exploit it however we can. Only through this anthropocentric lens could we justify the continued existence of an agency for predator control: a direct human manipulation of natural systems.

Environmental activists have long advocated a wilderness-minded-morality as imperative to reform. The concept can be traced back specifically to the “father of wildlife management,” conservationist Aldo Leopold, who fought for a “land ethic” and insisted on the value of wilderness outside of the economic realm. Leopold did not begin his career as a conservationist. Indeed, upon graduating from the Yale School of Forestry, his first job was as a game manager, performing the very kind of predator control that he later came to abhor. As author and philosophy professor Brian Norton observed in his article for *Conservation Biology,* Leopold’s approach to environmental management “changed drastically” (93) between his early career and his penning of *Thinking Like a Mountain,* in which he states that “one of the most insidious invasions of wilderness is via predator control” (191). This incredible shift of ideology is why Leopold is so valuable to us today. He carries within his works the wisdom of having spent a lifetime in the natural world. Leopold’s prolific works, *A Sand County Almanac* in particular, have served to communicate his credo throughout the passing of time, and may now serve as guides to amending the human-ecosystem interplay.

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Aldo Leopold was born in 1887, three years prior to the closing of the frontier, a time when the land was regarded as utility, commodity, something to be tamed. Growing up in the wilderness of Iowa, Leopold took an early interest in the forests that surrounded him, chronicling the many ecological intricacies he perceived. It was during his years as a game manager, however, that he began to question in earnest the utilitarian ways with which people used nature. As the story goes, Leopold and some fellow game managers found themselves on a mountain outcropping, where they discovered, many feet below, a family of wolves at play. "In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf" (130), Leopold recalls, and thus, they enthusiastically emptied their rifles into the pack. "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a 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…I thought that because fewer wolves meant fewer deer, that no wolves would mean a hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view" (130). This anecdote makes up the bulk of *Thinking Like a Mountain*, that excerpt Norton refers to as the epitome of Leopold's ethical work. And rightly so. It describes the moment that began his quest for a land ethic.

In the years that followed, Leopold continued his work for the US Forest Service, refining his philosophy of game management. In 1935 he purchased a worn tract of farmland in Wisconsin and there, surrounded by nature, began compiling his writings into a comprehensive manuscript. This would eventually become *A Sand County Almanac*, the critically acclaimed anthology of his observations, lamentations, and credos that would alter the face of the environmental movement ("The Leopold Legacy").

Within his tome, Leopold draws attention to the importance of natural things often cast aside. He devotes, for example, an entire chapter to the unsung value of tree disease. As Leopold is well aware, even the amateur forester would likely dismiss a tree disease as a blight or nuisance, but, speaking from years of gathered wisdom, Leopold skillfully introduces its potential benefit: the creation of food and shelter for numerous forest-dwelling species (73). The chapter hints to the reader that there are far more environmental phenomena written off as useless or undesirable that really hold unknown value.

In his later writing, he begins to examine, with the acumen of a seasoned nature-observer, the tangible ways that humans can and should interact with and appreciate ecosystems: recreation. He remarks that "recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind" (177). Leopold proposes that the idea of recreation be expanded to include pastimes, like *perceiving*: something that he notes "entails no consumption and no dilution of any resource" (173) and results in a greater awareness of and respect for each member of the biotic community that was perceived. This is the stark difference in ideology between Wildlife Services and Leopold -- between the men who keep shooting wolves and the man who learned to stop.

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Leopold's incredible talent with the pen transforms his theories into invaluable environmental works, lending to his experiences the unrivaled sway of great literary work. As George Kelker observes in his article, "Appraisal of Ideas Advanced by Aldo Leopold Thirty Years Ago," "his penchant for expressing biologic ideas in trenchant phrases is an ability not commonly displayed in our writings today" (180). Indeed, Leopold's knack for conveying his ideas and experiences may take significant responsibility for their lasting resonance within the environmental movement. Rather than simply providing scientific explanations for observable phenomena, he illustrates separate moments in time, often personifying his subjects, transforming them for the reader into beings of interest, of conscious thought, and of insurmountable value. Through his words, the daily behavior of a male woodcock is an intricate "Sky Dance"(30), a meadow mouse feels grieved by a spring thaw (4), and a goose carries "the conviction of a prophet"(18). Through his words, an old tree is not only a source of firewood, but a living connection to days gone by (9-16), a scenic river is not only a source of water, but a breathing, ever-changing painting (51), and flora is not only a source of energy for an ecosystem, but something for the eye to subsist on (47). Through his words, the land comes to hold unmeasurable value.

Leopold's strongest arguments against predator control stem from this idea of valuation --that human beings are incapable of fully comprehending the workings of nature, and thus cannot appraise the worth of any given species. That, by extension, we cannot interfere in ecosystems without unintended ramifications. "The scientist," Leopold writes, "knows that the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood" (205). This is exactly why Wildlife Services is so alarming. As Bale notes, the agency operates without “any kind of science-based system to justify [its] lethal control against wildlife.” With absolutely no system in place to assess the damage of predator-removal, according to Leopold, the potential for unintended consequences is immeasurable. And indeed, studies have shown that healthy wolf populations are necessary to prey on older or diseased elk, so as to prevent the spread of illness and maintain the strength of the herd. As Wildlife Services kill off wolves, the elk begin to suffer (Bergstrom et al.). Leopold emphasizes his point by chronicling such patterns that he witnessed in his own lifetime: “I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain,” he writes “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 anaemic desuetude, and then to death” (130). This, according to Leopold, is the price of presuming to know the value of a species, and interfering accordingly with a natural system. It is the price of predator control.

In the third portion of *A Sand County Almanac*, “The Upshot,” Leopold addresses these ecological problems in a broader sense, attempting to trace them to their specific human origin. He observes that “land-use ethics are still governed wholly by economic self-interest” (209), and argues continually against such an ideology. Yet economics continues to be a driving force. As Christopher Ketcham observes in his 2016 study of Wildlife Services, “ranchers, as a means of doing business, get Wildlife Services to kill wolves for them.” Environmental science professor and doctor of marine ecology Jesse Meiller builds upon Ketcham’s claim, noting that “there is definitely a tragedy of the commons problem.” She refers to the dilemma that arises when a common-pool resource, like, for instance, an ecosystem, is used for the short-term economic gain of the individual, rather than the long term benefit of all. Essentially, if the environment is viewed as an economic resource, it is vulnerable to exploitation. Within “The Upshot,” Leopold offers a remedy: “ethical obligation on the part of the private owner” (214). According to him, personal moral responsibility to the land is the only antidote to the tragedy of the commons.

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Leopold’s solution is anything but straightforward. Our society has long existed in the absence of any universal environmental conscience, and the consequences are already potentially irreversible. We have exerted extraordinary control over the natural world. Indeed, according to Dr. Meiller, we manipulate “to the point where [ecosystems] don't function as ecosystems anymore." She refers to large-scale pollution, to the construction of dams and reservoirs, and to the alteration of stream flow as mere examples of forced alterations of natural systems. "There is a line," she says "and we've crossed it in every instance." Leopold seems to agree. He declares man-made changes to ecosystems to be of a "different evolutionary order than evolutionary changes" (218). The interfering hand of the human species has already reached far and wide.

But why exactly is this hand so damaging? If humans are, as Leopold suggests, merely members of an ecological community, aren't all our interactions with that community *inherently* natural? Leopold would argue that it is *because* our species has forgotten this very thing that we cause so much injury. In *A Sand County Almanac*, he astutely notes that "to the laborer, in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on the anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was wilderness an adversary to the pioneer" (188). An antagonistic relationship with nature is not conducive to coexistence, only to conquering. In her analysis of Wildlife Services, Bale observes "an old ethos in the ranching community -- control and domination of the landscape…an almost biblical mandate to dominate the natural world" (Bale). From colonization to manifest destiny to the predator control of the modern era, Americans have long treated nature as something to use, tame, and even vanquish, in the "outmoded mentality of western expansionism" (Bergstrom et. al). It is this very mindset, this acting as through we are not members of a larger, interdependent community, which makes human behavior so dangerous. In response, Leopold repeatedly insists that people must consider themselves to be a part of the "land," and must conduct themselves accordingly. No more meddling with the natural flow of streams and rivers. No more eliminating species of trees because they are not rapid producers of firewood. No more predator control. No more of this anthropocentric controlling of ecosystems.

His ideology does not sit well with ranchers like John Peavy, a man who believes that Wildlife Services is "vital," that without "taking care of predation," his business would not succeed. "When the wolves come in, it's incredibly disruptive," Peavy protests, "We're very vulnerable" (Ketcham). However, as Ketcham observes, "wolves…were designed to eat sheep." Wildlife Services essentially punishes each predatory species for serving its natural purpose. For feeding itself in the only way it knows how. Leopold argues quite forcefully that "predators are members of the community," and that, resultantly, "no special interest has a right to exterminate them for the sake of benefit" (211). According to this logic, ranchers like Peavy have no right to exercise predator control, even if they lose their sheep. The wolves and coyotes and wildcats and foxes all have what Leopold calls a "right to continued existence" (204).

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This right, and indeed, all of Leopold's musings are compiled during "The Upshot" into one single concept. The land ethic. It is, arguably, Leopold's legacy. In his own words, "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it" (204). As simple as that. As important as that. Before Leopold, no one had thought to bring ethics into the environmental field (Kelker 181). Prior to the introduction of the land ethic, forestry was a science almost economical in nature. Which trees would produce the most firewood? Which predators were responsible for killing the most valuable game? But with the theories published in *A Sand County Almanac*, this mindset began to shift. According to Leopold, if we consider ourselves to be a part of the "land," his term for the entire biotic community, we must, then, in every action and interaction, have its wellbeing in mind.

A land ethic is what has been missing from industrialized societies. Its absence has allowed for sewage to be dumped in oceans, for riverine ecosystems to be dammed, for predatory wildlife to be hunted for the sake of agricultural gain. With no moral obligation to it, humankind has exploited and destroyed much of what the land once had to offer. "The whole idea," Dr. Meiller says passionately, is "whether we are part of the ecosystem or removed from it…The root of the ethic is that we are still part of it, so we should be thinking about it in a way that is sustainable." She claims that a worldwide adoption of the land ethic would be nothing short of "wonderful."

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Leopold's land ethic made a distinct mark on the environmental movement. According to Kelker, authors like Rachel Carson, Margaret Nice, Paul Arrington, Sigurd Olsen, and Francis Lee and Florence Page Jaques are now "carrying the torch for social betterment to be attained through a greater understanding of nature" (184). They are building upon the land ethic, following in Leopold's footsteps. But the time has come to expand the reaches of Leopold's ethic beyond literature, and beyond the sphere of environmental activism. It needs to reach the masses. As Leopold writes, “obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of social conscience from people to land” (209). What the land ethic proposes is a tremendous shift in ideology, in behavior, and in consciousness. It requires people to not only acknowledge and accept due responsibility for the damage we have caused, but to immensely and permanently alter our way of life.

Dr. Meiller is optimistic; she believes a shift towards a land ethic has already begun. “It comes more from the grassroots than by top-down,” she notes, and her views are well aligned with Leopold, who claims that an ethic must be adopted on an individual scale. He insists that an *imposed* land ethic will have no effect; farmers will flout regulations, or comply only to the necessary extent, exploiting the land as much as is allowed. He asserts that the only way to bring about a repaired human-land relationship is “voluntary adherence to an ethical code” (178), a willingness on the part of the people. *A Sand County Almanac* invokes such a willingness, inviting the reader to experience the overlooked majesty of the every-day outdoors, to fall in love with the honk of a goose, to find a lifetime of stories on the wing of a chickadee, and to understand the vastness of what we do not understand. And once the reader is hooked, having irreversibly grasped the importance of nature, Leopold introduces the land ethic, complete with instructions. “The ‘key-log’ which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this one: quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem,” he states in the final pages of his book. “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” (224-225). A sense of right and wrong in all dealings with the land -- that’s what it comes down to. And Leopold has written the guide.

For a publication with over two million copies sold, for a publication deemed “one of the most respected books about the environment ever published” (“The Leopold Legacy”), *A Sand County Almanac* is not very well known. But as we continue to dam rivers, pollute streams, chop down forests, and, yes, as we continue allow Wildlife Services to exist, it becomes clearer and clearer that we need a land ethic. Aldo Leopold’s work should be in every high school and library. It should be in the literary repertoire of any American boasting of higher education. Perhaps then this nation would see a grand shift towards an ethical relationship with its the land.

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