

The Land Ethic by Aldo Leopold, from *A Sand County Almanac*, 1948
abridged by Rabbi David Seidenberg, neohasid.org, (cc) 2008, 2018

This presentation of Leopold's seminal essay includes all the essential points, while leaving out a lot of the political discussion contemporary to his time and some of the historical examples that are less relevant. You can read more at neohasid.org/stoptheflood/the_land_ethic. Download the whole essay here: <http://neohasid.org/pdf/landethic.pdf>

The Ethical Sequence

[The] extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequence may be described in ecological as well as in philosophic terms. **An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct.** These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation. The ecologist calls these symbioses. Politics and economics are advanced symbioses in which the original free-for-all competition has been replaced, in part, by co-operative mechanisms with an ethical content.

The complexity of co-operative mechanisms has increased with population density, and with the efficiency of tools. It was simpler, for example, to define the anti-social uses of sticks and stones in the days of the mastodons than of bullets and billboards in the age of motors.

The first ethics dealt with the relation between individuals; the Mosaic Decalogue is an example. Later accretions dealt with the relation between the individual and society. The Golden Rule tries to integrate the individual to society; democracy to integrate social organization to the individual.

There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. **The land relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but no obligations.** (Ed. note: Leopold clearly had not read Leviticus 25!)

The extension of ethics to this third element in the human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. It is the third step in a sequence. The first two have already been taken. Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation.

An ethic may be regarded as 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. Animal instincts are modes of guidance for the individual in meeting such situations. Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct-in-the-making.

The Community Concept

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter down river. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. 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.

In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.*

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The Ecological Conscience

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial...

To sum up: a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts. It tends to relegate to government many functions eventually too large, too complex, or too widely dispersed to be performed by government.

An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations.

The Land Pyramid

An ethic to supplement and guide the economic relation to land presupposes the existence of some mental image of land as a biotic mechanism. We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.

The image commonly employed in conservation education is 'the balance of nature'. For reasons too lengthy to detail here, this figure of speech fails to describe accurately what little we know about the land mechanism. A much truer image is the one employed in ecology: the biotic pyramid. I shall first sketch the pyramid as a symbol of land, and later develop some of its implications in terms of land-use...

In the beginning, the pyramid of life was low and squat; the food chains short and simple. Evolution has added layer after layer, link after link. Man is one of thousands of accretions to the height and complexity of the pyramid. Science has given us many doubts, but it has given us at least one certainty: the trend of evolution is to elaborate and diversify the biota.

Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed: some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats, and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life. There is always a net loss by downhill wash, but this is normally small and offset by the decay of rocks. It is deposited in the ocean and, in the course of geological time, raised to form new lands and new pyramids...

The process of altering the pyramid for human occupation releases stored energy, and this often gives rise, during the pioneering period, to a deceptive exuberance of plant and animal life, both wild and tame. These releases of biotic capital tend to becloud or postpone the penalties of violence.

This thumbnail sketch of land as an energy circuit conveys three basic ideas:

- (1) That land is not merely soil.
- (2) That the native plants and animals kept the energy circuit open; others may or may not.
- (3) That man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen.

These ideas, collectively, raise two basic issues: Can the land adjust itself to the new order? Can the desired alterations be accomplished with less violence?

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The Outlook

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land...

The case for a land ethic would appear hopeless but for the minority which is in obvious revolt against these 'modern' trends.

The 'key log' which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem.

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.

...I have purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as an ethic is ever 'written'. Only the most superficial student of history supposes that Moses 'wrote' the Decalogue; it evolved in the minds of a thinking community, and Moses wrote a tentative summary of it for a 'seminar'. I say tentative because evolution never stops...

By and large, our present problem is one of attitudes and implements. We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use.

* I have left out from the section on "The Community Concept" a line about Abraham that is completely incorrect. Leopold wrote, "In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves. In the biotic community, a parallel situation exists. *Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham's mouth.* At the present moment, the assurance with which we regard this assumption is inverse to the degree of our education."

Here Leopold displays prejudices and ignorance many people share about the Biblical account of our relationship with the earth. His characterization of Abraham does indeed reflect some interpretations of Genesis, but the significance of the land of Canaan in the Torah itself is quite the opposite: Canaan is praised for being a land where humans have no direct control over the land's fertility, and must depend on rain instead of irrigation, which in turn depends on God's affirmation of the goodness of their way of living. In the Torah, this is inextricably linked to two things: equity and justice for all residents whether rich or poor, native or stranger, and letting the land rest in Sabbatical and Jubilee years.

Other notes: Leopold's conclusion, "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" stands in essence, but his emphasis on stability sounds a lot like 'the balance of nature', which he briefly critiques. ('Balance' in this sense can imply stasis, which is contradicted by ideas about 'dynamic equilibrium' in ecology, and 'punctuated equilibrium' in evolutionary theory.) A further problem is this: how shall we measure beauty in any way that is not so thoroughly anthropocentric as to undermine Leopold's objective that we learn to see ourselves merely as citizens rather than masters or stewards of the biosphere? Yet if we conjecture a human instinct towards 'biophilia'—an instinctual love for life—as Edmund Wilson does, then our sense of beauty should align with the need to nurture biodiversity. If we limit the scope of 'stability' to specific localities in time and space, we can arrive at a conception of what is 'right' that still works in relation to current ecological theory. Less significantly, Leopold's characterization of *The Odyssey* and Odysseus' Greece, with which he begins the essay, has also been challenged. His general point stands regardless.

About this abridgment: Two longer sections, along with the introduction, have been left out entirely. They are: "Substitutes for a Land Ethic" and "Land Health and the A-B Cleavage".

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