

# Aldo Leopold

Aldo Leopold is acknowledged by some as the father of wildlife conservation in this country. What may be a surprise to some is that he was one of the early leaders of the American wilderness movement. Throughout his life he played many roles: wildlife manager, hunter, husband, father, naturalist, wilderness advocate, poet, scientist, philosopher, and visionary. Yet he is best known as author of *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. Beyond his descriptions of the natural world, in this writing Leopold articulated an innovative idea known as the "land ethic," a new way of thinking and acting toward the land.



*Aldo Leopold seated on rimrock above the Rio Gavilan in northern Mexico while on a bow hunting trip in 1938. (Photo courtesy Aldo Leopold Foundation)*

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

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth.... The land is one organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the co-operations. You can regulate them--cautiously--but not abolish them.

The outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little we know about it. The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: "What good is it?" If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.  
----- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*

The roots of Leopold's concept of a "land ethic" can be traced to his birthplace on the bluffs of the Mississippi River near Burlington, Iowa. As a youngster, he developed a zealous appreciation and interest in the natural world, spending countless hours on

adventures in the woods, prairies, and river backwaters of a then relatively wild Iowa. This early attachment to the natural world, coupled with an uncommon skill for both observation and writing, led him to pursue a degree in forestry at Yale University.

Fresh from graduate school at Yale, he established himself as a forward thinker within the Forest Service. Although Leopold was greatly influenced by Gifford Pinchot, who advocated "the wise use" of forests—the efficient, utilitarian-based management and development of the nation's public and private forestlands—Leopold gradually came to rigorously reject such "economic determinism." During his tenure with the Forest Service, he began to see the land as a living organism and developed the concept of community. This concept became the foundation upon which he became conservation's most influential advocate.

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, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of 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 had 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...

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—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 hunters' 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 destitute, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.

----- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*

Through persuasion, fueled by an ability to speak and write about the magic of the wilderness, Leopold convinced his Washington bosses to adopt a concept that was unique at the turn of the last century: That pieces of wild land should be set aside and kept untamed. On June 3, 1924, three-quarters of a million acres of mountains, rivers and desert in New Mexico was administratively (rather than Congressionally) designated as the Gila Wilderness, the first area in the world to be managed as a wilderness area. That same year, Leopold left the southwest and accepted a transfer to the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, where he served as associate director and began teaching at the University of Wisconsin in 1928. Leopold's cornerstone book *Game Management* (1933) defined the fundamental skills and techniques for managing and restoring wildlife populations. This landmark work created a new science that intertwined forestry, agriculture, biology, zoology, ecology, education and communication. Soon after its publication, the University of Wisconsin created a new department, the Department of Game Management, and appointed Leopold as its first chair.

Leopold's unique gift for communicating scientific concepts was only equal to his fervor for putting theories into practice. He published over 300 articles, papers, newsletters, and letters, but his articles on wilderness, wrote his biographer Curt Meine, established him "as the nation's foremost spokesman for the preservation of wild country, and sparked a national debate over what became known as 'the wilderness ideal.'"

In 1935, the Leopold family purchased a worn-out farm near Baraboo, Wisconsin, in an area known as the sand counties. It is here Leopold put into action his beliefs that the same tools people used to disrupt the landscape could also be used to rebuild it. An old chicken coop, fondly known as the Shack, served as a haven and land laboratory for the Leopold family, friends, and graduate students. And it was here Leopold visualized many of the essays in *A Sand County Almanac*.

On April 21, 1948, Leopold was stricken with a heart attack while fighting a grass fire on a neighbor's farm. He was 61 years old.

## A Brief Chronology

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**1887** Aldo Leopold, born in Burlington, Iowa on January 11, eldest of four children of Carl and Clara Leopold. Educated in Burlington public schools until 1903.

**1904** Attends Lawrenceville School in New Jersey from January, 1904, to May, 1905, to prepare for college.

**1905** Attends Sheffield Scientific School at Yale (class of 1908).

**1906** Begins coursework at Yale Forest School (Master of Forestry, 1909).

**1909** Joins U.S. Forest Service (established 1905). First field assignment as assistant on Apache National Forest in southeastern Arizona.

**1911** Transferred to Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico as deputy supervisor, then supervisor. Founds and edits Carson Pine Cone, a newsletter.

**1912** Marries Estella Bergere of Santa Fe on October 9. Five children: Starker, 1913; Luna, 1915; Nina, 1917; Carl, 1919; Estella, 1927.

**1914** Assigned to U.S. Forest Service district headquarters in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the office of grazing. In 1915 placed in charge of new work on recreation, game, fish, and publicity.

**1918** After U.S. entry into World War I alters Forest Service priorities, leaves the service in January to accept a full-time position as secretary of the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce.

**1919** Rejoins Forest Service in August as assistant district forester in charge of operations, with responsibility for business organization, personnel finance, roads and trails, and fire control for the twenty million acres of national forests in the Southwest.

**1922** Submits formal proposal for administration of Gila National Forest as a wilderness area (administratively designated by Forest Service on June 3, 1924).

**1923** Completes Watershed Handbook (mimeographed) for district, reflecting observations on numerous inspection tours of southwestern forests.

**1924** Accepts transfer to U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin as assistant (later associate) director.

**1928** Leaves Forest Service Products Laboratory and Forest Service to conduct game surveys of Midwestern states, funded by the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute. Prepares survey reports for nine states and publishes book-length summary (1931).

**1930** As chairman of the Game Policy Institute of the American Game Conference, leads in formulating an American Game Policy, adopted in December.

**1933** In July, accepts appointment to a new chair of game management in the Department of Agriculture Economics at the University of Wisconsin.

**1935** In January, assists in founding the Wilderness Society. In April, acquires the Wisconsin River farm ("the Shack") that would be the setting for the almanac sketches. In Autumn, studies forestry and wildlife management in Germany on a Carl Schurz fellowship.

**1936** Assists in establishing a society of wildlife specialists, by 1937 renamed the Wildlife Society. In September, makes first of two pack trips along the Rio Gavilan in Chihuahua, Mexico.

**1939** Becomes chairman of a new Department of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin.

**1941** Develops initial plans for a volume of ecological essays.

**1943** Appointed by governor to a six-year term of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, a tenure dominated by debates over deer policy.

**1947** In December, submits revised book manuscript titled "Great Possessions" to Oxford University Press which notifies him of acceptance on April 14, 1948.

**1948** Stricken by heart attack and dies on April 21 while fighting a grass fire on a neighbor's farm at the shack. Burial in Burlington, Iowa, his birthplace.

**1949** "Great Possessions" final editing overseen by Luna B. Leopold and published as A Sand County Almanac.

## References

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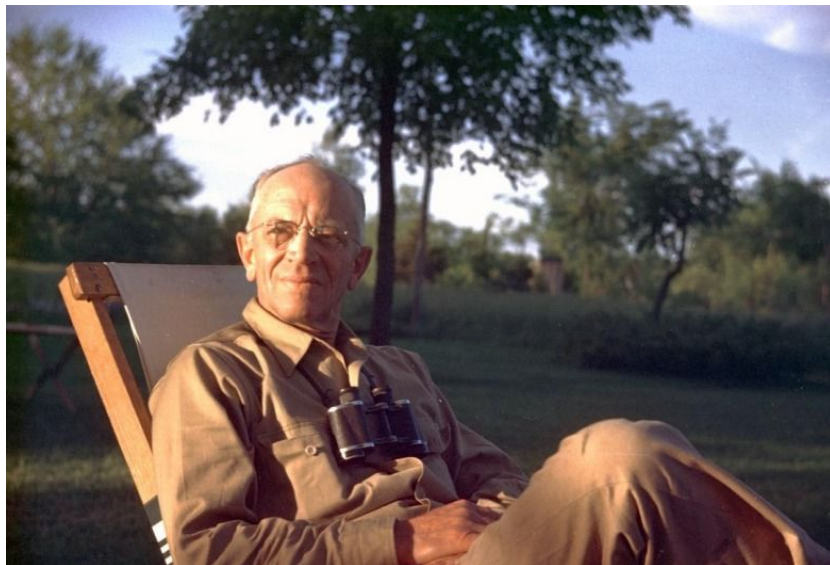
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Aldo Leopold circa 1947. Photo: Aldo Leopold Foundation/UW Archives