

ALDO LEOPOLD AT YALE

The Center for Humans and Nature was actively involved in the Symposium and Celebration Honoring Aldo Leopold's Graduation Centennial from the "Yale Forest School," Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, CT, Friday, April 3rd, 2009. The following two articles are based on presentations delivered at the Symposium by Center directors Curt Meine and Bruce Jennings.

Conservation Science, Ethics, Policy, and Practice

CURT MEINE

Wes Jackson—sitting there four rows back—has said to Courtney White—sitting over there—that “We live in the most important moment in history.” I will leave it to Wes and Courtney later on in the day to explain that comment in greater detail. But it is in this spirit that I am going to open up this morning's discussion by placing Aldo Leopold's legacy in the large context of conservation history. And I'm going to start actually with an allusion to a place where my friend Peter Brown (on this side of the room!) has been working with his colleagues at McGill University in Montreal: the Cree village of Wemindji, along the east shore of Hudson Bay in Quebec.

I open with this because there's a nice connection here. When Leopold was a student here at Yale, he would return during his summers to the Midwest and to a vacation cottage that the family had in the Les Cheneaux Islands at the north end of Lake Huron. There he nurtured for many years a great dream: to take a long canoe trip from the Great Lakes up through the Soo and eventually to Hudson Bay. This was going to be his great wilderness experience. But he never did it. It always remained just a dream in his mind.

But many decades later Aldo Leopold did in a sense arrive on the shore of James Bay. In 2006 Peter helped organize a project meeting at Wemindji, and invited me along to speak about “Leopold's Land Ethics: Stories of

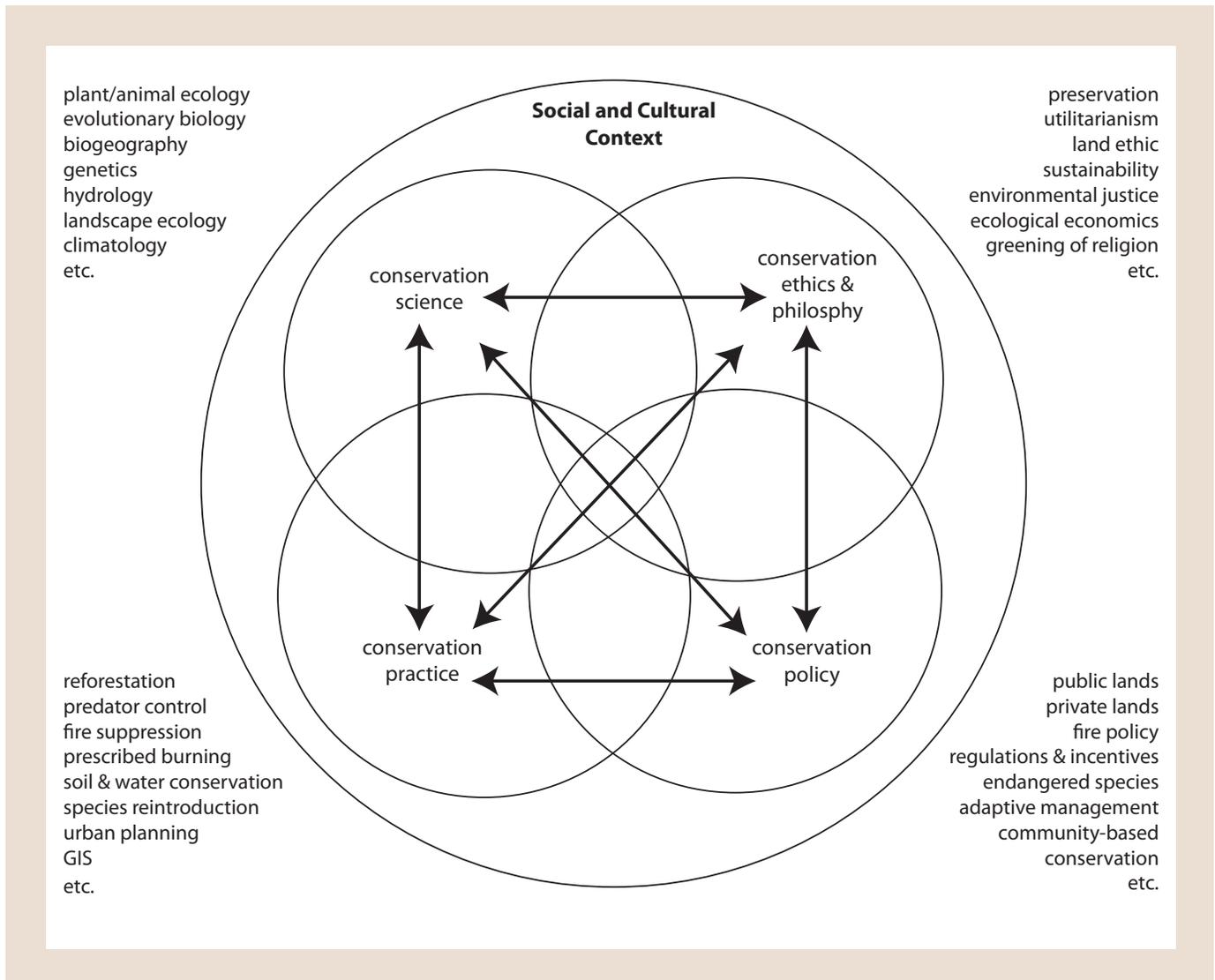
Wisconsin.” I have often used this as an example—and I could use many—of Aldo Leopold's legacy growing and evolving through connections that continue to be made across geographic, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries.

This February we had something of a “pre-union” of many of the people here today in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Several of us here were also involved in that gathering. Of course, after Leopold graduated from Yale he went on to take his first job with the U.S. Forest Service in the Southwest, and so our colleagues in that region are celebrating Leopold's arrival there in this centennial year as well. They kicked things off in February with a conference designed to consider the diverse cultural roots and expressions of the land ethic in the Southwest. And so, the discussion of Leopold's legacy at that meeting and in all the events this year provide an important opportunity to explore the continuing evolution of the land ethic as a vital idea.

With all this in mind, let me try in just a few minutes to put the morning's discussion into a very broad context. I'm going to use a simple Venn diagram that I often use to frame the large story of environmental history.

When I am asked if there is a single book that one should read to learn the entire story of conservation and environmental thinking, I always have to answer that such a book does not yet exist. To tell that story, one would need to know and integrate multiple fields of knowledge, and vast realms of detail within them. It's a large and complex task, and no one has yet taken it on. Lately I've used this diagram to frame and explain the challenge. I find this useful mostly for myself. Maybe you'll find it useful, too.

We have many exemplary books and scholarly articles that examine various aspects of the history of the conservation *science* (I use the term *conservation* here. You can plug in your preferred term—*environmental science*, or perhaps *sustainability science*.) There's obviously a history to the science, and the many fields of science involved. We can list some of many scientific disciplines relevant to conservation, each with their own rich intellectual history. And we could enjoy many long lectures and books on



each of these. We have quite an expansive bookshelf of material available on the history of various dimensions of conservation science, and our understanding continues to evolve.

But conservation is not a matter of science alone. Conservation science intersects with conservation *practice*—the application of that knowledge. In the realm of conservation practice, we can identify many particular activities and techniques and technologies—everything from historic reforestation efforts through things like predator control (so important, of course to Leopold’s story), from hydraulic engineering to the advent of GIS. These practices have their own rich history. Likewise, there is a rich and intersecting history of the development of conservation *ethics and philosophy*. These humanistic dimensions of conservation would again include a variety of fields, from literature to theology to environmental history and environmental ethics. And finally, there is the

realm of conservation *policy*. Within the policy arena we might include such endeavors as wildlife law, ecological economics, and land use policy, all of which, again, have their own rich history.

We are of course fortunate to have available many critical scholarly contributions that provide us with narratives of the developments in conservation science, practice, philosophy, and policy. But what is most interesting—and difficult—in grasping the large story of conservation history is how all of these realms interact in complex and dynamic ways. To write the ultimate comprehensive text in conservation history, one would need to examine all the complex feedback loops at work here. For example, a new advance in science may suggest a new ethical insight, which inspires a new practice on the ground, which might require a change in policy, which might in turn lead to a new ethical insight. Change in conservation ricochets around and around and around as history advances. And,

of course, all of this occurs within a complex and ever-changing social and cultural context. And beyond this is the world itself, the ever-changing natural world that includes all of the above.

Leopold for me has been such a rich and continuing source of insight and inspiration because he worked within all these realms. And one can track him bouncing around these circles, always in a critical and creative manner. That is what I have always found so amazing in Leopold's life story. It provides a unique transect across the history of 20th century conservation science, policy, philosophy, and practice. Understanding that story has helped me, at least, to get a better handle on where we are and where we're going.



Curt Meine, PhD is Director of Conservation History at the Center for Humans and Nature.

Leopoldian Professionalism

BRUCE JENNINGS

This session is entitled, “Looking Forward: Leopold For The 21st Century. What Would He Say To His Hundredth Anniversary Class Graduating This Year?” I’m going to take a slightly different approach to the question posed to our panel. I really don’t know what Aldo Leopold *would* say to the class of 2009. In good philosophical fashion I will dodge the scholarly question and instead address myself to what I think he *should* say, and probably would if he were looking at the human prospect through 2009 eyes.

One thing in particular caught my eye in looking through some of Leopold's writings for a clue to guide me. It was his emphasis on the importance and indeed the power of changing minds—not just manipulating “incentives” or motivations, but changing whole ways of

thinking and acting in the world; transforming outlooks, feelings, desires, intellectual understanding, imagination, values and commitments. He sometimes called this endeavor, “the development of an ecological conscience.” And he believed it went hand in hand with an education about the reality of nature as a system, as a pyramid, as an interdependent nexus or network of life and of energy. An ecological *conscience* goes hand in hand with an ecological *consciousness*.

“Ecological science,” he wrote, “has wrought a change in the mental eye.” That’s the sentence that I want to use as my jumping-off point for my remarks. This remark occurs in a passage where Leopold is saying that Daniel Boone understood nature and an ecosystem and the land in a certain intuitive way, but that we now today have a deeper understanding than he did. Boone lived on a surface; ecology allows us to see more deeply beneath the surface. And it actually dovetails nicely with the passage that was read at the beginning of this session by Mary Evelyn Tucker about how the ecologist is a lonely figure, because he or she can see things that most of the rest of us miss.

This sort of formulation leads me to ask the question, “Is ecology a profession?” What are schools of environment studies supposed to do? Are they creating a group of people with a special kind of education that we ought to refer to as a profession, and if so, what does that mean? And what should professionals be doing in our society today given the problems we’ve been talking about all day long?

I think Leopold would have said to us that he’s concerned in 2009 about the potential loss in our culture and our society of two essential things. (In a recent book Jane Jacobs actually has voiced this concern.) The first is a loss of an ideal or culture of professionalism, in particular ethical, civic professionalism. And the second, consequent to the loss of professionalism, is an atrophy of our society’s moral and natural imagination. Finally, with both a loss of civic professionalism and the atrophy of a moral imagination concerning the biotic community (the “land”) comes a crippling of our social capacity to realize anything like the land ethic in our policies and practices. This is nothing less than a crisis of ecologically responsible democratic citizenship.

Faced with this prospect, Leopold—and all intellectuals and educators in the conservation movement today—would and should charge the graduates of Yale FES to recover, recapture, and recreate that sense of ethical professionalism and that sense of moral imagination, and to help nurture and restore the vital connection between our land and our democracy.

Now, what do I mean by ethical professionalism, in what sense might ecology be a profession, and how should

professionals be educated? I suggest to you that we think in terms of the following three distinctions—which I believe are Leopoldian in spirit, if not in terminology or actual argumentation.

The three distinctions are as follows: (1) Education is not the same as training, or mastering a given body of information. (2) Being a professional is not the same thing as having technical or theoretical expertise. (3) Having a calling or a profession is not the same thing as having a career.

To develop a new kind of mental eye, as Leopold put it and explored it in the *Sand County Almanac*, is to develop a capacity for ethical judgment and discernment. It is also to develop a sense of commitment and responsibility. To have a profession is to have something to profess, and to have the qualities of mind and heart adequate to professing it with wisdom and finesse.

That's why there is a deep affinity, certainly in the Judeo-Christian tradition at any rate, between the notion of calling and the notion of profession. Leopold's writings are replete with narratives of calling. In the Bible Abraham, Moses, and other prophets were called by God into a relationship that established a moral transformation, a covenant. Leopold, echoing these traditional memories, describes himself being called by the voice of cranes and by the eye of a dying wolf. To be called is to be open to hearing or seeing a source of value larger and more fundamental than ourselves and our immediate interests. And such openness in turn leads one to embrace that higher value when it is confronted. That embrace is deeply transformative.

Precisely because calling and profession are so powerful, judgment and critical discernment are all the more crucial. There are true calls and false ones. In the practical application of knowledge to real-world decisions and actions, values are complex and subject to interpretation in light of context and circumstance. Values are often multiple and in conflict with one another.

So to respond to the call of a profession is not simply making a commitment per se; it is making a commitment critically, reflectively, with discernment. It entails a degree of mastering, of critical reasoning capacities and reasoned ethical judgment. *Education that does not make provision for and guidance toward such mastery is not education at all; it's technical training that prepares for a career, but does not enable a calling.*

Are we training, in our schools of environment studies, a cadre of individuals who have the specialized knowledge that gives them a new mental eye, but also that sense of professionalism or calling that shapes moral discernment and moral judgment? If we aren't, if we are not giving them

a Leopoldian mental eye of values as well as facts, where will we as society get such vision? If we are not training the next generation of ecological experts to be professionals, can we do without such ecological professionals? I think that in the years ahead we cannot do well without them; we need their vision and leadership and we can ill afford to be guided by technical experts lacking in ethical professionalism. Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, as Max Weber put it grimly.

Now, if we can educate and produce a new generation of ecological professionals what are they supposed to do? The essence of being a professional, I would argue, is really not the application of specialized knowledge to particular problems, so much as it is the practice of a kind of civic and moral education for the society as a whole.

And what is it that professionals educate society about? It is to develop in all of us as democratic citizens an expanded sense of moral and civic imagination. And in the case of ecology, natural imagination.

Physicians don't simply apply technical skill to cure a physiological problem. They shape our understanding of our own body and our own health. Similarly I contend that all professionals have this role of nurturing an expanded moral imagination and civic capacity. That's why it's a false opposition (alas often posed) to pit expertise against democracy; professional leadership against grassroots, participation and empowerment. Of course, technocratic elites often impede and undermine democratic governance, but Leopoldian professionals would not, they would nurture and educate and civil-ize it.



Bruce Jennings, MA, is Editor of Minding Nature and Director of the Center for Humans and Nature in New York.