

From the Upper Sugar River to the World: Aldo Leopold and Community-based Conservation

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For many years I have used a favorite image in presentations about Aldo Leopold and the history of conservation in Wisconsin (and beyond). In the black-and-white photo, Leopold and one of his graduate students are visiting a farm in rural Dane County. It is a hot summer day in the late 1930s. Leopold's sleeves are rolled up and the farmer's son is shirtless. Leopold was a few years into his career at the University of Wisconsin, breaking new ground in wildlife ecology and management. The farm is along the Upper Sugar River and the farmer is Reuben Paulson. Paulson and several neighboring farmers had been collaborating with Leopold and his students. In the photo, all stand in the barnyard, exchanging the latest news perhaps of the drought, crops, pheasants and quail, the progress of the students' study, the latest observations of Paulson and his boys.



Aldo Leopold (second from the left) at a farm in the Upper Sugar River Watershed in the 1930s. Image courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

Why does this image stand out for me? I suppose I like the notion of the farmer and the professor—who just happened to be one of the world's leading experts in wildlife conservation—having access to and working with one another. Somewhere in the portrait of their conversation I find the essence of the Wisconsin Idea: listening, cultivating relationships, sharing knowledge and experience, and always keeping the next generation in mind.

It also illustrates what was a dominant theme for Leopold in these years: encouraging collaboration among landowners, conservationists, students, scientists, and citizens to restore wildlife and watersheds. The Riley Game Cooperative (as the

project was known) was one of several such projects that Leopold was involved in at the time. They reflected Leopold's hard-earned insight that conservation had to address the land's many needs simultaneously and at the proper scale. Conservation had to concern itself with all the qualities and values inherent in the land. To focus only on soil or water or wildlife or scenery was to end up with "lop-sided conservation." "Each of the various public interests in land," Leopold wrote, "is better off when all cooperate than when all compete with each other."

Leopold's early efforts to put these insights into practice provide the historical foundations for what we now call community-based (or collaborative) conservation. In the decades since, we have acquired a great deal more understanding of how watersheds and wildlife populations work. But to put that knowledge to work on the land still requires the same essential ingredient that Leopold identified: the willingness to cooperate to enhance shared values and meet common conservation goals. The work of the Upper Sugar River Watershed Association, and of watershed-based organizations everywhere, carry on that vital spirit of cooperation—even as the need for caring stewardship extends from the Sugar River to the world.