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Wisconsin Honors Aldo Leopold? Not This Year

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Since 2004 the first weekend in March in Wisconsin has been celebrated as Aldo Leopold Weekend. This year a sober reality darkens the celebration. Aldo Leopold’s legacy is under assault on all fronts. In its details, Governor Walker’s proposed state budget undercuts the foundations of conservation and environmental stewardship that Leopold and so many others put into place over the last four generations.

Leopold and his contemporaries worked to pass the Conservation Act of 1927. The act established what is now the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and provided for an independent commission—now the state’s Natural Resources Board—to oversee the department, select its secretary, and set policy. The aim was to buffer decision-makers against the politicization of issues involving our lands and waters, forests and wildlife. In 1995 Governor Thompson undermined this arrangement, turning the DNR secretary into a governor-appointed position. In 2010 Governor Doyle vetoed legislation that would have restored the independent secretary. Governor Walker’s budget pulls out the last cornerstone, turning the Natural Resources Board into a merely advisory body.

Leopold recognized the acquisition of public lands as a necessary part of a balanced, long-term conservation strategy. The governor’s proposed budget halts until 2028 any further land acquisitions and easements under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program—named after former governors Warren Knowles (a Republican) and Gaylord Nelson (a Democrat), both known for their commitment to conservation. It says: we will no longer make investments in our shared conservation future.

Leopold understood research to be “a practical and necessary basis for [natural resource] management” and devoted himself as a professor at the University of Wisconsin to strengthening the scientific foundations of conservation. Governor Walker’s proposed budget would cut deeply into the DNR’s Bureau of Science Services, reducing by 31% the number of research positions.

As the state’s wildlife extension specialist, Leopold was devoted to sharing his expertise with the citizens of Wisconsin, exemplifying the Wisconsin Idea’s goals of putting knowledge to work for the public good. He even spoke regularly on the precursor of Wisconsin’s public radio network. The proposed budget cuts to the University of Wisconsin System and the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board will significantly impact the UW-Extension network and public broadcasting.

As a teacher, Leopold understood that it all begins with education. In 1935 Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to require schools to provide instruction in conservation principles. Teachers around the state turned to Aldo Leopold. Ever since the state has been recognized as a national leader in the field. Now we are poised to go backwards. The budget abolishes the Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education and the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (both housed at the UW-Stevens Point). The budget also eliminates the authority and funding of the state Department of Public Instruction’s environmental education consultant.

At the University of Wisconsin Leopold taught farmer’s short courses, undergraduate students, and some of the first graduate students in the new field of wildlife ecology and management. His influence on conservation science continues to ripple out across the state, the nation, and the world. The extraordinary \$300 million cut in funding to the UW System affects every campus and department and program, and ultimately every citizen, in Wisconsin. Leopold’s words remind us that, in a state where the university is so close to the core of our identity, such cuts will affect not only our fellow

citizens and future generations, but also our “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

Beyond these particular impacts, Governor Walker’s proposed budget reflects a deeper, more profound failure to appreciate just how interwoven our economy and our land are, and always will be. A healthy economy depends on healthy lands, waters, and ecosystems, and on individuals, businesses, and institutions that see, understand, and honor these connections. Aldo Leopold has a visionary grasp of this basic fact. “We fancy that industry supports us,” he once wrote, “forgetting what supports industry.”

In too many ways, Governor Walker’s proposed budget is economically and ethically irresponsible. Generations of Wisconsin citizen-conservationists have protected, restored, and sustained the foundations of our state’s economy, communities, and landscapes. In honoring Aldo Leopold, we honor all those who came before us in this never-ending work. In undermining their legacy, we earn the reproach of those who will come after us.

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