

replacing Native America with a neo-Europe. A privatized landscape, with farming and Old World domesticated animals and a rationally-ordered environment, collided with the agency of America's wild animals. Wild animals native to the new world ignored property boundaries, feasted on introduced stock, and otherwise subverted colonization for decades. And their very abundance quickly converted them into market commodities, ensnaring not only native peoples in the deerskin trade and in tribal wars over beavers and bison, but undermining colonization plans by creating a kind of social de-evolution among the settlers themselves.

From this latter emerged a classic *American* frontier type, the settler hunter who—as long as the animals lasted—cared little about colonial plans, let stock run wild in the woods, and moved repeatedly as huntable deer and bison steadily receded westward. That is a pattern that played out among some Plains Indians, as well, who abandoned farming and mounted up on horses to hunt bison as long as they lasted. This is likely an old pattern in human history, and thus it had old, expected results. Indeed, American treaty-makers even planned for Indian land titles to extinguish once animals were gone, as inevitably they would be.

Smalley's strategy is to concentrate her research on the British colonies, largely the Southern ones, a narrative she ultimately tracks to the bison story on the Southern Plains in the late 19th century. She performs extremely careful

research into local colonial and state sources, as well as drawing on a rich host of other first-hand accounts. Structurally her book devotes its chapters in turn to beavers, wolves, fishes, deer, and bison, each dedicated to showing how those particular species, in their own way, undermined settlement plans, at least for several decades or a century or two. The author writes her story effectively, although admittedly, this is not a book one pulls off the shelf for a read, as reflected in its price. It is the kind of book one takes notes on.

*Wild by nature* tells us at several points that it is providing the "animals' side of the story" (p. 10) and is "an animal history of colonization" (p. 238). I liked *Wild by nature's* carefully-reasoned arguments very much, and I will recommend it widely as an important book. While I certainly endorse the recent effort in historical writing to take wild creatures far more seriously than we ever have before, I am a bit less optimistic than Smalley about our ability to grasp and explain how animals other than ourselves see this world we share. Nonetheless, I'll applaud the book that attempts it.

DAN FLORES

*History of the American West*

*University of Montana*

*Santa Fe, New Mexico USA*

*E-mail: dlfnewmexico@gmail.com*

*Ecology*, 99(6), 2018, pp. 1510–1511  
© 2018 by the Ecological Society of America

## Challenging the darkness

---

Freyfogle, Eric. 2017. **Our oldest task: making sense of our place in nature.** University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois. 240 p. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-226-32639-9 (alk. paper); \$36.00 (e-book), ISBN: 978-0-226-32642-9.

---

*Key words:* conservation; economics; environmental justice; ethics; land use.

On April 11, 1938, Aldo Leopold delivered a lecture to colleagues and students at the University of Wisconsin entitled "Engineering and Conservation." He concluded the lecture with these words:

We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it. (*The River of the Mother of God and other essays by Aldo Leopold*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991: 254).

Since the lecture was republished in the early 1990s this has become one of Leopold's most quotable quotes. It seems

Leopold's hard realism and millennial overtones speak to this generation's conservation challenges as much as they did to those of his Great Depression and Dust Bowl contemporaries. His statement provides the frame and title for Eric Freyfogle's wide-ranging exploration of conservation values, environmental philosophy, and public policy.

Freyfogle is Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Over the last three decades, he has contributed essential works on the legal underpinning of environmental policy—and the shifting foundations of the law in history, science, and philosophy. Freyfogle's writings on private property as an institution have been especially noteworthy. In an era when claims about private property contribute to a powerful backlash against environmental policies, Freyfogle has provided indispensable service, bringing lucid insights to our understanding of conservation, property, and civic responsibility. See especially his books *Bounded people, boundless lands: envisioning a new land ethic* (1998), *The land we share: private property and the common good* (2003), and *Finding common ground on the ownership of land* (2007).

Freyfogle is also a scholar of Aldo Leopold's work and thought. In *Our oldest task* he takes up the question Leopold begged: What will it take for our species to live on the

land—on Earth—“without spoiling it”? Freyfogle submits that, whatever else is required, we need first to comprehend our cultural dilemma, to “set the full intellectual stage” for a “recasting of our worldview.” (p. 5) His book thus provides a sweeping review of the historical, social, economic, and ethical dimensions of our contemporary predicament, with the aim of advancing a “new, more ecological perspective on the world.” (p. 5) In so doing, Freyfogle offers an overview of the interdisciplinary intellectual framework that he has constructed across his career. General readers and environmental scientists and scholars alike will find Freyfogle a provocative and informative guide as, true to his subtitle, he seeks to make sense of our place in nature.

Freyfogle develops his framework through eight tightly packed chapters. He begins with the philosophical foundations. Chapter 1 (“Composing the world”) examines the building blocks of Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks to postmodern deconstructionists, to identify the flaws (with special emphasis on reductionism) that have brought us to the brink. Chapter 2 (“Use and abuse”) moves directly to the challenge of differentiating legitimate human use of nature from ill-advised misuse, highlighting the evolution of ecology’s understanding of natural and anthropogenic dynamism in ecosystems. In Chapter 3 (“Science and morals”) Freyfogle defines more clearly the roles and relationship of science and ethics. Chapter 4 (“Liberal fragments”) considers our culture’s process of recognizing and attributing value and moral worth in our social and ecological relations, leading immediately to consideration of contemporary concepts of rights, liberty, and equality. In Chapter 5, “An Ecological foundation,” Freyfogle contrasts the historic focus in American jurisprudence (and across the traditional political spectrum) on the rights of living individuals with ecology’s view of complexity, connectivity, and relationships across scales of time and space. Recognizing that “it is hard to imagine a people collectively living on land in good ways unless they treat one another fairly” (p. 138), Freyfogle devotes Chapter 6 (“Social justice”) to issues of environmental justice, from the local to the global scale. Chapter 7 (“The Capitalist market”) addresses the triumph and tragedy of global capitalism, in particular its propensity for reducing citizens to consumers and rendering natural assets into commodities. In the final chapter, “The Path ahead,” Freyfogle moves from diagnosis to prescription. Skeptical of what he sees as an inadequate, rights-based moral extensionism approach, he calls instead for “a vast overhaul in moral thought” (p. 210) that, over the long run, can and must redefine our entire ethical frame.

This capsule summary fails to convey the fine latticework of arguments by which Freyfogle fills in these primary themes and weaves them together. He strives throughout to reclaim from the reflexive libertarianism of recent decades a coherent commitment to the public interest and common good. Rather than reject liberty (which, he notes, “comes in varied forms”), Freyfogle calls for “an alternative moral vision. . . the positive, collective liberty of working with other community members

to protect and enhance the community’s home.” (p. 202) Freyfogle the professor of law well recognizes, as he has throughout his writing, that changing laws, incentives, and policies alone won’t get us there. “The reform effort needs to stay focused on cultural change. If the culture shifts in good ways, our uses of nature will get better.” (p. 202)

In his interdisciplinary breadth and command, Freyfogle at his best is reminiscent of polymath Lewis Mumford, analyzing the impact of social power structures on our communities, economies, and ecosystems. His range of reference points is vast, from Aristotle, Bacon, and Kant to Thomas Paine, Charles Darwin, and Donella Meadows (to name just a few). Any reader will come away with an appreciation of the many cultural “dots”—some familiar, some not—that Freyfogle connects. This is especially welcome respite for those seeking clarity and grounding amid today’s hurricane-force ideological winds.

At the same time, an ambitious synthesis such as *Our oldest task* invariably has gaps. The framework is situated solidly in the Western philosophical and cultural tradition, and thus misses opportunities to tie in non-Western, Native American, and other Indigenous histories and modes of understanding. Other essential sources and bodies of thought are absent. (My notes include, for example, feminism and postcolonialism; Buddhism, Quakerism, and other faith traditions; Henry David Thoreau, Hans Jonas, and Hannah Arendt; and such key contemporaries as Elinor Ostrom and Fikret Berkes.) The presentation stays almost exclusively at the high ground of abstraction. I found myself hungering for place-based applications and case studies (ironically, such a strong feature of Freyfogle’s other books). At the same time, the focus here is primarily at the level of Leopold’s “piece of land,” and the good use thereof. At only a few points does Freyfogle draw direct connections to the stewardship of our global atmospheric, oceanic, genetic, and biodiversity commons.

With all of these strengths and weaknesses, *Our Oldest Task* could not be timelier. Freyfogle soberly notes that, in our civic lives, we are now confronted by governmental systems dominated by powerful economic elites, and that the costs of this dominance obviously go beyond environmental degradation. Environmental reformers, he states, must work pragmatically with others, across ideological divides, “to challenge this grave and rising darkness.” (p. 204) He ends however on a cautiously positive note, seeing evidence for “a new turn” in our moral order and avowing that a revitalized conservation ethic “can give it ideas and values, direction, and considerable power.” (p. 211) The “oldest task” is also a never-ending one. Freyfogle helps to gird us for the struggles now at hand.

CURT MEINE

*Aldo Leopold Foundation and Center for Humans and Nature*  
PO Box 77  
Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913 USA  
E-mail: curtmeine@gmail.com