



Aldo Leopold at 130

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“There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot.” [Aldo Leopold, from the foreword to *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).]

The eleventh of January marks the 130th anniversary of the birth of conservationist, ecologist, and writer [Aldo Leopold](#). As one of Leopold’s [biographers](#), I have become accustomed over the years to marking these milestone dates. They tend to bring forth a strong pulse of articles, commentaries, and editorials. Some are celebratory, perhaps built around a choice bit of Leopold prose:

“To arrive too early in the marsh is an adventure in pure listening; the ear roams at will among the noises of the night, without let or hindrance from hand or eye. When you hear a mallard being audibly enthusiastic about his soup, you are free to picture a score guzzling among the duckweeds. When one widgeon squeals, you may postulate a squadron without fear of visual contradiction. And when a flock of bluebills, pitching pondward, tears the dark silk of heaven in one long rending nose-dive, you catch your breath at the sound, but there is nothing to see except stars.”

Some of the references are more wry, taking advantage of Leopold’s skill in subtly expressing consequential thoughts. “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” From such seeds whole discourses — whole movements — can grow. And have.

Some items veer more toward topical issues, for there is never a shortage of conservation-related topics in the news, and Leopold is a go-to source for supportive [quotations](#). This is especially the case at times when the core tenets of Leopold’s approach to conservation are at issue. Leopold emphasized, in his work and in his writing, the fundamental need in conservation for scientific research and information, interdisciplinary understanding, community participation, and public education. He called for more comprehensive definitions of economic value, and for an

expansion of our ethical sphere to embrace our relations to the entire “land community.” These remain contentious arenas of debate, and Leopold’s views remain trenchant:

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”

It is hard to imagine Leopold’s continuing ripple effect in the world apart from the role that his published works has played in advancing it. Seventy years ago this year, Leopold completed and submitted the manuscript for *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), his highly influential collection of essays. It is estimated that more than three million copies have been sold over the decades, and it has now been translated into a dozen languages. Over the last twenty-five years, as interest in Leopold’s work has continued to grow, several [collections](#) of his other articles and essays and previously unpublished works have appeared. And through a partnership of the Aldo Leopold Foundation and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the rich archival collection of [Leopold’s papers](#) have been digitized and made available to scholars.



Aldo Leopold (left) with Olaus Muire at the annual meeting of The Wilderness Society Council in Old Rag, Virginia, 1946. United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Public Domain via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Five years ago I was invited by [Oxford Bibliographies](#) to prepare the entry on [Leopold](#) for its “Ecology” section—a far more daunting task than I anticipated! Leopold’s own body of writings was large and diverse. Scholarship *on* Leopold, his many areas of influence, and especially his concept of a land ethic has expanded tremendously in volume and scope, over many decades. After realizing that I could hardly embrace the whole ocean, I made my best effort to distill it.

Scholarly interest in Leopold has hardly slowed since then. And so Oxford Bibliographies came knocking at my e-mail box again last summer, inviting me to update the entry. Over the last several weeks I have been at work on that job, surveying and summarizing the last five years of

published works on Leopold. Collectively, they reveal much about the state, not only of Leopold scholarship, but of current thinking in conservation, ecology, and environmental studies. We find scholars from a dozen different fields carefully examining, exploring, criticizing, and extending Leopold's thinking—on such diverse topics as [water and marine ethics](#), [global climate change and sustainability](#), [human health](#), urban studies, [ecological economics](#), and the [cultural context](#) of Leopold's early conservation advocacy. Most recently, Estella B. Leopold published a [personal account of life in the Leopold family](#). The youngest of the five Leopold siblings and a distinguished paleoecologist, Estella at the age of 90 remains active as an emeritus faculty member at the University of Washington and as a board member of the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Wisconsin.

It seems that Aldo Leopold, at 130 years old and counting, still inspires a sense of wonder, still suggests creative responses to our sobering social and environmental challenges, and still demands that we think critically about the “delights and dilemmas” that our relationship to the living world entails.

Featured Image credit: The shack near Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, where Aldo Leopold spent time and was inspired to write A Sand County Almanac. Photo by Jonathunder, GFDL 1.2 via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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