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## Teaching Conservation: The Leopold Legacy

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*Liberal education in wildlife is not merely a dilute dosage of technical education. It calls for somewhat different teaching materials and sometimes even different teachers. The objective is to teach the student to see the land, to understand what he sees, and [to] enjoy what he understands. I say land rather than wildlife, because wildlife cannot be understood without understanding the landscape as a whole. — Aldo Leopold, "The Role of Wildlife in Liberal Education"*

With these words, written in 1943, Aldo Leopold summed up much of what he had come to understand about the study and teaching of wildlife ecology. He himself had been a teacher for ten years at this point, and he knew well the pitfalls and opportunities inherent in conservation education. At the same time, a lifetime of devoted attention to wildlife had led him to the threshold of a new, broader philosophy of land health and ecological well-being — a philosophy which he was so eloquently incorporating into the pages of *A Sand County Almanac*. For Leopold, conservation consisted of equal parts action and reflection. "The real substance of conservation," he once wrote, "lies not in the physical projects of government, but in the mental processes of citizens."

And for those entrusted with the shaping of mental processes in future citizens — the teachers — Leopold had suggestions, culled from his own experience, which will remain relevant as long as the environment remains important to us.

We think of environmental education as a relatively new phenomenon, but it has its own untold history. In Wisconsin, one of the milestones was a 1935 law which made the teaching of conservation in public schools compulsory. Our current efforts along these lines are motivated by circumstances — toxic contaminants, groundwater pollution, population pressures, energy issues — that were scarcely imagined in 1935. Then, the concerns were simpler, if no less insidious: the depletion of Wisconsin's northern forests, the disappearance of its wildlife, soil erosion, and above all the imminent spectre of the Dust Bowl. After the 1935 bill was passed, Leopold in his role as educator and extension specialist would devote increasing amounts of his time and thought to the question of how best to prepare citizens to see, understand, and enjoy the land upon which they lived.

To pass a law was one thing; to make it work another. Leopold harbored no illusions about its real effects. Law or no law, education was still a function of the teacher's own excitement over the subject. "My guess," Leopold wrote in 1937, "is that the chief utility of compulsory laws is to lend official sanction to pre-existing enthusiasms among teachers, and to

stimulate the preparation of good courses, texts, exhibits, and other overhead services." In the years since, our knowledge of the environment has grown more sophisticated and our stockpile of good texts, exhibits, etc., has grown prodigiously. But teachers still awaken the interests of their students, in Leopold's words, "by the contagion of their enthusiasm, rather than by merely transmitting information."

Leopold appreciated the need to appeal, first and foremost, to the student's inborn curiosity. He nurtured a healthy skepticism of educational approaches that terrified young minds by "placing statistical horrors end-to-end," and that told students "what had happened, but not how or why." He was no less critical of materials that simplified conservation by avoiding its implications. In a review of a prospective textbook he wrote, "Conservation, without a keen realization of its vital conflicts, fails to rate as authentic human drama; it falls to the level of a mere Utopian dream. Paradox is the earmark of valid truth, and to the extent that any textbook fails to point this out, it fails [as a sound education tool]."

The alternative to these approaches? Trust the student's instincts. Encourage them in their interests. "I have no hope for conservation born of fear," he wrote during this period. "The 4-H boy who becomes curious about why red pines need more acid than white is closer to conservation than he who writes a prize essay on the dangers of timber famine." In short, education devoid of its sense of adventure was no education at all.

Leopold himself pursued understanding with the same eagerness that he usually reserved for October grouse hunts and mid-summer birdsongs. In his advice to teachers around the state, and in his own classroom, Leopold tried to impart to others this sense of challenge. He sought one main objective: to encourage others in their ability to "read the landscape," to "put the arts and sciences together for the purpose of understanding the environment." If this were accomplished; if land came to be appreciated not merely as a source of wealth, but as the dynamic context of life, human and otherwise; if students were made to understand that sciences were separated only in the human mind and in human classrooms, not in the natural world beyond; then critical support for conservation would grow, with a net gain in personal

enjoyment to boot. "With such a synthesis as a starting point," Leopold wrote, "the tenets of conservation formulate themselves, almost before the teacher can suggest them." Open their eyes, Leopold believed, and students would come of their own volition to an appreciation of land.

Particularly in the last ten years of his life, Leopold worked constantly to put these ideas into practice. In his renowned Wildlife Ecology 118 class at the University of Wisconsin, he opened the eyes of several hundred students, many of whom went on to teaching careers of their own. In his own special field of wildlife management, Leopold was a major force in instituting professional standards of training. Within the University, he tirelessly promoted the idea of interdisciplinary studies of conservation — one result was the Department of Botany's influential program in Biological Aspects of Conservation — that were at least partly aimed at giving teachers a sound foundation in the natural sciences.

Leopold also wrote a number of articles on education and served on a committee of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction that was charged with the task of developing instructional materials for the teaching of conservation in the public schools. On a more personal level, many were the teachers and school principals from around the state who wrote to Madison for advice from Leopold. Invariably, he responded to their requests with a personal letter of suggestions and encouragement. In short, the environmental educators of Wisconsin have as much right as do the foresters, wildlife managers, ecologists, writers, and wilderness enthusiasts of claiming Leopold as one of their own pioneers.

We celebrate Leopold's life because he saw so much in the world around him, and taught others to see as well; in this sense, we are all students of Leopold. But this celebration would not be complete without one caveat. Leopold was a humble man who would have been somewhat embarrassed by the current spate of attention. In his own lifetime, he decried the tendency to allow personalities to take precedence over issues. With this in mind, the most appropriate way to honor his legacy is undoubtedly to return to the task at hand: to enable the next generation of students, whose environmental challenges are not likely to lessen, how to see, understand, and enjoy the world around them. That was, is, and will remain the special privilege of teachers.

#### Further readings:

- Callicott, J. Baird. 1982. "Aldo Leopold on Education: As Educator and His Land Ethic in the Context of Environmental Education." *J. of Environmental Education* 14:34-41.
- Flader, Susan. 1983. "Aldo Leopold's Challenge to Educators." pp. 33-41 in *Transactions of the Forty-Eighth North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference*.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1937. "Teaching Wildlife Conservation in Public Schools." *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters* 30:77-86.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1942. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." pp. 33-41 in *Transactions of the Seventh North American Wildlife Conference*.

**Editor's Note:** Curt Meine has written a comprehensive biography of Aldo Leopold. The book will be published this year by the University of Wisconsin Press, 114 N. Murray St., Madison, WI 53715.

