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# Amplifications

## Continuing Notes on the Land Ethic

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# How Leopold Learned to Think Like a Mountain

BY CURT MEINE

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Editor's note: *It will hardly be news to those who are familiar with this space to learn that it regularly takes sustenance from the pages of Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac, one of the central documents—some would say, the central document—of the modern conservation movement. What is less well recognized, probably, is the fact that this small (in size at least) book was the product of years of intricate and sometimes painful work—and, like many truly important books, the final result was a good deal different from what the author had in mind when he started.*

*The idea of a book of some kind began seriously in 1941. It was to be written in scattered periods of time carved out of Leopold's teaching duties at the University of Wisconsin, the production of his more tech-*

*anical writings, his advisory work with the American Wildlife Institute, his speechmaking, his family, and his tender loving care of the patch of Wisconsin sand country he called his own. The book was designed as a modest collection of descriptive essays, with illustrations by one of Leopold's graduate students, Hans Albert Hochbaum, who by 1941 was directing operations at the Delta Duck Station, a waterfowl research facility in southern Manitoba, Canada (it was later named the Delta Waterfowl Research Station).*

*In the end, Hochbaum was unable to provide the illustrations for the finished book—but what he did provide was far more important. It was Hochbaum's relentless goading, to a significant degree, that slowly turned Leopold in a direction that would add a powerful new dimension to his thinking and*

*to one of the shortest yet most profoundly moving of all the essays in A Sand County Almanac: "Thinking Like a Mountain." It could be argued that it was this essay, as much as anything else, that first lifted the book far above the level of something nice for the Christmas market—the highest ambition Leopold had for it at one point—to its position as one of the most influential works of the twentieth century.*

*The story of how this came to pass is related by Curt Meine in Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work, the first truly comprehensive biography of Leopold (to be published, fittingly enough, by the University of Wisconsin Press in March of 1988). In the following excerpt, Meine picks up the tale early in 1944.*

A Christmas trip to Burlington inspired a new essay. "Illinois Bus Ride" was written on New Year's Day, 1944. Several days later (on his fifty-seventh birthday), Leopold wrote an account of the canoe trip he and his brother had made on the delta of the Colorado twenty-two years before. His tone was unusually nostalgic, his memories of the trip golden, but his moral disturbing: "All this was far away and long ago," he wrote. "I am told the green lagoons now raise cantaloupes. If so, they should not lack flavor. . . . Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?"

Leopold sent "The Green Lagoons" to Hochbaum. Over the next six months,

they would correspond extensively about the essays. Hochbaum was a direct, honest critic, and Leopold responded openly to his sometimes quite personal suggestions. Their literary give-and-take would alter not only the flavor of Leopold's essays, but also the process of self-examination that went into them.

On January 22, Hochbaum gave Leopold his opinion of "The Green Lagoons." "I haven't a comment to offer," he wrote, "except that it is one of your best." Hochbaum did, however, comment on "the series as a whole."

In many of these [essays] you seem to follow one formula: you paint a beautiful picture of something that was—a bear, crane, or a parcel of wilderness—then in a word or an epilogue, you, sitting more or less aside as a sage, deplore the fact that brute man has spoiled the things you love. This is never tiresome, and it drives your

point deep. Still, you never drop a hint that you yourself have once despoiled, or at least had a strong hand in it.

Hochbaum none too gently pointed out Leopold's role in the extermination of the wolf in the Southwest.

In your writings of the day, you played a hand in influencing the policies, for your case against the wolf was as strong then as for the wilderness now. I just read they killed the last lobo in Montana last year. I think you'll have to admit you've got at least a drop of its blood on your hands.

You already sit in a circle which may never hold more than a dozen in the century. What you thought 20 years ago has small part in your influence. Still, I think your case for the wilderness is all the stronger if, in one of these pieces, you admit that you haven't always smoked the same tobacco.

A few days later, Hochbaum sent four new illustrations to accompany the essays.

Leopold reacted cautiously to Hoch-

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<sup>\*</sup>Joined mid-July-October 1987.

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baum's suggestions. In principle, he agreed. "Your point is obviously well taken," he wrote on January 29, "and I think I can see several opportunities for admitting specifically that we all go through the wringer at one time or another, differing only in the date of emergence. Of course, the question is how to do this without spoiling literary effects, but I think there are several chances where the effect will not only be preserved, but perhaps improved."

Hochbaum did not let the Professor off the hook; pleading "literary effect" was not sufficient. Albert's own artistic sensibility would not permit that. "If you really have something to say," he wrote back to Leopold on February 4, "you cannot afford to choose and discard the subject matter which builds the central theme on the basis of the ease or difficulty with which the technique can draw the picture." Then Hochbaum pressed hard:

I can't exactly put my finger on your central theme, although I know what it is. What you write about is a state of mind, probably common to all men. For some, like yourself, it is found in the wilderness; but it isn't the wilderness. What you may feel in the heart of the Sawtooth Mountains may be found by another on lower Manhattan before sunrise, by another at the prow of a ship, or on a microscope slide, or in the melody of a song. As such this is indestructible as long as there is life on earth, although certain mediums, such as the wilderness, may be destroyed. You are aware of this of course; I just wanted to let you know that this thread is grasped by others.

... Then I find no strong hint in your series that perhaps the greatest unspoiled wilderness is the search for the Truth and that he who would seek this wilderness will find the trail just as untraveled behind a white-footed mouse as behind a desert bighorn.

Leopold could not refute Hochbaum's insights into the meaning of wilderness, so reminiscent were they of his own arguments in the 1920s. Hochbaum's opinion of Leopold's literary stance was no less direct:

There is . . . a secondary chord which is probably more easily grasped: man's reaction to the American environment—yours and the Bureau Chief's, the college boy's and the CCC road builder's. And in this theme there is one false note—the reader cannot help but gather that you believe your reaction is always the proper one and that it has been always so. Don't get me wrong; the lesson you wish to put across is the lesson that must be taught—preservation of the natural. Yet it is not easily taught if you put yourself above other men. That is why I mentioned your earlier attitude towards the wolf. . . .

... I, for one, gather the impression from some of your pieces that man, particularly

the poor brutes who work for the government, has spoiled the river deltas and the native fauna and the crane marshes in a dumb, stubborn, deliberate effort to always do the wrong thing. You almost chide him for not having the vision you didn't have 20 years ago. After all, many of the things we do, we do because we are men, the same as moles do what they do because they are moles. True, we have thought, but thought takes time and maturity. We are just getting to the point where mature thought is guiding the manipulation of land. This is a hope. If we regret what we have done, we must regret that we are men. It is only by accepting ourselves for what we are, the best of us and the worst of us, that we can hold any hope for the future.

Only a character as strong as Leopold's own could have come back at him with criticisms that struck so close to home. Hochbaum, in turn, found his deep respect for Leopold laid bare. "If there is anyone in the land who should have more hope for the future than regret for past mistakes it is you, for you have played the strongest hand in building that hope. . . . Give your series some of this hope. . . . I only hope that you won't overlook the real thread of the series in your enthusiasm for 'literary effects.'"

Leopold needed time to weigh Hochbaum's lengthy commentary. On February 11, he replied, "I wish I received more letters of the kind you have just written. It is probably the most valuable comment I have had so far on the essay series. . . . I particularly agree that they must have something more important than nostalgia. . . . I am not at all offended by your homily on 'literary effects.' There is much in what you say, but I think there is something in what I said. It is probably too tangled to thresh out by mail. I am entirely convinced that the essays collectively should make clear that everybody, including myself, goes through the points of view which are deplored in the essays." Again the next day, Leopold wrote, "I have been thinking a great deal about your last comment on the essays. Please regard my reply as purely tentative, since I will think the whole thing through, and will have some more to say later."

... Leopold wrote to Hochbaum again on March 1, after he had had time to ponder his comments. He was still not willing to concede Albert's point about the artistic approach in the essays:

Your comment on the essays has been turning over in my mind for a month now. I think you are partly right, but I am not persuaded that you are wholly right. Perhaps I can explain what is on my mind this

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way. When you paint a picture, it conveys a single idea, and not all of the ideas pertinent to the particular landscape or action. If you inserted all of your ideas in your picture, it would spoil it.

In order to arrive at an ethical judgement, however, about any question raised by the picture, you need to consider all pertinent ideas, including those which changed in time. It seems to me, therefore, that any artistic effort, whether a picture or an essay, must often contain less than is needed for an ethical judgement. This is approximately what I meant when I said I intended to revise the essays insofar as could be done without spoiling the literary effect.

Leopold was still arguing that aesthetic integrity and ethical argumentation were, by definition, mutually exclusive. He was now willing to admit, though, that Albert had a point: "I don't know whether you are right, but I do know that the essays can give a more accurate judgement, particularly in reference to my own changes of attitude in time, without hurting the literary effect."

Hochbaum did not give an inch. On March 11, he came back at Leopold again, with a letter that Aldo labeled "important." Hochbaum focussed his criticism:

Perhaps more than anything else, the series is a self-portrait of yourself. Let me say this by way of pointing to the blanks. You have told a good deal more about yourself in this series than you probably realize. But it seems to me that, while you have covered your subject well, you have left obscure two of your strongest characteristics. One of these is your unbounded enthusiasm (at least as it has impressed me) for the future. . . . The second characteristic is that your way of thinking is not that of an inspired genius, but that of any other ordinary fellow trying to put two and two together. Because you have added up your sums better than most of [us], it is important that you let fall a hint that in the process of reaching the end result of your thinking you have sometimes followed trails like anyone else that lead you up the wrong alleys. That is why I suggested the wolf business.

. . . Please don't feel uneasy that I should call this a self-portrait. I doubt that you ever thought of it as such. I think it is very important that it should be. If you will put yourself in perspective you might realize that within your realm of influence, which is probably larger than you know, Aldo Leopold is considerably more than a person; in fact, he is probably less a person than he is a Standard. I am probably not too clear on that point, but can't carry it any further. At any rate, this series of sketches brings the man himself into focus. . . . It tells not what is law and order in his chosen field, as most of his other writings have, but shows the process of his thinking. Just for fun, then, as you round out this collection, take a sidewise glance at this fellow and decide just how much of him you want to put on paper, and that I think is your best guide. . . .

. . . And about the wolf business, whatever you decide, I hope you will have at least one piece on wolves alone, for a collection with so much of the wilderness and yourself in it I think certainly would be incomplete without giving wolves a place all to themselves.

Leopold accepted the criticisms gratefully, and with deep feelings of amity toward Hochbaum. He thought Albert's letter "one of the clearest analyses of our 'problem' that I could hope to get. It will not only help me to round off the collection of essays, but more importantly, it convinces me completely that you and I cannot afford to get ourselves into the kind of pickle we were in. We can understand each others' language, and that is saying a great deal."

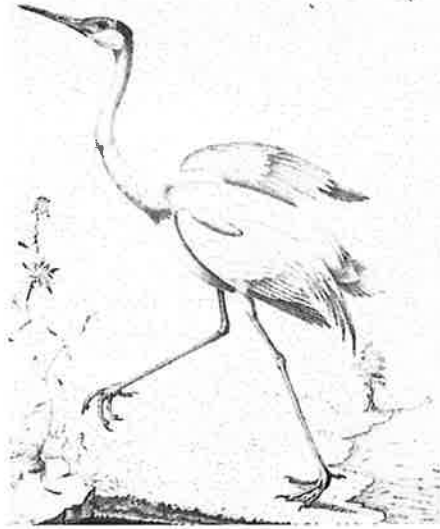
Hochbaum's remarks were as timely as they were incisive. In the wake of the 1943 deer hunt, the question of predator "control," specifically wolf control, again presented itself. In 1943, the Wisconsin state legislature, following the recommendation of the Citizen's Deer Committee, curtailed the state bounty on

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predators. After the tumultuous deer season, the legislature responded to public demand by reinstating a bounty, but Governor Goodland vetoed the bill. Deer lovers around the state, certain that their deer were being massacred by predators, inundated the Conservation Commission with pleas for action. In the early months of 1944, the issue was on Leopold's doorstep, and he addressed it as a commissioner, a wildlife biologist, and a writer.

As a commissioner, Leopold received numerous queries and complaints from interested citizens. Among the many who took him to task on the wolf question was Waldo Rinehard, an insurance agent from Shawano. He wrote to Leopold in March that "wolves must be eliminated to the vanishing point." Rinehard held that the wolf population had been on an increase for over a decade and that "if there is an excess of deer, the people of the state of Wisconsin and not the wolves of Wisconsin are entitled to those deer. The deer are living on my land. The wolves pay no taxes. The hunter demand for deer is not getting smaller." Leopold replied that "No one seriously advocates more than a small sprinkling of wolves. When they reach a certain level they will certainly have to be held down to it. I voted for lifting the bounty because our field men said there were only a dozen or two left in the state." Their correspondence continued for several months, and although they reached no common ground, their discussion remained cordial. Leopold's courtesy was never better exemplified than in the thoughtful replies he made to those with whom he differed.

In a manuscript on which Leopold was working at the end of March, he explained his current view of the wolf situation from a management standpoint.

It is probably no accident that the near-extirpation of the timber wolf and the cougar was followed, in most big-game states, by a plague of excess deer and elk and the threatened extirpation of their winter browse foods. . . . It is all very well, in theory, to say that guns will regulate the deer, but no state has ever succeeded in regulating its deer herd satisfactorily by guns alone. Open seasons are a crude instrument, and usually kill either too many deer or too few. The wolf is by comparison, a precision instrument; he regulates not only the number, but the distribution, of deer. In thickly settled counties we cannot have wolves, but in parts of the north we can and should.

More facts were needed. Earlier that winter, the Conservation Commission had hired a veteran northwoodsman to conduct a survey of predators. In April, Leopold tried to gather support for a study, through the Wisconsin Academy, of "The Ecology of the Wolf in Wisconsin," to be headed up by Bill Feeney. "The idea is to bring together . . . all the pertinent information on the status of wolves and on their ecological function in the state. The study would be a companion piece to the report already published on the deer question."


In the midst of these official deliberations, Leopold wrote one of his best-known essays. On April 1, 1944, he sat down, ready to respond to Hochbaum's proddings. The result was a poignantly worded mea culpa on the subject of wolves. In "Thinking Like a Mountain," Leopold told the story of the mother wolf he and his crewmates had shot from the Blue River rimrock, and of the "fierce green fire" that died in her eyes.

I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that nei-


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ther the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

He described the results of wolf extirpation and deer overpopulation: bushes and seedlings browsed "first to anemic desuetude, and then to death"; trees "defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn"; the "starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd." He ended with one of his most memorable paragraphs:

We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps is a requisite to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: in wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men.

Leopold sent the essay to Hochbaum. "Thinking Like a Mountain," Hochbaum wrote back two weeks later, "fills the bill perfectly, and is, I think, a beautiful piece besides the meaning it carries."

\* \* \*

*Leopold himself, Meine reports, liked the essay so much that he decided to entitle the whole collection—which by then numbered thirteen pieces—Thinking Like a Mountain—and Other Essays. He gathered the material together and submitted the book for publication to both the Macmillan Company and to Alfred A. Knopf. Macmillan turned him down swiftly, and while Knopf at first made encouraging noises, it too finally rejected the book after holding it for consideration for more than a year.*

*By then, Leopold had added to the original collection two more descriptive essays, as well as an "almanac" of lyrical vignettes and a group of philosophical essays—"Conservation Esthetic," "Wildlife in American Culture," "Wilderness," and—the most memorable of all—"The Land Ethic." He also had found a new illustrator, Charles Schwartz (Hochbaum was too busy with his own work now), and had retitled the book Great Possessions. And it was as Great Possessions that Oxford University Press, on April 14, 1948, agreed to publish it.*

*One week later, Leopold was dead of a heart attack suffered while fighting a fire on his Wisconsin land. Had he lived to see it, he might or might not have approved of the final title of the book as published in the fall of 1949: A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There. —T.H.W.*