

Leopold's Words at Work

BY CURT MEINE

HERE ARE some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot." These are the opening words of Aldo Leopold's conservation classic *A Sand County Almanac*. For 50 years, those "who cannot" have worked Leopold's sentences like worry stones, polishing them to a fine finish through countless readings, finding them an indispensable source of steadiness, direction and courage. Leopold, who died before his book was published, could never have imagined how mightily his words would brace the conservation cause.

It is of course a mixed blessing for any book to achieve the status of "classic." The designation is likely to relegate it to the untouched bookshelf, the required reading list, the academic symposium, where it may do little harm and occasional good. *A Sand County Almanac*, however, is a different sort of classic. Its words are still at work. Its stories, a half-century after its publication, are still being written.

Here's one. Two summers ago I traveled to Bulgaria as part of a team working on the conservation programs of this wonderfully diverse country. One afternoon I was walking with a colleague through the busy streets of the capital, Sofia, when I heard my name. Taken aback, I searched the faces in the crowd. Running across the trolley tracks came Petko, a young field biologist whom I had met four years earlier. Petko had been active in one of Bulgaria's most effective conservation organizations, the Green Balkans. Now he was completing his studies and eager to continue his conservation work.

On that previous visit I had brought along several paperback copies of *A Sand County Almanac* as gifts for co-workers. I had not thought of it since. After an initial exchange of smiles and hugs, Petko spoke in his broken but enthusiastic English: "*Sand County Almanac* book most excellent! We use all time! We need Bulgaria translation!" Across half a century, two continents, a language barrier and vastly different ecosystems, cultures and histories, Aldo Leopold's words had found a receptive reader.

We hoped, of course, that our efforts to bolster Bulgaria's conservation policy and administration would prove fruitful. In truth, such work — especially under the challenging conditions the Balkans face — rarely produces clean results; the gains are almost always modest and incremental. Our more significant contributions may actually come through the informal sharing of perspectives, the mutual devotion to the mission of conservation that grows outside the boundaries of official meetings, field trips

and reports. "All the acts of government," Leopold once wrote (not in the *Almanac*) "are of slight importance to conservation except as they affect the acts and thoughts of citizens." For 50 years, *A Sand County Almanac* has offered its readers access to that core of conservation.

The stories of the *Almanac* continue to be written, though the connections to its storyline may be invisible. Outside Chicago, at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, a former Army munitions manufacturing facility is being restored to the bluestem and bobolinks. In Leopold's old haunts along the middle Rio Grande, scores of conservation agencies and organizations are seeking ways to safeguard the watershed and revitalize its dwindling bosques. In Colorado, conservationists struggle to keep open the last open spaces of the front range. In the Everglades, we undertake a massive "last-ditch" effort to refresh the river of grass. In these and innumerable other places, people have made the difficult choice, rejecting the comfortable assumption that land is "a commodity belonging to us." They have chosen to act upon Leopold's hope that "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

In 50 more years, we can be confident that Leopold's words will still be at work in the hands and hearts of those who cannot live without wild things. For future readers, "the opportunity to see geese" will still be "more important than television"; "the chance to find a pasque-flower" will still be "a right as inalienable as free speech." They will still celebrate "winds and sunsets," the "green fire" of the wolf's eyes, the "far, clear blast" of the crane's bugle, the "vast pulsing harmony" of the far hills, the "small creatures" that do small jobs "quickly and well." And they will still be defending what they celebrate. □

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