

Spotlight 4.1

HISTORIC PRECEDENTS TO COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION IN WORKING LANDSCAPES

The Coon Valley “Cooperative Conservation” Initiative, 1934

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IN BRIEF

- One of the earliest formal efforts of collaborative conservation—called “cooperative conservation” at the time—began in the 1930s in Coon Valley, Wisconsin.
- As many as 418 private farming families worked with researchers and agency personnel to restore soils, watercourses, forest cover, wildlife habitat, and recreational value to 40,000 acres of land degraded by poor farming practices.
- The cooperative effort continues today; the region has become a hub for sustainably produced and organic products, including the highly successful business, Organic Valley.

Intentional community-based efforts toward the collaborative conservation of working landscapes in the United States are not a recent phenomenon. Although watershed councils in the Pacific Northwest and rancher-environmentalist alliances in the Southwest both emerged in the early 1990s, perhaps the earliest formally organized effort to pursue integrated, landscape-level conservation and restoration of a food-producing watershed began in Coon Valley, Wisconsin in 1934.¹ The same year that Aldo Leopold began to offer the first game management courses in any American university, he also became involved as an adviser to the first watershed-scale soil conservation demonstration area designated by the U.S. Soil Erosion Service (now the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service).²

The demonstration area was located in the Coon Creek watershed in the erosion-prone Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin. The farmers, soil scientists, foresters, and wildlife biologists involved in Coon Valley did not use the term “collaborative conservation” at that time. However, Leopold’s first publication on the project in May 1935 did use the phrase “cooperative conservation” to encompass many of the same principles and processes that the Malpai Borderlands Group and Diablo Trust (see chap. 4) would pioneer in the Southwest in 1993 six decades later.

At the time the Coon Valley initiative began in the 1930s, Leopold described this agrarian landscape as one where residents not only had damaged their own natural resource base but had also generated problems that had impacts downstream: “Coon Valley is one of a thousand farm communities which, through the abuse of its original soil, has not only filled the national dinner pail, but has created the Mississippi flood problem, the navigation problem, the overproduction problem, and the problem of its own future continuity.”³ With technical support from the University of Wisconsin, the U.S. Soil Erosion Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and other agencies, Coon Valley’s farmers coordinated their efforts to rescue, conserve, and restore soils, watercourses, forest cover, wildlife, and aesthetic and recreational values on their privately owned farms.⁴ Through regular meetings on farmsteads, in makeshift offices, and even at the local bar and café, food producers and natural resource professionals came together to “show that integrated use is possible on private farms, and that such integration is mutually advantageous to both the owner and the public.”⁵

Just as western ranchers and foresters have done over the last two decades, the farmers of Coon Valley voluntarily participated in farm- and watershed-scale planning to repair incised gullies, reseed barren areas, reforest vulnerable slopes, modify livestock grazing practices, and slow water flows (and soil loss) through contour plowing and the construction of a variety of retention structures.⁶ At its peak of activity in the late 1930s, Coon Valley’s soil conservation demonstration area engaged 418 farming families and 200 additional employees in working to restore and sustain production on 40,000 acres of enrolled land. The agencies and universities that collaborated with the Coon Valley farmers provided technical assistance, seeds, nursery plants, materials for erosion control structures, and in some cases, equipment. Coon Valley’s bankers were involved in the effort, working with farmers and conservationists to provide the financial resources needed to adopt innovative farming practices.

Over the next several decades, contour farming, strip cropping, and fish

and wildlife habitat enhancement became the norm in Coon Valley, clearly regenerating rather than depleting the ecological and economic wealth of the watershed. Although intense flood events, urban encroachment, and current high prices for corn and soy today pose threats to the watershed's land stewardship legacy, Coon Valley has amply demonstrated that "cooperative conservation" can indeed work over the long haul for the local economy, for the maintenance of the rural cultural community, and for the resilience of the biotic community.

The Coon Valley watershed continues to attract attention from scientists and land stewardship advocates.⁷ The improved streams of the area now host a thriving trout fishery and a flourishing recreational fishing economy.⁸ Interestingly, the area around Coon Valley has also become one of the more important hubs for direct marketing of sustainably produced dairy products, eggs, and organic crops through the business Organic Valley, which in 2011 produced revenues to its farmers and shareholders in excess of \$70 million.⁹ Begun in 1988 in the Driftless Area as the CROPP (Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool) cooperative, Organic Valley has expanded well beyond its home in the Kickapoo River watershed to include more than 1,600 farmer-owners in 33 states and four Canadian provinces.

The Coon Valley experience suggests that, over time, community-based collaborative conservation can enhance ecosystem services, economic productivity, and social cohesion in a landscape. Agencies can support such endeavors, but their personnel, their resources, and even their names and missions shift over time. It is the internalization of a land ethic among local land stewards and food producers that accounts for the persistence and successes of the Coon Valley Watershed Project over eight decades.

NOTES

1. A. Leopold, "Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation," *American Forests* 5 (May 1935): 205–8; see also R. Anderson, "Coon Valley Days: A Short History of the Coon Creek Watershed," *Wisconsin Academy Review* 48, no. 2 (2002): 42–48.
2. C. Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 313–314. Also see the website of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, www.aldoleopold.org, for more information.
3. Leopold, "Coon Valley," 206–7.
4. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, 313.
5. Leopold, "Coon Valley," 205.
6. Anderson, "Coon Valley Days," 43–44.
7. For example, S. W. Trimble, "Fluvial Processes, Morphology and Sediment Budgets in the Coon Creek Basin, WI, USA, 1975–1993," *Geomorphology* 108 (2009): 8–23;

- A. S. (Tex) Hawkins, "Return to Coon Valley," in *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*, ed. D. L. Jackson and L. L. Jackson (Covelo, CA: Island Press, 2002), 57–70.
8. L. Gaumnitz, "Restoring Life to a Watershed," *Wisconsin Natural Resources* (February 2002), <http://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmag/html/stories/2002/febo2/coonval.htm>; see also J. Luhnig, "Birth of a Conservation Movement," *Edible Madison* 14 (Fall 2013): 34–42, <http://www.ediblemadison.com>.
 9. C. Pine and C. Spengler, eds. *CROPP Cooperative Roots: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Blue Jay, CA: Hawking Books, 2013). For more information on CROPP and Organic Valley, also see www.organicvalley.coop.