

COMMENTARY

Commentary: Earth Day during a crisis: Aldo Leopold's words resonate

By Curt Meine
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Until an upstart bit of submicroscopic organic material upended our existence, environmentally concerned people around the world were preparing to gather Wednesday for [the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day](#). Things were on track for a generational passing of the torch and a call for renewed action on behalf of the Earth. Veterans of environmental campaigns past would tell their stories. Eager youth would share their ideas and determination. Speeches would be made and workshops organized and petitions signed.

Now the gatherings will be virtual, the stories shared online, the actions forced indoors and focused on our backyards. Perhaps this is not altogether unfortunate. The coronavirus pandemic is giving us pause to reflect on the trails we have taken over the last five decades. It provides a chance to look inside our own stories and consider how we have come to understand our interconnected world and our place within it.



American conservationist and ecologist Aldo Leopold is shown 1947, one year before he died. He pioneered the modern ecology movement with his book "A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There," published posthumously, and inspiring environmental activists in the 1960s and '70s. (Associated Press)

In my case, I look back to that spring of 1970 as a time when the seeds were planted for my own commitment to conservation. Two things happened that put me on the path. The first was Earth Day itself. At Adlai Stevenson Elementary School in Des Plaines, our usual fifth-grade classes for the day were canceled. With 20 million other Americans, we took our lessons out to the parking lot and the school grounds, picked up litter and planted trees.

As an outdoorsy kid, I found this all perfectly acceptable. And in the days and weeks that followed, I earned a neighborhood reputation as a champion gleaner of discarded aluminum cans and waste paper. It was nerdy even then — but not quite as much as it had been pre-Earth Day.

The other seed that was set that spring would not germinate, for me anyway, until a few years later. In 1970 a mass paperback edition of the book “A Sand County Almanac” by conservationist Aldo Leopold appeared just in time for Earth Day. First published in 1949, Leopold’s book had sold modestly over the years. But now a new generation of baby boomer readers, learning their first lessons in ecology, seized on it. It would sell a million copies.

All of a sudden, Leopold’s sharp-eyed but understated observations of what he called “the land community,” and his reflections on the human role in nature, hit a mark. They did for me when I encountered the book a few years later, while a student at DePaul University. “We abuse land,” Leopold wrote, “because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” He called this philosophy of conservation “the land ethic.”

Leopold’s book has never stopped selling, never stopped opening hearts and minds to “the drama of the land’s workings.” And the land ethic has continued to grow and evolve — as he hoped it would — “in the minds of a thinking community.”

That ethic is pertinent not just in rural settings such as the Wisconsin countryside that inspired Leopold. It concerns all lands, from the most remote wild places to working farmlands to the most urban cityscapes. It embraces the waters and oceans. It calls for us to get real and take action to counter the accelerating effects of climate change while we still can. In Chicago, the land ethic has informed and inspired efforts ranging from ecological restoration in the forest preserves, to the educational programs of Brookfield Zoo and Eden Place Nature Center in Fuller Park, to urban agriculture work across the metropolitan region.

Now, to commemorate the 50th Earth Day, Oxford University Press has partnered with the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Wisconsin to release a new edition of Leopold's classic work, featuring an introduction by novelist and conservationist Barbara Kingsolver. Kingsolver was another of those eager readers of the 1970 paperback. She writes that rereading Leopold decades later "feels like contacting a revered teacher from school days and finding an adult friend." And she notes that his words are in some ways even more relevant now, as we try to talk with one another across our deep political divides: "If you've lost all hope of finding a common language for that conversation, you might well find it here."

We will, in time, reemerge from our self-isolating home caves, back into the world of green and growing things, of critters that call to us and of litter that always needs picking up. We will find an Earth that needs to be reimagined and restored with lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis.

Perhaps the musings of this Midwestern ecological sage can help us again to come together to take on this generation's great shared cause. Perhaps in appreciating our deep connections to the land and to one another, we can again move forward in what Leopold called our "search for a durable scale of values."

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