

# **The Land Is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium**

## **CHAPTER 5: ARGUING FOR THE LAND ETHIC**

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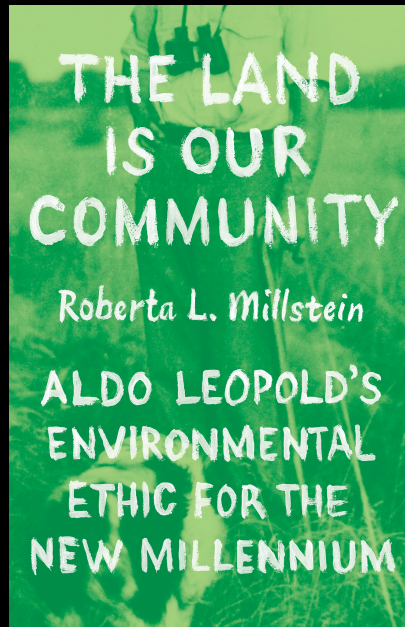
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***Have you watched the Introduction video yet?***

This video assumes that you have,  
so please go back and watch it first  
if you haven't done so yet!



## Summary statement of the land ethic

### Reminder:

In addition to the obligations that we already have toward other human individuals and to our human communities, act so as to **protect and promote the capacity of land communities** (soils, waters, plants, and animals, understood collectively) **for self-renewal**, i.e., their **health**, implying respect for both community members and the community as a whole.



*From A Sand County Almanac*

So, Leopold claims that we should act to preserve and restore the **health** of land communities.

**But *why* should we do that?**  
**Why should we believe in the land ethic?**



## Several implicit arguments for extending obligations to the land

1. **All of ASCA.** Indeed, in the Foreword, Leopold states that he is hoping to effect a “shift of values” (1949, viii). The much beloved pages of ASCA are intended to inspire appreciation for the beauty of the land and the need to conserve it.
2. **Holism.** “Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, you cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism (Leopold [1938] 2013, 416).



From ASCA

***with an important clarification:*** “If the components of land have a collective as well as a separate welfare, then conservation must deal with them collectively as well as separately” (Leopold [1944] 1991, 284).

3. **Ignorance.** Leopold suggests that humanity simply isn’t smart enough to pick and choose between parts of a community or to play the conqueror – that to do so is eventually “self-defeating.” We don’t know which parts are essential.

## Leopold's *Main Argument for the Land Ethic*

Leopold's main argument for the land ethic rests upon seeing that **we already accept the basic principles on which a land ethic can be justified.**

- That is, once we:
  - examine what justifies and grounds our **human** ethics
  - understand land communities properly
- Then we:
  - should see that the same principles justify and ground extending obligations to the **land**.

In what follows, I further elaborate and defend this argument.

- It can be understood as **an appeal to consistency in our ethical thinking.**
- To be clear, Leopold does not phrase it in those terms or make the argument as explicitly as I will try to make it.



Jane Goodall with chimp

## Interdependence => obligations & rules of conduct

Central to Leopold's argument is his claim that:

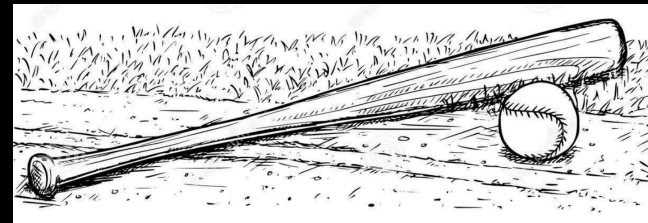
“All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a **community of interdependent parts**” (1949, 203; emphasis added).

This informs how Leopold thinks of relations & obligations in *human* communities:

- we accept **limitations** on our freedom of action, obligations, and rules of social conduct,
- **because** we are parts of competing and cooperating interdependent human communities.



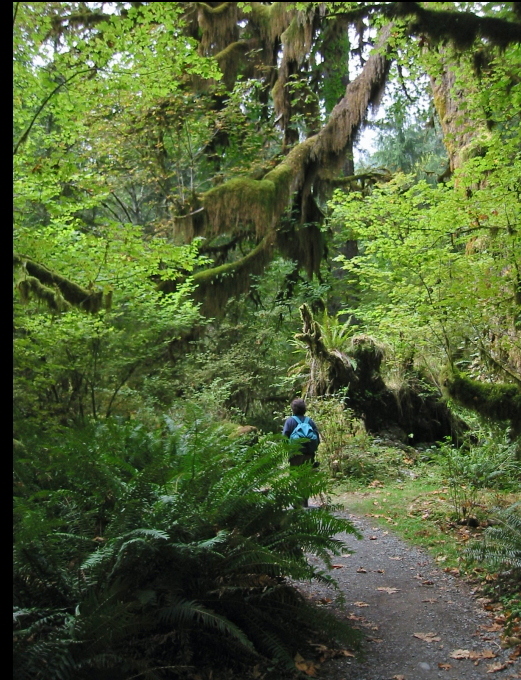
For example, “the existence of obligations over and above self-interest is taken for granted in such rural community enterprises as the betterment of roads, schools, churches, and baseball teams” (1949, 209).



## Extend to the land

However, both **history** and **ecology** teach us that it isn't just humans we are interdependent with.

**We are also interdependent with “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (1949, 204; emphasis added).**



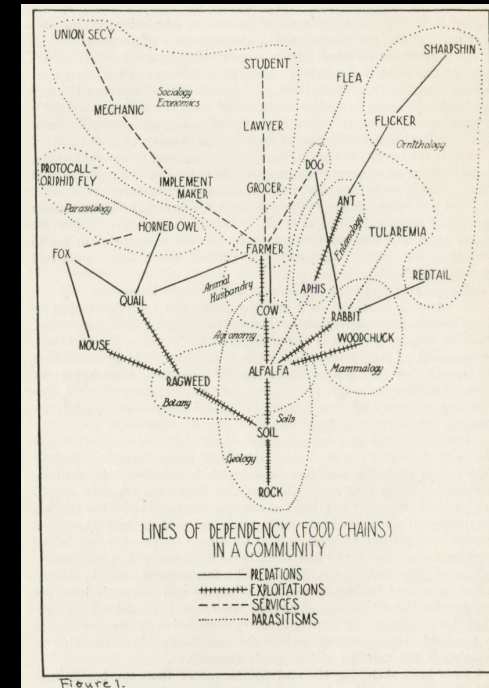
Temperate rainforest. Wikipedia.

## Interdependence through the lens of *ecology*

Leopold referred to entangled “lines of dependency,” including predations, exploitations, services, and parasitisms.

Some of his examples:

- **A food chain:** a squirrel that drops an acorn, which feeds a quail, which feeds a horned owl, which feeds a parasite.
- **But not just food chains:** “The oak grows...fuel, browse, hollow dens, leaves, and shade on which many species depend for food and cover or other services.”
- **Humans and our domesticated species too:** “Each species, *including ourselves*, is a link in many chains.”
- **And abiotic components:** Grazing led to a “progressive and mutual deterioration, not only of plants and *soils*, but of the animal community subsisting thereon.”



From “The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education,” 1942

## Interdependence through the lens of *ecology*, cont.

For a contemporary example, consider **bees**:

- A huge percentage of crops and native flowers depend on various bee species for **pollination** – in turn, human and non-human animals depend on those for **food**.
- Threats to bees include: 1) Human-caused global climate change, and 2) pesticide use



Western honey bee. Wikipedia

These **negative** (harmful) interactions with bees make them dependent on what we do or fail to do – they are **vulnerable**.

Of course, it is also open to us to interact with bees in **positive** (beneficial) ways.

Both types of interactions indirectly affect other species (flowers, crops), soil and water, and the species that depend on *them*. Thus, bees are really part of a larger **webs of interdependencies** (i.e., ***land communities***).



## Interdependence through the lens of *history*

“Many historical events, hitherto explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were **actually biotic interactions between people and land**” (1949, 205).

- The characteristics of the land determined “the facts quite as potently as the characteristics of the [people] who lived on it” (1949, 205).
- Leopold asks: What if when Kentucky was subject to colonization by white settlers, “plow, fire, and ax” had yielded not bluegrass but “some worthless sedge, shrub, or weed” (1949, 205)?  
**American history might have been very different.**
- “We are commonly told what the human actors in this drama tried to do, but we are seldom told that their success, or the lack of it, hung in large degree on the reaction of particular soils to the impact of the particular forces exerted by their occupancy” (1949, 206).

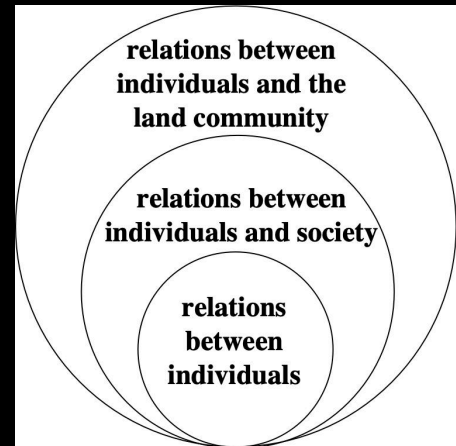


These aspects, often overlooked, show that interdependencies between humans & the rest of the land community play an essential role in human flourishing (or not).

## Upshot from Chapter 5: The main argument for the land ethic

With interdependencies established, the **basic structure of Leopold's argument from consistency** can be clarified as follows:

- **Given *interdependence*** between humans, we accept **limitations on our actions** (rules of conduct) to benefit and protect individual humans and human communities; our ethical theories capture these rules of conduct.
- However, history and ecology show us that we are not just interdependent with other humans, but that we are also ***interdependent with other species*** and with “**abiotic**” components such as soils and waters; together, we form ***land communities***.
- Thus, **consistency** demands that we need to ***expand our ethics to include the land***; we also need to accept rules of conduct that benefit parts of the land community (one's “fellow members”) as well as the community as a whole. We must act to preserve and restore ***land health***.





## Status of arguments from consistency

If this interpretation is correct, it puts **Leopold's argument in a similar category as other arguments from consistency** in environmental ethics.

- For example, **defenders of animal rights** often use the similarity of nonhuman animals' capacities to human ones as a reason for extending ethical theory to avoid an inconsistent or arbitrary ethical theory.
- The ethical upshot for animal rights proponents and Leopold is of course different; my point here is that the reasoning is the same in each.



*From A Sand County Almanac*

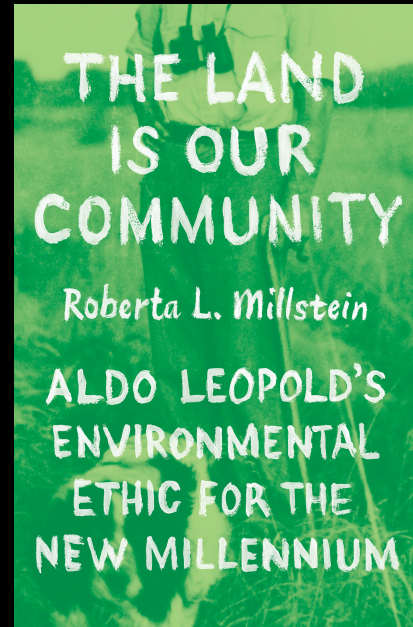
Although this form of reasoning has its limitations (ultimately resting on an unargued-for premise), it is widely accepted among both philosophers and non-philosophers (Newman, Varner, Linquist 2017; Varner 2020).

The next video is for Chapter 6, which talks about the policy implications of the land ethic...

...in other words,

How do we put the land ethic into practice?

How can it serve the basis for *policy*?



*The Land Is Our Community* can be purchased (paper copy) or downloaded for free from the University of Chicago Press; the link is on my website at **www.RLM.net**