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

CHAPTER 6: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Roberta L. Millstein
Professor Emerit
Department of Philosophy; Science and Technology Studies
University of California, Davis

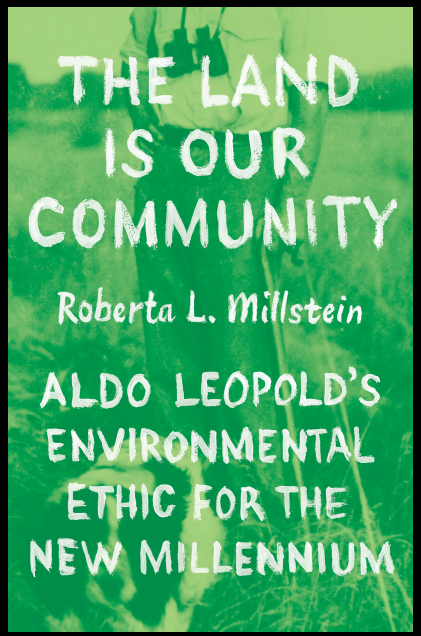
https://www.RLM.net/

@cepaea@mstdn.social

@cepaea.bsky.social

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*

But how can we respect *both* community members and the community as a whole?

What do we do when what's good for individuals isn't good for the community as a whole, or vice versa?

How can we put the land ethic into practice? How can it be the basis for policy?

A challenge for a pluralist

Let's elaborate the problem a bit more: As I interpret him, Leopold is a type of **ethical pluralist** because the land ethic:

- ascribes value and obligations to **biological wholes** (land communities)
- ascribes value and obligations to **human and non-human individuals**

But how can a pluralist environmental ethic be translated into environmental policy?

- **Challenge**: what's good for individuals & land communities can conflict
- **Example**: an invasive species that threatens the existence of other species and the health of the land community more generally.

- Might require hard choices—but how to make them? *What did Leopold do?*

Some of Leopold's policy-related activities

Leopold crafted policy for agriculture, forestry, and "game" management. E.g.:

- In the early 1930s, Leopold was an advisor to the **Coon Valley Erosion Project**.
  - Coon Creek had been selected by a new federal bureau to be "the first watershed in which to demonstrate the values of **soil conservation measures**."
  - The goal was to show "how farmers could plan farming operations to include soil conservation for long-term productivity" (Helms 1992, 51).
- He also served on the **Wisconsin Conservation Commission** from 1943-1948:
  - Worked on a variety of issues: everything from warden pensions and ice-fishing seasons to tractor purchases and state park concessions.
  - Recommended policies to reduce size of the deer herd for **forest health**.

Some of Leopold's policy-related activities, cont.

Concerning the erosion project, Leopold described what he called ***the principle of integration of land uses*** (Leopold 1935):

> ... a reorganized system of land-use, in which not only soil conservation and agriculture, but ***also forestry, game, fish, fur, flood control, scenery, songbirds, or any other pertinent interest were to be duly integrated*.**

Concerning the Wisconsin deer herds, Leopold wrote (Leopold 1946):

.... this Commission was created, and was given regulatory powers, for the express purpose of insulating it, to some degree, from the domination of fluctuating public opinion. It was hoped that such a Commission ***might take the long view***, rather than the short view, of conservation problems.

Putting these ideas together means taking an **even more pluralistic approach** that can incorporate many types of values (including anthropocentric ones), with a common commitment to the long view—**land health**.

How to implement pluralism?

But we noted already, **the variety of interests and values are sure to conflict sometimes**, and that will be even more true with so many types of interests and values to be considered.

- How should we “integrate” those different interests and values?
- How can we get advocates for different types of interests and values to cooperate rather than compete?

Obvious answer: Seek out win-win solutions when we can (don’t settle for cheapest, easiest, etc).

When no win-win is available: Commit to a respectful, inclusive, science-based process that educates the public and recognizes that failure will occur.

But again: All must have a ***common purpose:*** **the health of the land as a whole**.

Eight sub-principles of the principle of integration of land uses

The upshot: I infer these eight sub-principles from Leopold's writings and practices to serve as a **guide to how to engage in conservation policy**:

1. Include and ***attempt to integrate all pertinent interests and values***.
2. Seek cooperation rather than competition between the different interests and values to try to find a ***harmonious, balanced system*** of land-use.
3. Deploy a variety of techniques.
4. Recognize that there will be failures, some due to ignorance and some due to unforeseen circumstances (vagaries of weather, etc.).
5. Recognize and act on ***obligations to the land over and above self-interest***, in particular, obligations to ***promote and protect the health of the land***.
6. Take the ***long view*** of conservation problems, recognizing that often interests that seem to be served by a particular action end up being undermined in the long term.
7. Gather applicable scientific information from relevant scientific disciplines (note the plural) and take it into account when developing policy.
8. Engender public understanding of the relevant science and its impacts.

Applications of the principle of integration of land uses

The principle of integration of land uses might still seem to be asking the impossible, but there are some contemporary cases that fit:

- The **Ashland Forest Resiliency Project** involved bringing together people with a seemingly intractable conflict of interests: anti-logging environmental activists and Forest Service employees accustomed to using timber sales of the biggest trees to finance the infrastructure for firefighting – yet found common ground.

- The **Yolo Bypass** in northern California serves a variety of functions:
  - **flood control**
  - **seasonal agriculture** in the late spring and summer, with crops such as sugar beets, rice, safflower, and corn
  - **wetlands** that are managed to provide **habitat** for migratory waterfowl and various species of birds and mammals, including threatened species
  - **recreation** and **education** (bird-watching, hiking, guided tours)
  - **key aquatic habitat** for 42 fish species, including some native or threatened/endangered.

Upshot from Chapter 6: Policy implications of the Land Ethic

There is of course much more to be said here about how one might implement the principle of integration of land uses.

So here I will just acknowledge that success is not guaranteed, either in the process or the outcome; policy is hard.

- Leopold's own experiences show that.
- But no set of policy guidelines can guarantee a good process or a good outcome.

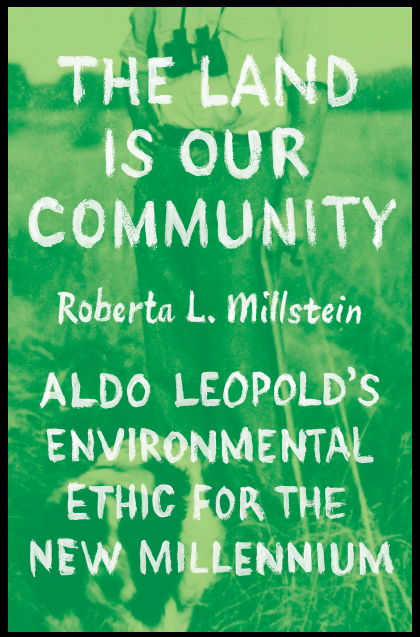
My claim, then, is that the eight Leopoldian-inspired sub-principles that I have outlined provide for a defensible and inclusive process that can guide us through the variety of challenges that we face as a society today.

Moreover, I claim that these principles can guide us in a scientifically and ethically justified way, inasmuch as they are grounded in the land ethic.

Final reflections

Trying to integrate multiple values means that **each of us has a role to play** in putting the land ethic into practice—acting to promote and protect the health of the land communities of which we are members.

With the **ongoing climate crisis**, **rapid extinction of species**, and **loss of habitat**, we need more than ever to understand that we cannot just focus on ourselves without recognizing all the biotic and abiotic entities that we are interdependent with.



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**