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

Chapter 6: Policy Implications (Transcript)

Roberta Millstein

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Hi, I'm Professor Roberta Millstein, and I'm here to talk about chapter 6 of my book, *The Land is Our Community*, and that's the chapter that talks about policy implications of the land ethic, and this video is for the philosophers for sustainability.

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But before you watch this video, let me remind you again, have you watched the introduction video yet? You need to watch that because this video assumes that you have, it'll talk about concepts and ideas in this video and presume them, so please go and watch that now.

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Okay, but I will give you this little reminder just to connect what I'll be talking about today back to the land ethic.

So this is to say that my summary statement of the land ethic is that in addition to the obligations we already have toward other human individuals and to our human communities, that we need to act so as to protect and promote the capacity of land communities, land communities being soils, waters, plants, and animals understood collectively, their capacity for self-renewal, in other words, their health, and this implies respect for both community members as well as the community as a whole.

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Okay, but how do we do that? How do 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? This is longstanding questions about the land ethic. How can we put the land ethic into practice? How can it be the basis for policy?

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Okay, so let me elaborate this problem a little bit more.

As I interpret him, Leopold is a type of ethical pluralist. Why? Because land ethic is ascribing value and obligations to biological wholes, right, land communities, as well as ascribing value and obligations to human and non-human individuals. This makes him a type of pluralist.

But how can a pluralist environmental ethic be translated into environmental policy? So one of the big challenges is that what's good for individuals and land communities can come into conflict. So a common example would be an invasive species that threatens the existence of other species and that threatens the health of the land community more generally. It might require some hard choices, but how do we make those

choices? And so to think about that, in my book, I said, well, what did Leopold do? How did he handle problems like this?

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So I turned to his various policy-related activities, and he was very involved in policy at different phases of his life.

So for example, he crafted policy for agriculture, for forestry, and for what was then called game management, later wildlife management. So for example, in the early 1930s, he 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 value of soil conservation measures.

And the goal of this project was to show how farmers could plan farming operations to include soil conservation for long-term productivity. He also, another one of his policy activities, served on the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, and there he worked on a variety of issues, everything from warden pensions and ice fishing seasons to tractor purchases and state park concessions. In particular, and this is what I'll focus on, he recommended policies to reduce the size of the deer herd for forest health.

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Okay, so those are the two ones I'll talk a little bit further about. Concerning the erosion project, Leopold described what he called the principle of integration of land uses. Okay, so the principle of integration of land uses, “a reorganized system of land-use in which not only soil conservation and agriculture” right, the two main things he was focused on, “but also forestry, game, fish, fur, flood control, scenery, songbirds, or any other pertinent interest were to be duly integrated”, right? All of those interests were meant to be integrated into that Coon Valley project.

Concerning the Wisconsin deer herds, Leopold wrote, “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.” Okay, let's put these two ideas together.

What that means is we're taking a really pluralistic approach, right, not just including individuals and wholes, but also including all pertinent interest in values, right, as he suggested earlier. So we're taking this super pluralistic approach that it can incorporate many types of values, some of which are anthropocentric, by the way. But what is important here is that no matter what value you take, there is a common commitment to the long view, and that's a common commitment to land health.

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Okay, but still there's this question of how we implement this, right? I mean, we've now just made the problem even more difficult by including more types of values. And again, these variety of interests and values are sure to conflict. So how do we integrate them? How can we get advocates for different types of interests and values to cooperate

rather than compete? Okay, there is an obvious answer to this question, and that's seek out win-win solutions when we can, right? Easy, right? No trouble.

And it is sort of an obvious answer, but it's amazing how often we don't do it. Often we just settle for the cheapest or easiest answer, and we don't take the time to think about can we satisfy more of these values with another way of going, right? So that's the easiest way when we can do it to integrate different interests and values to seek out new solutions that we might not have thought of right off the bat.

Unfortunately, sometimes there's no win-win available. So then what do we do? Again, this is inspired by Leopold's own actions. What he did was he committed to a respectful, inclusive, science-based process that educated the public, but also recognized that failure would occur, right? Sometimes there's things out of your hands that happen, or again, there's things we don't know. And so, you know, failures will happen. There's no way around that. But again, whether we're seeking a win-win or whether we're trying to work out some, you know, less perfect solution, we have to have that common purpose, that the health of the land as a whole. And there is the earlier video on land health if you haven't watched it. That's the chapter 4 video.

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Okay, so taking all, you know, I'm waving my hands real quickly. In the book, I go a little more slowly to show how Leopold's practices give rise to these sort of eight sub-principles to the principle of integration of land uses. And these can serve as a guide to how to engage in conservation policy.

So first, as we've seen already, we include an attempt to integrate all the pertinent interests and values.

Second, and we've suggested this, seek cooperation. Rather than competition between the different interests and values, we try to find a harmonious balanced system of land use.

Third, we use a variety of different techniques. This actually comes along with the different interests and values. Those will come along with different techniques, and we should use whatever we have at our disposal.

Fourth, as I said before, recognize there's going to be failures, some due to ignorance, some due to unforeseen circumstances.

Fifth, recognize and act on obligations to the land over and above self-interest, in particular obligations to promote and protect the health of a land.

I cannot overstate how important number five is, as well as number six, which goes hand in hand with number five. 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, right? So no matter what your interests are, you have to take that long view.

Number seven, gather applicable scientific information from relevant scientific disciplines, plural, because again, most problems will be multifaceted, and we have to take those disciplines into account when developing policy.

And finally, number eight, we want to engender public understanding of the relevant science and its impact, right? We want to get people on board with these solutions, proposed solutions.

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Okay, so here's some applications of this principle of integration of land uses. It still might be seeming like I'm asking something impossible, but I think there are some contemporary cases that use this sort of approach, even though they, I don't think they did so deliberately, but I, you know, perhaps maybe implicitly, but not explicitly.

One is the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project. And again, I talk about these in more detail in the book, but it involved bringing together people with a seemingly intractable conflict of interests. You had anti-logging environmental activists together with forest service employees who were used to selling timber, the biggest trees, to finance the infrastructure for firefighting. You might think those sorts of people can't come to agreement, but they did. They were able to find common ground.

And another example I think that shows this principle of integration of land uses is the Yolo Bypass in Northern California, actually, just up the road from me. And it serves a variety of functions. It's amazing how many interests and values that they were able to satisfy. Flood control, perhaps, you know, the main impetus, but also seasonal agriculture in late spring and summer. They grow crops like sugar beets, rice, safflower, and corn. There are wetlands there that are managed and that provides habitat for migratory waterfowl, various species of birds and mammals, including some threatened species. There's a ton of recreation out there, education. People do bird watching, hiking, guided tours, all that good stuff. So again, your anthropocentric values. And it's key aquatic habitat for 42 fish species, including some native or threatened or endangered, right?

So again, I think these two projects are suggestive. We can do this, you know, we can do it.

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Okay, so upshot from chapter six. What are the policy implications of land ethic? There's a lot more to be said, of course, about how you might implement this principle of integration of land uses.

So again, I'm just going to keep acknowledging success is not guaranteed, either in the process of how we do this, right, the process I've outlined, or the outcome of that process. Policy is hard. There's no way around that.

And Leopold's own experiences very much showed that. But you know, I couldn't give you any set of policy outcomes that could guarantee a good process or a good outcome. So what am I saying here? Well, I'm claiming that these eight Leopoldian-inspired subprinciples provide for a defensible and inclusive process that can guide us through the variety of challenges that we face as a society today.

And I further claim that these principles can guide us in a scientifically and ethically justified way in as much as they're grounded in the land ethic, which I argued in the previous video is an ethic we ought to adopt.

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Okay, so some final reflections. This is my last video.

Trying to integrate multiple values means that each of us has a role to play in putting the land ethic into practice, acting so as to promote and protect the health of 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. And if you've watched this whole series of videos, videos rather, I want to thank you for your time and thank you, you know, hopefully for reading the book and, you know, getting more information from the book.

So take care and go forth and do great things.