The Land Is Our Community

Conversation Between Roberta Millstein and Nora Mills Boyd (Transcript)
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NORA

All right, well, Roberta, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I really appreciate it.

ROBERTA

Thank you for inviting me. I'm really happy to do this.

NORA

So we're going to talk about your new book *The Land is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium*. I've got it right here. And we're going to focus mostly on the last three chapters as an accompaniment to some other resources we're going to put on the Philosophers for Sustainability website for folks. And we're going to kind of assume that at this point, people have maybe done some reading and have a sense of what you're up to and have a sense of what Leopold's up to. But maybe you're at the stage where they want to go a little bit deeper and understand some more of the subtleties and some more of your thinking about this that didn't quite make it into the book or just elaborate on some of these thoughts.

So hopefully, hopefully our listeners are on board for that. And if not, maybe this will be a good invitation to hit the book. But before we get into the last three chapters, I want to ask you about some of these really famous quotes from Leopold.

So early on in your book, you argue that there's been too much focus on some of Leopold's most memorable quotes and also that these have been misinterpreted in unhelpful ways. And I think I've been guilty of this myself. I remember in an environmental ethics class telling my students that they should tattoo the summary moral maxim on their forehead so that they can see it when they look at themselves in the mirror in the morning.

So I'd like to just start by going through some of these quotes and asking you to reflect on them and help us to situate them in your larger interpretation of his views. And, you know, maybe some of these you think are really true to the spirit of Leopold as you read him, but maybe some you want to downplay. So maybe just starting with the summary moral maxim, Leopold writes, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” You can see why people love it because it's so pithy.

ROBERTA

Of course. Yeah, it's so pithy. Right. Yeah. It just evokes--it's inspirational, right? And his language is so beautiful. And so, you know, I don't want to downplay it to that extent. I don’t

want to say, well, we should ignore this, it's not important. I mean, it is important, but I think what we have to remember is who he was writing for.

So he was writing for a general audience, really. He wasn't writing for philosophers and when philosophers write, you know, they write very precisely and everything is exactly what it is. And I don't think he was thinking in those terms. You know, again, he's trying to inspire us.

And so when you look at what he says, you have to kind of take it in the context of other things, he says in that essay, but also in the rest of Sand County Almanac, also in everything else he's written. And so people read this literally and they thought he was saying that, well, you know, if a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, beauty, the biotic community and wrong when it tends otherwise, that means that, you know, if so, you know, if we need to sacrifice ourselves for the good of the community, then we should do that. And, you know, it's not by accident, nor that you and other people have read it that way.

I mean, that's like the early interpretations said that and then they kind of became entrenched. But there's you read everything else that Leopold wrote, and it's very clear he's not looking for us to sacrifice our human activities. What he does want us to do is to think about the non the non-human communities that we're parts of. And so when I look at this passage, I don't read it literally like it's right when it does this and it's wrong when it's that. But I look at it and say, oh, we should we need to try to promote these things, integrity, stability and beauty.

And then just kind of, you know, I think we'll get into this later. But then there's also been a lot of attention about, well, what did he mean by stability? And, you know, when you look at even in the Land Ethic essay itself, it seems clear he's not talking about keeping everything exactly as it is or even in a dynamic equilibrium. Right. He's he's actually in that essay talking about change.

So so, you know, what I argue in the book is that by stability, he meant something more like land health. And we can we'll talk more about land health. But so, you know, yeah, all this laser focus like, OK. And so so now we're going to spend all our time talking about what's integrity and what's stability. And somehow people spent less time talking about beauty. But yeah. So I don't know.

NORA

It's harder!

ROBERTA

Yeah, exactly. We don't know what to say about it. So we don't we just ignore it.

Yeah. So I think it's just a matter of kind of, yeah, putting it into context, recognizing he's trying to be evocative and thinking about, you know, the role that it plays in everything else that he said.

NORA

Mm hmm. But we can think about, you know, these are some traits that we should keep in mind on the community level when we're thinking about conservation policy. And

ROBERTA

Absolutely.

NORA

And that looser interpretation will stand. OK, great. And how about this one? He says: All ethics so far evolved, all ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise that the individual is both member of a community of independent parts...Sorry, I'll just read it again. “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts...The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

It's like, yeah, “simply”. But this is such a huge move to include soils!

ROBERTA

Right. Yeah. So, you know, so one part of this is clearly just the expansion of the moral community. Right, that it isn't just us humans. It even isn't just sentient animals, but it's soils, waters, plants and animals. And also that we need to think of them collectively as well as separately. Right. Both.

And so that already is, I think, yes, a significant change from maybe what we're what we're used to.

But I think also, too, I see a hint of what in the book I call Leopold's argument from consistency. And he doesn't call it that. But I call it that because I think what he's trying to say is, look, we start with this premise: the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. Right. And we can see that amongst humans. We're interdependent with one another, and he's saying our ethics come from that.

Oh, but wait a second. You know, ecology tells us and history tells us that it's not just humans that we're interdependent with these other parts, and so consistency *demands* that we expand our community. He's not just saying, oh, we should do this. It's you know, I think it's a good idea. But, you know, if we're going to be consistent about our ethics, if we're going to say that we have obligations to members of the community with whom we're interdependent, he's saying, oh, by the way, our community is bigger than we thought. So we need to expand our community.

NORA

Yeah. Putting it that way, it seems much more compelling. I remember reading the Land Ethic essay thinking like, oh, well, he's he sort of phrases it as like, well, this is just the next step, you know, in this sort of progression and this evolution and, you know, it's this sort of obvious next step in the way history has been evolving. And it's kind of like, yeah, well, I mean, I can see it. But if you're but if you start with this more principled idea that, you know, ethics stems from interdependence, then I think the consistency makes more sense.

ROBERTA

Yeah.

NORA

OK, how about: “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for [one’s] fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such”

I love this. I always think about how Leopold places us, you know, in like in the food chains right there with bears and, you know, sort of raccoons, and these other omnivores.

ROBERTA

Right. We're not even at the top. Right, we’re kind of in the middle.

NORA

Yeah. Things that eat berries and also meat.

ROBERTA

Yeah. So, yeah, we're plain members and citizens. We're not conquerors. And he spent some time talking about how the conqueror role is typically self-defeating. We're not good at it. We're not smart enough to do it. It inevitably blows up in our faces. And, you know, the things we're trying to achieve actually end up getting undermined. So that's, I mean, there's just also just a very practical reason for not playing the conqueror role and being a little bit more humble and recognizing our limitations.

So I think is one of the things that's significant about this quote. I think the other thing is, you know, he's very clear here that we have respect for our fellow members and respect for the community as such. And again, it kind of goes back to, you know, that we were talking about before with the misunderstanding of the summary moral maxim, like it's very clear here that, no, it's not that individuals get sacrificed for the whole. We have to have respect for the individuals, our fellow members. Right. Which, again, is other humans, soils, waters, plants and animals, you know, as well as the whole.

So it's it's both. And I like that this quote states that very clearly.

NORA

Mm hmm. Yeah. We can talk about this more later, but I can imagine that, you know, balancing those two imperatives, you know, gets really hard in the application and policy context.

ROBERTA

That's what the last chapter--I tried to deal with that. Yeah.

NORA

Yeah. And I'm so glad you wrote that! Yeah. Yeah.

OK, great. So the next one is he's labeled speaking of soil, water, plants and animals. And he said: "A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state."

Yeah. So this speaks to something that you were just mentioning, which is the epistemic humility, you know, that we want to take care of the, you know, the continued existence of members of the community, in part out of humility for what we don't know, the effects might be of their removal. But it also speaks to this kind of larger debate and question about what you know, what the role of preservation and preservation of wild places in particular is and how Leopold's views intersect with that debate and what he thinks is appropriate there. Yeah, and misunderstandings of it.

ROBERTA

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, again, this, you know, not to harp on the misinterpretations, but, you know, he says here we're not going to prevent alteration management and use. Right. That's what we do. We're humans. We do those things. In fact, all animals and all species modify and alter things. That's what we all do.

So it's not about, you know, not doing those things, but it's like, when we do those things, we need to be cognizant of our fellow members. Right? We need to be aware of what we're doing to our fellow members.

Now, one of the things I love about this quote, and it doesn't come across when you say it out loud, is that resources is in quotes. And he says, so he says a land ethic, of course, cannot prevent the alteration management and use of these "resources". And to me, what he's saying is that these actually aren't just resources for us to use.

We will use them, but they're not just that. Right. They're not just there for our purpose. And so then the next sentence kind of says they actually have a right to continued existence. They're not just there for us. And, you know, we can't always keep them in a natural state, but maybe in some places we can keep them in a natural state.

NORA

And that would be a good thing.

ROBERTA

Yeah.

NORA

To have some places.

ROBERTA

Yeah.

NORA

Yeah. Okay. And then the last one I have is: “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity”

ROBERTA

Yeah. So I think that. I mean, one is that, you know, again, this you see how this is trying to inspire us, right? That the land ethic involves changing our minds and our hearts. Right. And that we have to kind of take this on in a very personal way. This this individual responsibility that that each of us has. So I think, you know, that's part of what's going on here.

But I also like this quote for highlighting the importance of land health in the land ethic. And I think, again, everyone was so focused on stability in the maxim that land health didn't get as much attention—it got some attention, but not as much attention. And here he says, well, what's that? It's the capacity of the land for self-renewal.

And in here, I think, oh, we're you know, we're philosophers for sustainability. To me, this is a very this concept of land health is very much a sustainability concept that works, that the goal of the land ethic is to try to preserve the capacity of the land to renew itself and basically sustain itself over time, which just it's just another way of saying the same thing. So I think, you know, seeing that as a primary goal of the land ethic, again, it's not the only thing. It's not, we don't have to sacrifice everything for it. But a goal of the land ethic is to preserve this capacity to sustain itself over time. So that's what conservation is supposed to do is try to understand how do we do this? How do we preserve this?

NORA

Mm hmm. And is that I mean, I take it that's not like, you know, preserve the land in a particular, you know, state that was time stamped to whatever, seventeen hundred or something and just recreate perpetually that same state. Does that make sense? What is it that's, you know, I mean, it sounds like he wants the individual threads, like the individual species, for example, to be able to continue their existence, and he wants the

land health to be preserved overall in the long run. And this and this capacity for the land to renew itself.

ROBERTA

Yeah. The capacity. Right.

NORA

But it's not some particular scene that he's envisioning.

ROBERTA

That's exactly right. No, 100 percent. That's exactly right.

It's the it's the capacity. And which species are part of that in a given area can change over time, will change over time. When you look at history, you know, and he looked at, you know, some of like the history in Wisconsin where he was living at that time. And he could see, yeah, the composition of species has changed over time. But the question is, do they continue to function together? And this is where, you know, we'll talk more, I guess, about interdependence, right, but this is where interdependencies come in. Right.

That, you know, having the species that rely on each other, that are able to interact in ways that let the community sustain itself over time. That's what's important. It's not that it's necessarily the same as it was in some particular time or even the same species at a different time, but it's maintaining those interactions, that's what's important, even if the interactions change.

I know that's, yeah.

NORA

Yeah, I just, I think this is an interesting question, because it has been the subject of so much debate between the more preservationist-minded people and folks who have a different idea of what conservation should be.

ROBERTA

Right, right. Well, yeah. And it's, yeah, it's very timely, actually, because, I mean, in a lot of ways, we're in a situation where it really isn't going to be feasible to have the same species in the same area with climate change. It just isn't, it isn't going to be. So then what do we aim for? And Leopold says, well, we should aim for land health, we should aim to making this a sustainable system. And, you know, he's got some hypotheses about what it means, you know, to do that, how you have a sustainable system.

Right. But, yeah, so I think it's, it ends up being ironically, or inadvertently, maybe I should say, inadvertently very timely to think about conservation this way.

NORA

And, you know, what species and parts of the land community are playing which roles and how those might be played by different individuals or different species...

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah. Now, then I have to think, though, that he's, this is where he's going to remind us that we are not actually as smart as we think we are, we need to proceed cautiously when we do this. So it's not as though this is somehow like a blank check, go in there and just re-engineer everything, which sometimes people try to do. It's like, well, no, go slowly. You know, if you know certain species work well together in certain ways, right, try that out. But, you know, nothing, don't go too radical, because again, it's going to blow up in your face. And that comes from his own experience seeing, trying things and having them blow up in his face and realizing like, okay, no. It doesn't always work out the way you think it's going to.

NORA

Okay, great. So let's talk about the land health stuff some more.

So in your chapter on land health, very early on, you note that for Leopold, the presence of humans, we talked about this a little bit already, but I think it's, it's worth spending some time on.

The presence of humans does not necessarily destroy the health of the land, and that he noted the modifications that Indigenous peoples had made in the Sierra Madre, such as damming waterways, in a landscape that he nevertheless considered “unspoiled wilderness”. And I want to pause on this issue and ask you to expand on it. So Leopold studied landscapes that he had, that had been decimated by human intervention, including overgrazing and the extirpation predators, and also appreciated the Sierra Madre, Indigenous modifications and all. So you note that Leopold allows humans a role in the self-maintenance of land communities in a way that many contemporary ecologists do not.

So I'm wondering if you can talk about how Leopold understood the lines between benign, helpful, and harmful interventions for the health of the land, and then how we should think about these lines. I gathered from your book, for example, that interventions that promote soil erosion and ones that shorten food chains are particularly problematic, usually.

But yeah, I want to ask you about this, you know, yeah, what kind of human interventions are helpful and which are damaging? When I teach environmental ethics, I often teach the Trouble with Wilderness essay[1], too. And I, you know, that essay makes this really strong argument that, you know, if we as human beings write ourselves out of our definition of the

[1] William Cronon’s essay “The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, which can be found in 1995 volume he edited titled *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature,* published by W.W. Norton & Company

environment, we're, you know, that's a suicidal approach to conservation. It doesn't make any sense for a world in which we want to be living in environments.

So I think this is really important to see how it is that, you know, humans can be part of the land community in a way that isn't destructive, primarily. And it's such, I think, I feel like it's such a hard and big question, but I'm really curious about it.

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah, no, it's a great question. And absolutely, right. Yeah, Leopold's trying to say, like, how can we live on the land and do it in a way that, you know, that promotes land health and doesn't cause further land sickness? Right.

How do we do that? So, yeah, soil erosion or I guess more generally soil fertility, I would say. And it's interesting, actually, since I wrote the book, I've been thinking more about that. And that's I won't go too far down the path because that's a that's a new project. But, you know, he was he just through all the different things he did in his life, like seeing grazing and seeing the way that people did agriculture. He just saw like again and again in these different domains, forestry, that everything came back to the soil and that if you didn't have healthy soil, you didn't have a healthy community.

And so that for him was key. And he's like, absolutely. No matter what else we do, we have to take care of the soil. And again, that's something that is now very timely. A lot of ecologists are pointing to that same thing.

So, number one, take care of the soil.

Right. And we have some knowledge about what kinds of practices tend to promote fertility and what don't. And, you know, some of that has to do with, you know, what we plant and how we how we rotate crops and all those things that people are talking about now.
But and then you mentioned the shortening food chains and there he was a little less kind of certain about the role there. But it just it seemed to him that that the shorter that, you know, if something comes up from the soil and into a plant and then something eats that and eats that, eats that, eats that, et cetera. And the shorter the chain, the sooner it goes back down into the soil. And once these nutrients are in the soil, then, yeah, they're subject to erosion. They could be blown away or washed away. And so he hypothesized that the longer the chain, the longer the nutrients would stay bound up in organisms and be sort of at less risk. Right. From being blown away or eroded.

So, yeah, he says, OK, let's stop causing massive extinctions. Right. Let's protect species because, you know, back when we were talking before about, you know, what makes for a healthy system. So, yes, preserve the interactions, but preserve the diversity of interactions. Right. So that there can be these long, you know, in food chains, you know, the dependencies between species. Right. That these could be complex and involving a lot of species for the area. Right. That's going to be relative to an area.

Yeah, so those are the two big ones. And then I think, you know, more generally, his advice is, you know, something I alluded to earlier. Right. Make changes that are slow. Make them locally. Do the least amount of violence in concert with what we already know about natural processes.

And always, always recognize what we don't know, recognize our ignorance. Right. And then and then finally, just that, you know, I see this as having two sides. Right. We want we can try to prevent more land sickness and we can also try to promote land health. And we could we can do both of it. We can and should do both of those things is what I hear him advocating for. Right. And so that's where, you know, restorations can come into play. Right. There's this positive obligation to help as well as to try to prevent more harm. So I don't know if that...does that? It's a big question.

NORA

Yeah. Yeah. No, I think I'm just thinking, like, you know, it's one of these things where I think there will be, you know, there will be clear cases where, well, that's really not promoting the health of the land community, the tar sands, the Athabasca tar sands, really not promoting the health of the land community.

And then there's going to be some stuff that's more subtle about, yeah, how do we have enough...are we confident enough in our understanding of this local system to introduce this, you know, tentative intervention yet? Or is it something that we still need to do more on? And I can imagine that it getting difficult to kind of adjudicate in those more contextual cases.

There's going to be some obvious no's.

ROBERTA

Yeah. No, I think I think you're absolutely right. And I think there's just no way around those hard choices or not hard. But, yeah, I guess hard choices is the right way to put it. Yeah, because they're complex situations and we don't know everything.

And so we, you know, we get our groups together and we discuss the pros and cons and proceed as best as we think we can. And he'd say proceed cautiously. But, of course, doing nothing is sometimes bad as well. Right. So, yeah, I think there's just there's no way around that challenge. And that's why we have, you know, smart ecologists and conservation biologists out there to try to figure this out. And they know better than the rest of us, you know, just how difficult these things are.

NORA

Yeah. I just have to listen to them. And, yeah, I'm thinking I'm wondering...so he does include waters, you know, in addition to soils as part of the land community. Yes. And I'm wondering, does he emphasize that, you know, the role of water and land health more in other parts of his work that I haven't read? I feel like in my mind, this is such an important

thing. And maybe it's just at the top of my mind, because I just finished Robert Macfarlane's book, *Is a River Alive?* And he's talking about the, you know, all the dead rivers that we have now and wrestling with this question about, like, how should we you know, can we really understand the state of these rivers on the in terms of health like that? But, yeah, I'm thinking, you know, this is and maybe it's because I'm living in upstate New York these days too where, you know, the role of the Hudson River and its health and all of the other water bodies around us is so important. And I mean, this is absolutely true. And, you know, out in the West, too. So people think a lot about water in their landscapes.

ROBERTA

Yes they do.

NORA

And, you know, Leopold did all this work, as you were describing in New Mexico, in the Bosque. And so I'm wondering, yeah, what does what does he think about water and its role in that?

ROBERTA

Yeah. I mean, he it's definitely I think, you know, perhaps he doesn't spend as much time on it. And that's given, you know, what his background was and what he worked on. But it certainly is important. It is certain certainly something he discussed. I can't...this is where I think like I'm not a historian. I'm not good at just bringing up these quotes off the top of my head. But it is definitely that something he found important.

I think sometimes one of the examples I think I use in the book and I certainly have used in a lot of talks is talking about overfishing. And I think that fits very well into his concern about land. I mean, that's funny "land" health. We're talking about water. But, you know, if you think of if you don't think of land community as like a dirt community, but like the community of right, *everything*, right. When we when we overfish, when we cause a keystone fish species to go extinct, then it has those...Sorry, I want to say "downstream" of

NORA

Yeah, or "ripple down". It's hard to avoid!

ROBERTA

I'm so sorry. I'm so bad with puns, downstream effects on other species. And so now we have these areas, because you overfished one species, right, now these other species are gone. And that's just that's a case where we didn't pay attention to interdependence. Right. I mean, you know, there's other things we weren't paying attention to, but we weren't paying attention to those interdependencies.

And so now some of those areas, it's really hard to restore them. So that's just. Yeah, that's one kind of water issue that we have. But I feel like, you know, what he has to say there is very directly relevant.

NORA

OK, great. OK, so I'm here, I'm curious what...You mentioned at some point...What do you think are some of the most promising hypotheses that contemporary biologists, ecologists, and conservationists today can draw out of Leopold's work for a further empirical study? Stuff that might have just been at the state of hypothesis when Leopold was writing, but we now maybe have the tools to explore some more.

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah, good. That's a great question. I love that.

So there's three chapters in the each focus on a different concept, right? So one is interdependence, one is land community, and one is land health, which we've talked a lot about. And I feel like each of those could be sort of the basis for some further empirical work.

So interdependence. One of the things that I try to argue in the book is that it's, and people have said, oh, this is interesting, this is unusual, that it isn't just, when we talk about interdependence between species or abiotic components, it isn't just the positive interactions that matter, it's also the negative, what we would call negative interactions. So the predator-prey interaction is very important for interdependence, can be very important for the health of the community, even though it's a negative for the prey.

So interdependence doesn't just mean, you know, one species that helps another species, it can, you know, and I give a whole argument as to why this is, but that it can include these, you know, what we've called negative interactions as well. And so, and then kind of tied with that, thinking about vulnerabilities, that part of what it means to be interdependent is to be vulnerable. And so then that brings on us obligations to protect vulnerable members of the land community.

And we are vulnerable in many ways, right, from our actions, right? When we overfish an area, or when we introduce too many pollutants, right, then that makes ourselves, so we're vulnerable too in that web of interactions. So the hypothesis that I think would come out of that is, you know, well, how does this work? You know, does it, if we think of interdependence in this broader way, is that helpful? Does that enhance our conservation work to think of it in that way? So that's, you know, I think rather than focusing just on the positive interactions, does it help to include the negative ones as well?

And does it also, you know, does it include to not just think about interactions between species, but also interactions between organisms and, you know, land, I mean, sorry, soil and water, you know, does it help to have this really broader...is that a fruitful way that enables us to better understand how communities function and to better, you know, do restoration and things like that?

NORA

Like when conservationists actually take this broader view into their, into account in terms of making plans and enacting policy, then does, what kind of results do we get?

ROBERTA

Exactly, yes, is it more successful?

So then land communities, that's a chapter where I argue for land communities being understood in terms of, again, the interactions between species and also the flow of energy, which is kind of a very ecosystem type of concept. And, but that makes it really difficult to find their boundaries. And so a lot of times we want to, you know, think about, well, what's the target of our conservation, right? And my thinking is, you know, you want to be able to, you don't want to go too small, because then there's these other interactions you're not taking into account. But if you go too big, it's, you know, you might be dealing with a lot of things that aren't necessarily relevant, right? So sort of finding that right in between boundary. And so, you know, I argue that it should be sort of roughly where the level of interactions drops off, right? And it's going to be a fuzzy boundary. It's not a sharp boundary, right? But where you've got sort of intense interactions here and then lesser interactions outside.

So again, you know, I would say, is this a fruitful way of thinking about communities? Does this lead to successful conservation efforts, restorations? Is it a practical, workable way of thinking about communities?

NORA

And what's relevant to some conservation efforts?

ROBERTA

Exactly. And what's relevant, right? That to think about both the interactions and the energy flow, right. And yeah, exactly. Yeah.

And then the third is land health, like I said, which we've already sort of talked about. And then so then this hypothesis that Leopold had about long food chains leading to the ability of the land to sustain itself over time. Does that, is that borne out or not? And, you know, there's some people I think thinking about that right now, but I think, you know, again, even Leopold himself is like, hmmm, you know, so he's clear, like he wants the goal to be land health. Like we want the, and I think this is how you get it, right? But so then is that, is that the best way to achieve land health? And how does that play out in different situations? Like some people push back on me, which, you know, rightly so, and say, well, you know, in this area, the food chains tend, tend to be shorter anyway. And so then I think, well, yeah, it has to be relative to a particular area, but sort of fleshing that out and figuring out how to apply it, I think is an interesting area that could be explored.

NORA

Yeah. Maybe like, what's the right length, you know, of these chains for some context given like, yeah, the “resources” available, but also how the soil is, you know, the vulnerabilities of the soil in that region, all those things.

ROBERTA

Right. The climate, the soil, right. All that.

NORA

Yeah. Cool. Oh, okay. Yeah. I really want to ask you about this one. You mentioned that you say perhaps the most significant contribution that Leopold's land health concept will have regarding our thinking about climate change will have to do with potential solutions for addressing climate change.

And I'm hoping you'll say more about this because I'm really thirsty for climate change solutions right now.

ROBERTA

Yeah, right?

I don't know if I'll be able to have any, any grand ideas. I wish that I did. So here's my concern though. It's such a, such a difficult problem. It's such a horrible problem that I think the tendency is to try to reach for anything that will address it. And that's when I get concerned.

And, you know, it, as I look at the conversations, it, it's like we, we fall back on these very human centered solutions. We forget about the rest of the land community. And I think again, if you look at history, those are the types of solutions that end up blowing up in our face.

And so I think what, you know, the, because I don't, I wish I thought that the land ethic had some, you know, some grand solution to it. But I think what it does tell us is that we always have to remember land health, whatever, whatever solution we're considering, how is this going to affect other species? How's it going to affect the soil? How's it going to affect the water? How's it going to affect their functioning, the way they work together?

And so that, you know, some of the things that people talk about, like, well, where do we put solar panels? And well, yeah, put them, put them on a roof. That's usually good, you know, put them in parking lots that, that can be good. I mean, you know, I'm not, I don't want to generalize and say like these things are always, cause it's always contextual, but, but then, you know, sometimes people will propose putting solar panels, like, oh, we'll just put them in the desert as though there's nothing living there, which is, you know, a misconception, right? So then people talk about putting them in these sensitive areas or in these areas, you know, and it's like, oh my God, we have to reduce our carbon, which we

do, but let's think about the ways in which we can do it that are, you know, better promoting land health and less, yeah, and less damaging to the rest of the community. So that's where I think it's got the main message or, you know, same thing with wind turbines, you know, they can be great, but where do you put them? And that that's, you know, or how should they be constructed? Can they be constructed in a way that they do the least amount of damage? And so, you know, kind of, yeah, I guess it's, it's that not leaping to the, like, oh my God, we have to do something, but...It seems like we can't take a moment, but we have to take that moment to think about how can we do these things in a way that also preserves land health?

NORA

Yeah, because that's where, yeah, that's the sustainability piece, like how this is going to work in the long run. Yeah, I'm thinking about, Kyle Whyte makes these kinds of arguments too[2], about, you know, the rush to institute solutions to climate change that then just bulldoze over Indigenous rights on, you know, with respect to land use and how he kind of hates the sort of ticking clock feeling that we have going, you know, in public consciousness about climate change, because it feels like it gives people the license to make these really hasty decisions without thinking it through.

And so, yeah, I think there's lots of reasons to use the intelligence that we have in terms of ecologists and, you know, Indigenous land use folks and, you know, everybody who needs a seat at the table in order to enact these solutions in a way that is, like, makes sense for the long term as opposed to whatever can be done fastest, even though, even though it is an emergency, you know?

ROBERTA

Yeah, it's hard when you're in an emergency, it's hard to take that moment, but yeah, we have to, right? So, yeah.

NORA

Okay. So, yeah, I wanted to ask you about the, yeah, the idea of the land communities being morally considerable and the subject of moral consideration themselves. So, you say that a strong case can be made that the land communities are morally considerable, and your argument draws on a way of defining boundaries of land communities and a discussion of land health as a way that they can be harmed or benefited. And it seems to me that a natural thought someone might have is that in order for something to be appropriately the subject of direct moral considerability, that thing might need to be sentient, or even worse, it might need to be a person. And that people are going to worry that, you know, we can't have that view about land communities as a whole. So, they might not be the appropriate subject of moral considerability.

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[2] See his piece "Time as Kinship" in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities* (2021).

Yeah. Or, you know, even for land communities to have interests *themselves*, as opposed to sort of indirectly, one might think they would need to be sentient in some cases. So, I'm wondering what you...and I think this is, I really, I really think this question is interesting, too, with respect to how we think about the land communities, you know, these large-scale land communities, but also members of land communities, and just how we sort of philosophically and metaphysically think about what it is that we're interacting with when we're interacting with land, and what sort of state and status we should be thinking about there.

So, yeah, I'm curious about your thoughts on that, and how that ties up with their being the subjects of moral considerability.

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah, good. Thank you.

So, before I launch in, I do want to say, like, I think this is going to be me going beyond what Leopold said. Again, you know, he doesn't use the phrase “moral considerability”, or, you know, talk about it, talk about, you know, sentient versus land community in a way that environmental ethicists like to do, or ethicists like to do. So, just to kind of be clear that this isn't, I tried to do that in the book, too. Like, this is where I'm talking, and this is where I'm trying to interpret.

So, then speaking personally, one of the things I loved about environmental ethics from the outset is the way that it challenges our intuitions. And so, yeah, this is challenging to our intuitions! And I feel like most of the field has done that, right? And it has been, especially in this area of broadening the moral community.

And I think I like that because whenever philosophers appeal to intuitions, I often find I don't share those intuitions, and then I think, okay, now what do we do, right? You have your intuitions, I have mine, I don't share them. So, I think it can be kind of a poor basis in a lot of ways. And then I think, like, why do we even have them? Do we have them because of a bias, or is this just an entrenched way of thinking? Like, everyone knows that it's this, you know, sentient, you know, or only people that, you know, are morally considerable. So, I try to, in my thinking, kind of set that aside and let us be open.

And so, but then I do think, you know, as before, like, consistency matters, and we do want to be consistent in our thinking. So, I look at being sentient, and yes, of course being sentient is morally relevant. There's, you know, in my mind, no question about it. If you're not going to start with that, then I think you're not even going to have any kind of ethics at all, right? It's certainly morally relevant. It might not be the most important morally relevant characteristic, but I think it's certainly morally relevant.

So, why is it relevant? Well, you feel pleasure and pain. Entities that are sentient can feel pleasure and pain, and those are types of benefits and harms, really, what they are, right?

It feels bad, in general, feel bad to feel pain, and feels good to feel pleasure, and that, you know, it's like a type of harm, type of benefit.

Okay, well, why single out those harms and benefits? Why not think about harms and benefits more broadly? When we learn that, you know, a plant can be made healthy or sick, right, can be benefited or harmed, then why not take that into account as well? And then, you know, more generally, if you understand that a land community can be benefited or harmed, can be made more healthy or sick, then that should be taken into account as well. So, I think, you know, the argument, once you take away, like, the intuition and just think about, kind of, what's going on with why do we think that sentience is important, I think it opens the door to think more broadly about benefits and harms.

And I do want to say, too, like, I'm not the first person to do this, right? I'm drawing on other folks that have, you know, very much drawing on other folks that have used this kind of argument to make the case for a bigger moral community. I don't know if you find that persuasive or not.

NORA

Well, and then it's, yeah, and then it's benefited or harmed, sort of, with respect to the project of land health, which is the capacity for self-renewal. So, that, because I could wonder, you know, I mean, it's, I'm seeing how that's such an important piece to have in the argument, because otherwise it's like, you know, benefited or harmed with respect to what? You know, like, what kind of aim or, you know.

ROBERTA

Yeah, no, thank you for that. That's a really good way to put that. Yeah, it's not benefited or harmed for us. You know, it may be good for us, it may be bad for us, but it's, can it, is this an action that will let the community sustain itself over time or not? Yeah, so it's, it's the benefit or harm is to the land community itself. Yeah.

NORA

Yeah, and then I guess you have to get, sort of, people just have to get on board with that, you know, premise zero, which is like the continuation of land communities is a good thing.

ROBERTA

Well, there's, there's always a starting point, right? But yeah, you know, again, it's, it's to try to, to open up that discussion about, and it's funny when I talk to ecologists or, or evolutionary biologists about this, they're like, well, wait a second, pleasure and pain, that's just one environment or one evolutionary adaptation. There are a lot of evolutionary adaptations for preventing harm and, you know, promoting good. Why single out that one for a special ethical...And I find that kind of persuasive as well.

NORA

Okay, so this is related, but I think it's different enough that it's worth asking too. So you note that Leopold makes interdependence the ethical basis of the land ethic, using it and the concept of community to make an argument from consistency. And we've talked about this a little bit already.

And you note, various other historical traditions that seem to share this fundamental idea ranging from Aristotelian ethics to the African notion of *ubuntu*. And you suggest that "at the basis of all such views" is the idea "that, as members of the community, our fates are intertwined, so that interdependence and vulnerability are fundamental aspects of our existence and are thus the origin of our obligations to one another".

And so it sounds like this is something you deeply believe. Is that something you personally are committed to? And do you think it's strong enough to get us this full, rich ethics that, you know, from that starting point?

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah, no, I do. I am a believer. So, and you know, and I have to say, I think a lot of students found it persuasive as well, you know, that I would go through this sequence in my environmental ethics class. And I think a lot of students actually found this easier to think about than animal rights. I'm not saying that's, you know, that's not, let's say an argument in favor of it against, but it was one of the things that motivated me to write the book. Like this is something that people kind of get and find persuasive.

So, yeah, so why do I find it persuasive? You know, I look at us as human beings and, you know, in spite of Americans talking about their rugged individualism, we're a social species by nature, you know, like we're like other primates, we're like wolves, we're social. And we're, you know, we don't do well in cold temperatures, we don't do well in hot temperatures. We, you know, we're tool users, but our tool using is also very much community based, right?

In other words, I, there's a long way of saying like, I see us as being kind of necessarily interdependent with other humans. And, you know, it's because of the sorts of beings that we evolved to be. There are other species that are maybe less dependent on their, at least on their fellow members, but we're very dependent on other members of our species in ways that we take for granted every day, all the time. You know, the couch I'm sitting on, the computer I'm using, right? The house I'm sitting in, all those things, very dependent on other humans.

And so then again, yeah, the consistency argument. Once you realize that it isn't just humans that you're interdependent with, but that all of these other species, right? All of these, all the food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink, all those things really come down to those connections between species. Then we have to recognize that it isn't just our fellow humans. It isn't just our human communities that matter, but our fellow land community members and the land community itself that we have obligations to. So.

NORA

It just gave me this moment of like, yeah. And if you really feel the ethics of that, you know, I mean, just like when we really feel, you know, what, you know, how our computer was made and the suffering, human suffering that was involved in all of these things that we take for granted in faraway places, like there's, like when you open your eyes to that, there's a lot to hold. And then if you open your eyes even further to your dependence on, like, I'm thinking about the Hudson River here and how horribly we've treated it and how, you know, absolutely vital it is to so much in the region. And it's like, if you, and then if you start to think about that as really, yeah, these entities as members of the moral community...it's a lot to feel, you know? Yeah.

ROBERTA

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

But, you know, and then you think, well, if we had thought about the Hudson River as part of our community from the outset, maybe we would have treated it better. And so that making that mental shift, you know, this is what I think what Leopold is suggesting that making that mental shift can help us, you know, do better, act better. And so he sees that as a necessary step along the way.

NORA

Yeah. To avoid that kind of situation in the first place. Yeah.

Okay. So I want to talk a little bit more about policy before, before we wrap up, in these really tricky decisions that people have to make.

So you say that, you know, Leopold recognized that we're never going to fully achieve harmony with the land. It's not like, you know, we're going to completely get it right at the end of the day, we can check the box or something like that. But that we should nevertheless strive towards this ideal. And as your first subprinciple in your guide to Leopoldian conservation policy, which I'm so glad you did, you include the need to attempt to integrate all pertinent interests.

And I'm wondering if there's any more to say about how, you know, in practical circumstances, we can recognize when enough interests have been integrated to, you know, turn to the application of policy. So like when we can say, okay, this is good enough for now, you know, given what we have to do, or if this is just something that will have to be hashed out in the details of context.

And I guess you said a little bit about this earlier, when we were talking about the, you know, paying attention to when you kind of drop off the cliffs of interactions, when you're looking at some system that is highly connected, but that there will be some fuzzy boundary. But you know, there's probably a way to set that boundary for practical...Yeah, I'm just wondering if you, you know, when we're thinking about what we're trying to achieve

overall, in conservation policy, like, is there anything more to say about how people will know when it's time to act and stop worrying about it? Yeah.

ROBERTA

Yeah, yeah, good.

No, thank you. So yeah, I was, you know, when I was doing the research for the book, and I saw that Leopold, you know, talks, he himself talks about integrating all of these pertinent interests. And I thought, that's, again, that's just amazing. Like, this is something that philosophers of science are talking about now, right? The importance of kind of diverse perspectives and figuring out how to do conservation policy. So I got very excited about that. And this is a way to spell out, you know, what Leopoldian policy looks like.

But yeah, he doesn't tell us much about then, well, how do you do it, right? For him, it was like, I think it was sort of given, like, if you're in an area where, you know, people are hunting, he would say, that's a pertinent interest, or people care about the songbirds, or the aesthetics, right? So all those human interests are part of it as well. The key thing he always says is that, you know, land health has to be always, you know, I can't emphasize that enough, always take into account, but all these other interests, right, you want to bring those to the table as well.

So yeah, you know, back to your point about it being context sensitive, right? What kind of interests are going to partly depend on what kind of area you're talking about, what kind of action you're considering.

And then I think, you know, for me, the things to think about is, you know, who's been speaking up, right? Probably want to bring those folks to the table. But then who is affected, but isn't been speaking up, maybe because, you know, they're, you know, marginalized peoples, or, you know, don't have time to visit meetings, go to meetings, you know, during the workday. And to try to bring, again, this is me speaking more than Leopold speaking, right? But to me, bringing all those interests means, you know, also means bringing, you know, these voices that, you know, aren't always heard. And this, I think, you know, goes back to Kyle Whyte's point that you mentioned earlier, right? Bringing, you know, Indigenous peoples who have knowledge of the land to the table as well.
And so, you know, yeah, but when are you done? I mean, you're never done, right? But, you know, you do the best you can. And, you know, it seems like we've covered most of the relevant interests here and made an effort to include people who are typically not included, and then go. Then we start a conversation. And he says, you know, we try to harmonize these, while everyone has to be committed to the common goal of land health.

NORA

Yeah, I can imagine that being really useful...just, you know, guiding star to hold on to in what would otherwise be incredibly complicated meetings.

ROBERTA

Yes. Yes, if you just if it were just like, okay, hash it out, like, right? No.
But yeah, and then other things, too. It has to be respectful. It has to be, you know, you have to, like, not that I don't care about your interest, but oh, I hear your interest. Here's my interest. How can we work together to harmonize our interests in a way that preserves land health, right? That commitment to that kind of conversation.

NORA

To the collaborative project and to respect. Yeah, and I can imagine there would be some really cool solutions that would come out of those kinds of conversations when you get people in a room together who, you know, with that amount of creativity who don't necessarily talk to each other.

ROBERTA

Right, right.

NORA

I like this idea.

ROBERTA

That's cool.

NORA

Okay. And yeah, can you, is there something that comes to mind, like one important issue where you really wish the Leopoldian approach to conservation that you that you've outlined and argued for would be applied today where you see it not currently being applied?

ROBERTA

Yeah, I mean, I thought about this because you gave me the questions ahead of time. And, you know, I kind of think, well, everywhere.

One thing I did think about was that when we talk about conservation, it's so often, like, how can I eat better? Like, how can I use less plastics? How can I, you know, drive a different kind of car? And we put so much on individuals. And I, and that's important. And our individual decisions certainly matter. But then I always want to shift it to, okay, well, what are the big corporations doing? Because they're, they are the worst offenders, right? They are the biggest impacts. And so I think that kind of tells us, well, you know, land ethics says we want to care about land health. Look to where the biggest impacts are and they're coming corporations. So that means we need to think about both the you know and it does. It's still individual decisions, but how we, as individuals, can press corporations through our buying choices, or whatever to do better, and how we can press our political representatives to get them to have policies that are, you know, better preserve the health of communities.

So, it's a, I didn't give you a specific answer, but just kind of that. I think that general shift to not always going back to what we do as individuals. But thinking about how these yeah, these, what these bigger corporations are doing, how we can get them to act better.

NORA

Yeah, yeah. And you sort of immediately go to just a larger scale, like a you know, watershed scale, or much larger regional scale. Or you know, in the like, I mentioned the Athabasca tar sands like earlier. It's like a planetary scale project that they've got going on, you know? So, yeah, if we start thinking about right, how...what would promoting land health look like at this much larger scale? Yeah, I could see how that would be really impactful.

Well, is there anything else you wanted to, that we didn't touch on that you wanted to add? Yeah, those were my questions. I'm really glad to get to speak to you about them.

ROBERTA

It's funny again, like talking with people about the book since it's been published. And you think about, I wish I talked about that a little bit more so. I wish that I had talked more about the first part of Sand County Almanac, more. As a philosopher, and I think most of us philosophers are this way, we tend to go to the end of the book where he's getting philosophical. But the early parts of the book where he's talking about basically stories of things he's seen. And he...the last time I reread it I was really struck the way he takes the point of view of different animals, or even of the trees. And it's very powerful, and I think it, you know, it kind of fits in that line with like, how do we come to see these as morally considerable? Right? You come to see these, you know this mouse as a being that has its own goals and has its own desires, and you know again, can be benefited or harmed. And it's just trying to get through its day. And I think that that's very powerful. It might not be, you know, like a strictly logical argument that a philosopher wants to see, but I think it's powerful, and I think it kind of speaks to that general sort of get outside and appreciate what's out there, which is something that that Leopold did. And you know that doesn't have to mean going to a national park. It can mean going just to your little local park or parklet, and sitting under a tree and listening to the birds, and just sort of appreciating things. I think is...otherwise this is all very dry and abstract, you know. And so I wish I'd emphasized that more, and if I were rewriting the book today I would talk more about that.

NORA

Hmm.

ROBERTA

That's on me.

NORA

That's great. Well, I love that that gives people some homework right now to just go outside.

ROBERTA

Yes, no better homework than that.

NORA

Well, thank you so much, Roberta. This has been really wonderful to speak with you. And I appreciate, yeah, getting to explore this in more depth, and thank you so much for this beautiful book. It's really, I hope it's read far and wide, and I hope the ideas get a lot of uptake in applied contexts, too.

ROBERTA

Thank you, and thank you so much for your questions. I really, they were great questions. They made me think. I really enjoyed talking with you about it.

NORA

Thanks.