

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

INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

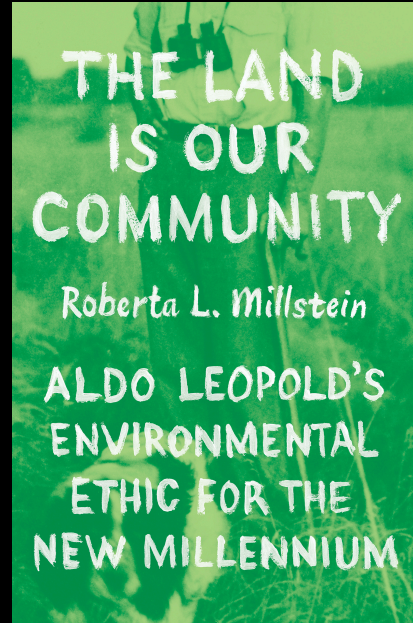
My recently published book offers a new interpretation and a new defense of Leopold's land ethic.

The approach is from the **history & philosophy of science** as well as **environmental ethics**:

- Elaborates and clarifies *central concepts* of the land ethic.
- Gives *reasons* why we should accept Leopold's views.

In this series of videos, I will be giving a **high level overview** of chapters 4, 5, and 6.

This video gives necessary background for the others.



So first:

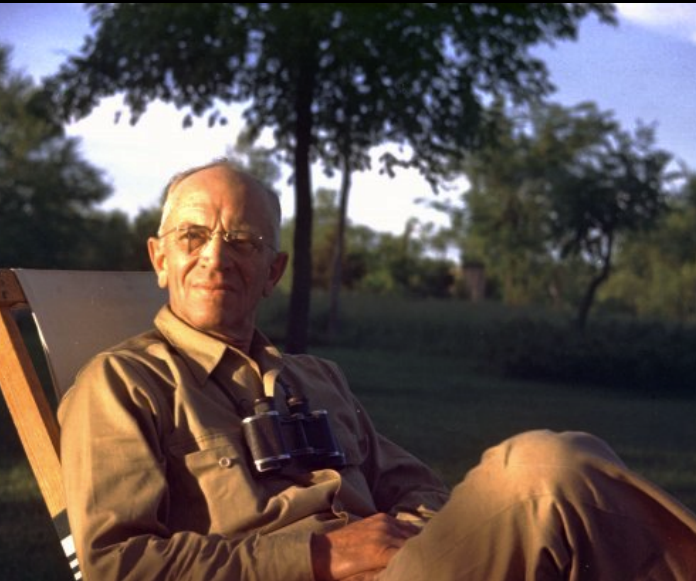
Who was Aldo Leopold?

What is the land ethic?

And why does it need to be reinterpreted?

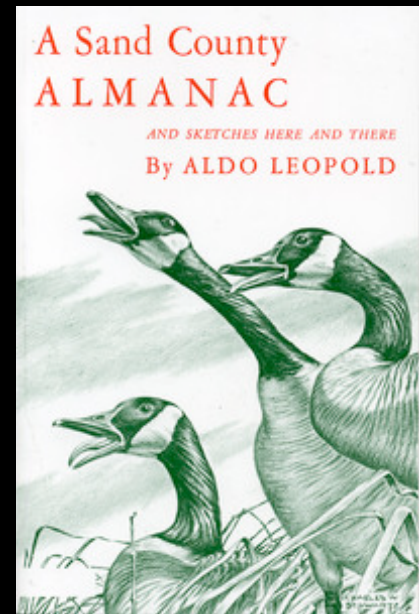
Aldo Leopold (1887-1948)

- Hunter, forester, wildlife manager, ecologist, conservationist, and professor
- Best known for his posthumously published book *A Sand County Almanac* and the essay “The Land Ethic” contained within.



- More than 500 published works and about as many unpublished.

- Extremely influential not only in environmental ethics, but also conservation biology and related fields, such as forestry, wildlife management, and restoration ecology.



The Land Ethic: Some essential quotations

“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.**” (Leopold 1949, 203-4; emphasis added)



From *A Sand County Almanac*

“...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**” (Leopold 1949, 204; emphasis added).

“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” (Leopold 1949, 221; emphasis added).

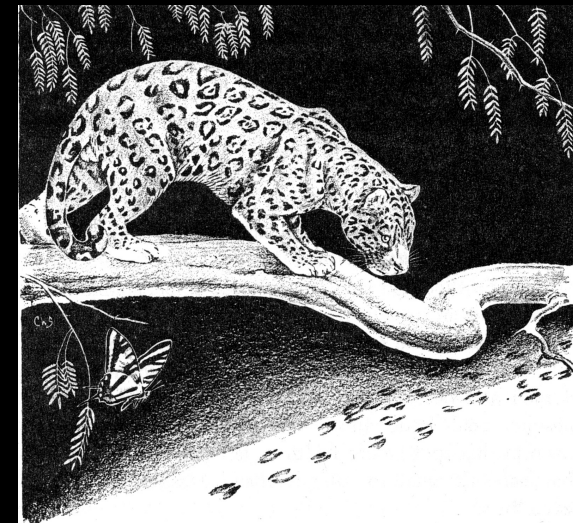
Summarizing the land ethic

Leopold believed that the land ethic is a product of social evolution – thus, it continues to develop over time.

He also stated that “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written’” (1949, 225).

The upshot: With those two caveats, here is my **summary statement of Leopold’s land ethic:**

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*

Previous interpretations of the land ethic—and their problems

Many authors identified the following as the “*summary moral maxim*” of Leopold’s land ethic: “***A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic [land] community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.***”

- Some believed this implies that actions are wrong if they don’t benefit the entire community and thus that individuals should be sacrificed for the community.
- Some thought that the concepts of integrity, stability, and biotic community were *the* key to the land ethic—and looked to *other* ecologists for interpretations.
- Some overlooked Leopold’s emphasis on ***interdependence*** in the land ethic.

However, it is a **mistake to laser focus on these two sentences** and read them too literally. Need to understand land ethic through Leopold’s other writings & the context of his life.

The Aldo Leopold Archives

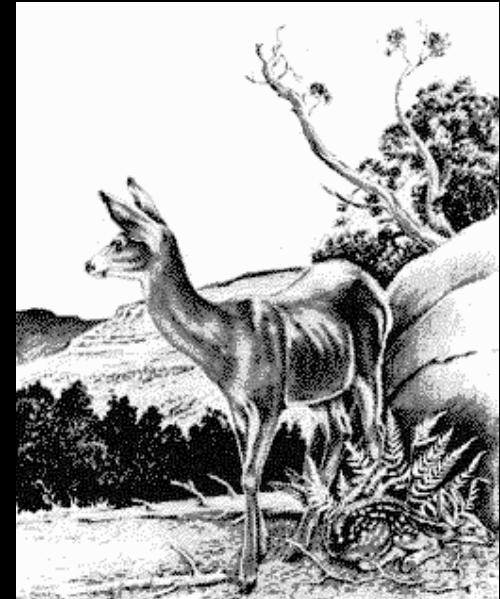


Leopold “published more than 500 articles, essays and reports and his papers contain at least 500 more unpublished essays, reports, and memoranda of significance.”

Towards a new interpretation of the land ethic

With the old interpretations rejected, the following questions take center stage

- What is **interdependence**? (ch. 2)
- What is the **land community**? (ch. 3)
- What is **stability (land health)**? (ch. 4)
- What is the **argument in favor of the land ethic**? (ch. 5)
- What are the **policy implications** of the land ethic? (ch. 6)



From A Sand County Almanac

Since there are no videos for chapters 2 and 3....

Upshot from Chapter 2: Interdependence

Leopoldian interdependence consists of direct and indirect “negative” and “positive” causal interactions between organisms (including humans), populations, and abiotic components (“interactors”), that **yield a variety of vulnerabilities in organisms**, populations, and abiotic components (as well as land communities more holistically) with interactions that vary in strength and direction in time and in place, **often forming a web or network of such interactions.**



From *A Sand County Almanac*

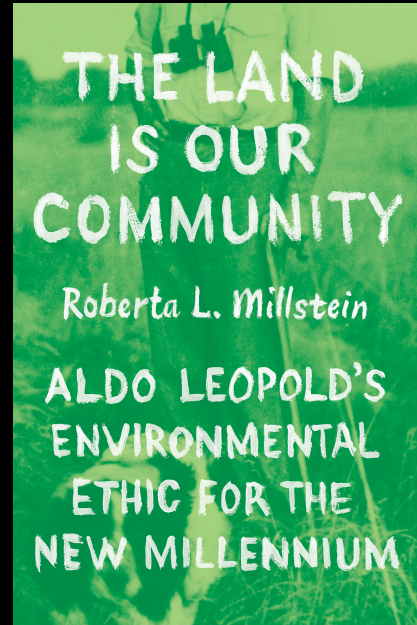
Upshot from Chapter 3: Land communities

A ***Leopoldean land community*** consists of **populations of different species interacting with each other and with their abiotic environment** over a specified time scale; these survival-relevant interactions often **produce a flow of energy and materials** between biotic components and between biotic components and abiotic components (and vice versa).

Land community boundaries for well-bounded systems are where discontinuities or steep gradients in the flow of material and energy coincide with discontinuities or steep gradients in species interactions.

Land community boundaries for open systems are at a minimum delineated by the smaller of the two types of discontinuities or steep gradients, including the more extensive interactions or matter/energy flows if and only if those interactions or matter/energy flows are stronger or larger than those of the smaller area.

There are videos covering chapters 4, 5, and 6 —
check them out!



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**