



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

Introduction (Transcript)

Roberta Millstein

SLIDE 1

Hi, I'm Roberta Millstein. I'm Professor Emerit at the University of California Davis, and this is a video talking about my book, *The Land is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium*, and I'm very excited to have been invited to give this series of videos for the Philosophers for Sustainability. So with that, I will just dive right in.

SLIDE 2

So this video is really an introduction to my recently published book, and the book offers a new interpretation and a new defense of Leopold's land ethic. It's an approach that comes from the history and philosophy of science, as well as from environmental ethics, and that means it does primarily two things. One is elaborating and clarifying of central concepts of the land ethic. That's something that historians and philosophers of science do.

It also gives reasons why we should accept Leopold's views, and it does that throughout the entire book. So this is going to be a series of videos where I'm giving a high-level overview, primarily of chapters four, five, and six, and so what this video is intended to do is to give some necessary background for those subsequent videos.

SLIDE 3

So I don't want to presume you all know who Aldo Leopold was, so I'll start with that, and then I'll say a little bit about what the land ethic is, because I don't want to presume you know about that either, and then finally I'll say a little bit about why it needs to be reinterpreted, why I thought it needed to be reinterpreted.

SLIDE 4

Okay, so Aldo Leopold was a hunter, a forester, a wildlife manager, an ecologist, a conservationist, and a professor. He wore a lot of hats.

This is early to mid-20th century, and I always like to emphasize all those different hats because they very much influenced the ideas that he came up with throughout the course of his lifetime.

He's best known for his posthumously published book, *A Sand County Almanac* and "Land Ethic" contained within. And again the ideas that he came up with in the book at the end of his life were all very much influenced by all those different hats, but I think it's always important to recognize that he wrote a lot of things and more than 500 published works, about as many unpublished, so we can't focus too much on Sand County Almanac. We also have to glean his ideas from these other works.



Finally, I think it's important to know just how influential he's been in environmental ethics. His work is standard in all the textbooks, but he's also been hugely influential in conservation biology and related fields like forestry, wildlife management, and restoration ecology, so he's an important figure for us to understand and to understand his ideas correctly.

SLIDE 5

All right, now here's some quotations that I think will help us understand what the land ethic is.

The first is, "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."

So I've highlighted some key words here. It matters that the members of the community are interdependent and that what the land ethic is arguing for is enlarging it, not just from interdependent humans, but to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, and that we often will be thinking of them as a collective and not just as individuals.

Second quotation: "...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" and that's important because we see that we need to respect individuals and we need to respect the community as a whole.

And finally: "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."

So this tells us that a main goal of the land ethic is going to be understanding and preserving land health, the health of land communities.

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All right, so let me try and give a summary of this.

Now a couple caveats. Leopold believed that land ethic is product of social evolution, that it would continue to change over time, and that "nothing so important as an ethic is ever 'written'". That being said, he wrote it down in his book, so I reinterpret in my book.

So this is what I take to be the essence of the land ethic. So in addition to the obligations that we already have toward other human individuals and to our communities, right, those don't go away, we need to act so as to protect and promote the capacity of land communities, again soils, waters, plants, and animals understood collectively, their capacity for self-renewal. In other words, their health, and that implies respect for both the community members and the community as a whole.



SLIDE 7

Alright, but other people interpreted the land ethic differently, and I think those interpretations have problems, and I talk about those in more detail in the book. So starting with, I think, what the main problem is, is identifying the following as a summary moral maxim of Leopold's land ethic, and these are probably the two most quoted sentences of the entire book: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" or he also called it a land community, "It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Now these are beautiful evocative sentences, but people read them literally, and when you read them literally, it sounds like he's saying that actions are wrong if they don't benefit the entire community. So what does that mean? Well that seems to mean that individuals should be sacrificed for the community.

Now we saw on that previous slide, he says very clearly respect for individuals, the members of the community, as well as respect for the whole. So he didn't ever think that, but if you try to say summary moral maximum, take it literally, it sounds that individuals should be sacrificed. Well the thing about, you have to understand about A Sand County almanac, is that it was written for a general audience, and these words are meant to be inspiring.

They're meant to be evocative. They're meant to motivate you to act, to care about land communities. They're not meant to be taken literally.

They were never meant that, and it's very clear just by reading other things that Leopold wrote, that he didn't mean them literally. So that's the biggest problem. Another problem is that some thought that the concepts of integrity, stability, and biotic community, that these were the key to the land ethic, right, because they're part of the summary, and so the so-called summary, and then they looked at other ecologists for interpretations, and that was a mistake, because it turns out that Leopold is a very, was a very independent thinker, and used terms in his own way, and so you have to look at these other readings to really understand what he was getting at.

And finally, again, because they were, people were so focused on these two sentences, they overlooked, or at least didn't emphasize, Leopold's discussion of interdependence, which really is kind of a key part, again, as we saw in those earlier quotations.

So in summary, it's a mistake to laser focus on these two sentences. It's a mistake to read them too literally, and what we need to do instead, and what I try to do in the book, is to understand the land ethic through Leopold's other writings, and also through the context of his life.

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Okay, so the book rejects these old interpretations, and so then new questions take center stage. Chapter 2 talks about what interdependence is. Chapter 3 talks about



what the land community is. Chapter 4, what's stability or land health? You know, these are all words you've heard me use a few times now. Then chapter 5 talks about what the argument in favor of the land ethic is, right, why you should accept it. And then finally, chapter 6 talks about how you apply the land ethic, what are its policy implications.

So again, there's going to be videos for chapters 4, 5, and 6, but no videos for chapters 2 and 3, so I wanted to say a little bit about interdependence and land community, so I'll turn to those, and these are going to be super brief.

SLIDE 9

Okay, so here's the final upshot from chapter 2. I'm not going to be able to go into this in all detail, but I'll read it out and kind of highlight a couple points.

So, Leopoldian interdependence consists of direct and indirect negative and positive causal interactions between organisms, and I should emphasize that includes humans. Every time I say land community, you should think humans are part of that. That was a very key point for Leopold.

So, between humans, I'm sorry, between organisms, including humans, populations, and abiotic components 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 a network of such interactions.

Now, again, I know that's a lot, but just a couple key ideas here. One is this idea of including both negative and positive causal interactions, so you might think when you hear interdependence, you think, oh, two things that are symbiotic that are, that help each other, but Leopold also included something like a predator and prey as being an interaction that gave rise to interdependence, like a wolf predating on deer, right? That actually turns out that the deer are dependent on the wolves to keep their populations in check, and that also vulnerability is part of interdependence, that what we do or fail to do, what other species do or fail to do, makes other species vulnerable.

And finally, this, I want to emphasize this idea that there's a web or a network of interactions, right? So, don't just think in terms of this species interacting with this other species, but that other species is interacting with other things and so on and so on, right? And you get this tangled web or network, and that's really important for when you want to think about interdependence and what's dependent on what.

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And actually, that leads right into what a land community is. So, a Leopoldian 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. And there's stuff about boundaries on this slide, I've kind of gotten grayed out.

So, the basic idea here is, again, if you just think of that web of interactions, right? A interacting with B, which interacts with C, but also A is interacting with many things and B with many things and C with many things, right? Just think of this web or this network of interactions.

And that's what makes the community, right? Are these groups of interactors. And if you think of like a lake where most everything is intensively interacting with other things that are in the lake, there's some interactions outside of the lake, but those are weaker, right? So, the lake in essence is defining the boundaries of the community. Okay.

SLIDE 11

So, that's all we have for introduction. There are videos covering chapters 4, 5, and 6. Please check them out.

And you can buy this book if you haven't already, or you can download a free copy. You can find the link on my website at www.RLM.net

So, thank you for watching and I'll see you in the next video.