



## Perspective

## Debunking myths about Aldo Leopold's land ethic

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## ABSTRACT

Aldo Leopold's land ethic has been extremely influential among people working in conservation biology, environmental ethics, and related fields. Others have abandoned the land ethic for purportedly being outdated or ethically untenable. Yet, both acceptance of the land ethic and rejection of the land ethic are often based on misunderstandings of Leopold's original meaning – misunderstandings that have become so entrenched as to have the status of myths. This essay seeks to identify and then debunk six myths that have grown up around the land ethic. These myths include misunderstandings about how we should understand key terms like “stability” and “biotic community” as well as the scope and main message of the land ethic. Properly understanding Leopold's original meaning, a meaning derived from ideas he developed after a lifetime of scientific theorizing and hands-on practical knowledge, prevents hasty rejection and provides a sounder basis for conservation policy.

## 1. Introduction: Aldo Leopold's influence

Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) – a forester, wildlife manager, conservationist, and professor – has been extremely influential in conservation biology and environmental ethics as well as related fields such as forestry, wildlife management, and restoration ecology. A few typical quotes illustrate this point. For example:

Leopold's classic essay ‘The Land Ethic’ in *A Sand County Almanac* is probably the most widely cited source in the literature of environmental philosophy. His view of the moral consideration of the land-community is the starting point for almost all discussions of environmental ethics.

(Katz, 1996, 113).

Here is another example:

Leopold's original contribution was to combine this ethical conservation with practical experience in resource management, and then to inform both with scientific expertise...[He] began to change fundamental assumptions not only about the best use of natural resources but also about the nature and purpose of ecological studies. These changes opened the door for the development of a value-driven approach to science and conservation, *without which the field of conservation biology could not have emerged*...Today many

conservation biologists see themselves as heirs of Leopold's legacy to restore ethics and value to the science of conservation.

(Van Dyke, 2008, 41; emphasis added).

The degree of Leopold's influence is perhaps not surprising. His writings melded his scientific knowledge, his hands-on practical experience, his breadth of expertise across conservation sub-fields, and his respect for the natural world. In *A Sand County Almanac* as a whole and in the essay “The Land Ethic” in particular, he sought to inspire not only action but reflection, recognizing that values drive actions and that facts alone would not be sufficient for conservation. But the book did not come out of nowhere. *A Sand County Almanac* came from a lifetime of his own reflections, reflections that resulted in hundreds of written works produced for a variety of audiences: scientific, practical, and political. His lifetime of reflecting on these values informed his science and his science informed his values, producing groundbreaking results in both, anticipating many issues that remain live today.

Yet a number of misunderstandings have grown up around Leopold's land ethic.<sup>1</sup> These misunderstandings are so entrenched as to have the status of myths.<sup>2</sup>

This essay seeks to cast doubt on these entrenched myths; the myths, concerning Leopold's supposed “summary moral maxim,” his use of the terms “biotic community” and “stability,” his views on the rights of individuals and the role of humans, and the grounding for his land

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<sup>1</sup> In the essay “The Land Ethic,” Leopold remarks that the land ethic is a product of social evolution, noting that all such products are tentative because evolution is ongoing. Thus, other people might seek (and have sought) to develop the land ethic further or in other directions. However, in using the phrase “Leopold's land ethic,” this essay refers to the version that Leopold described and developed, even as he used the thinking of others as building blocks for its development.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term “myth” is meant only to indicate the widespread persistence of these mistaken beliefs over time and their transmission from person to person; the term has other connotations and associations (such as an association with traditional cultures), but those connotations and associations should not be inferred by the reader in this instance.

ethic, are described in Section 2.<sup>3</sup> If we think that Leopold had profound insights about ethics and the natural world that are still important today, those insights should be understood correctly. There may be more for Leopold to teach us; indeed, one claim of this essay is that there is more, and that what Leopold actually was trying to teach us is more defensible and more consistent with contemporary science than what some have thought he was trying to teach us. The result is an ethical basis for our conservation policies that is more well-informed and defensible.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate this relevance, Section 3 describes an arguably successful case of restoration and land use that is consistent with Leopold's land ethic, a fact that the myths would conceal. Section 4 concludes the essay.

Several things make a proper understanding of Leopold timely. First and foremost is the multi-faceted global environmental crisis we are experiencing, one that is almost entirely (or entirely, period) the result of human actions. To address it, we want all good ideas on the table for consideration. As is discussed below, some authors state that they reject Leopold's views, but those rejections are based on misunderstandings and not Leopold's actual views. The rejections are thus hasty. On the other hand, the picture of the land ethic that emerges after debunking its myths is one that is appealing and practical. Second is what has been described as “The Battle for the Soul of Conservation Science” (Kloor, 2015), which contrasts the traditional view in conservation biology as preservationist (often associated with Leopold) with one in which humans play a more active and even constructionist role. The view of Leopold presented here will show that there is another alternative to these two extremes. Third, the perceived need for prioritizing ecosystems (again, a view associated with Leopold) is sufficiently high as to have spawned a new journal, *The Ecocentric Citizen*. An opinion piece co-authored by editors of the journal characterizes ecocentrism as a view that holds that “human needs, like the needs of other species, are secondary to those of the Earth as the sum of its ecosystems” (Gray et al., 2017). But was this Leopold's view, as some have suggested, and are there other plausible alternatives? By debunking the myths surrounding Leopold, this article will reveal another path, one that is sympathetic to ecocentrism as defined by Gray et al. (2017) in some respects but which finds a middle ground.

## 2. Myths concerning Aldo Leopold's land ethic

The following six myths have grown up around Leopold's land ethic:

- Myth 1: There is a two-sentence “summary moral maxim” of the land ethic.
- Myth 2: When Leopold said “biotic community,” he meant “ecosystem.”
- Myth 3: Ecosystems are the only entities of value in the land ethic.
- Myth 4: The central message of the land ethic is to set aside human-free ecosystems.
- Myth 5: By “stability,” Leopold meant something like “balance” or “dynamic equilibrium.”
- Myth 6: Leopold's ethics are derived from Charles Darwin's “protosociobiological” perspective on ethical phenomena.

Each myth will be described in further detail below.

<sup>3</sup> For other work reflecting on the way that Leopold has been interpreted over the years, see Stegner (1987), Noss (2002), Meine (2004).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the conservation implications of Leopold's thinking, see Meine (2014).

### 2.1. Myth 1: There is a two-sentence “summary moral maxim” of the land ethic

It is claimed that the following quote from Leopold is the “summary moral maxim” of the land ethic<sup>5</sup>:

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 (Leopold, 1949, 224–225).

The implication is that the essence of the land ethic can be gleaned from these two sentences. Even without the phrase “summary moral maximum,” these two sentences are often *treated* as a summary of Leopold's land ethic. For example, Tom Regan quotes these two sentences and from them alone infers that the “implications of this view include the clear prospect that the individual may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good” (Regan, 1983, 361). Having made that quick inference, Regan just as quickly rejects the land ethic for endorsing “environmental fascism”.

Similarly, Hettinger and Throop (1999) quote the same two sentences as a “summary maxim” of the land ethic, and from there, proceed directly to a criticism of Leopold's use of the term “stability.” They equate “stability” with “equilibrium” and “balance,” but then argue that contemporary ecology is an ecology of *instability* that rejects equilibrium and balance.<sup>6</sup> So, like Regan, Hettinger and Throop reject Leopold's land ethic on the basis of two sentences alone.

Even scholars who are sympathetic to the land ethic seemingly endorse this myth. For example, Holling and Meffe (1996) use the “summary maxim” as a jumping-off point to develop what they call a “Golden Rule” of resource management. They replace “stability” with “resilience,” but otherwise maintain that the “summary maxim” constitutes “sound advice.”

Despite the ubiquity of the belief that these two sentences are a good summary of the land ethic, this belief is a myth that should be rejected. Leopold published approximately 500 distinct items over the course of his lifetime; these are two sentences out of one essay out of one book, published posthumously, with Leopold dying before intended revisions to the book could be done (Meine, 2010). We need to consider the rest of the essay, the context of Leopold's life experiences, and his statements elsewhere. When one does so, it becomes clear that Leopold expanded on these themes in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts, sometimes using different words and in some cases changing his views as he reflected on his experiences, and this casts a different light on the words appearing in those two sentences. This contextual interpretative practice is standard in the history and philosophy of science, but it is less common in environmental ethics and conservation biology.<sup>7</sup>

For example, it might appear from these two sentences that *anything* that benefited the integrity, stability, or beauty of a biotic community would be ethically right, even if it meant sacrificing the rights of individuals to do so. For this reason, Leopold has been accused of endorsing “environmental fascism.” However, Section 2.3 will show that other statements Leopold made do not support this interpretation; it is itself a myth. Or some readers see the words “stability” and “biotic

<sup>5</sup> The claim is originally due to Callicott (1987), and it has been repeated many times since by many authors, with the phrase “summary moral maxim” producing 70 “hits” on Google Scholar as of July 2017. Indeed, as will be seen further below, a number of these myths have their origins in Callicott's work, even though he himself has subsequently sought to debunk at least one of them (namely, Myth 3). Callicott, who has published numerous essays and books on Leopold, has been called the “leading philosophical exponent of Aldo Leopold's land ethic” (Norton, 2002, 127) (with no challenges to that ascription of which I am aware) and he has, for example, had an entire book devoted toward discussing his views on Leopold (*Land, Value, and Community: Callicott and Environmental Philosophy*). But to be clear, the point of this essay is not to criticize Callicott but rather to rectify widespread and persistent misunderstandings concerning Leopold.

<sup>6</sup> Whether this understanding of contemporary ecology is fully correct – and I have my doubts – is separate from the point at hand.

<sup>7</sup> For authors who *do* follow this interpretative practice for understanding Leopold, see, e.g., Flader (1994), Meine (2010), Berkes et al. (2012), and Warren (2016).

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