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Channing Kury

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Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests

Susan L. Flader

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Aldo Leopold has been deemed, in this Age of Environmental Awareness, a prophet. His *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously after many years of seeking a publisher, has become required reading in college courses and, even more significantly, read and admired by a wide public. At one level, his writings are much in the spirit of entertaining accounts of country living and nature; at another level, they constitute a dynamic argument for a proposition at first blush trivial but, when cast in operational terms, revolutionary. That proposition is his ethic that resource management should be conducted within the limits of economic feasibility so that the tendency is to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.

Thinking Like a Mountain, while to some extent necessarily biographical, is primarily an explanation of Leopold's ethic as he, himself, must have understood it. Those who have struggled with resource problems will be amused to see in Leopold the reevaluation of theories forced by new and unexpected data, a process with which they, themselves, have also had to cope. The conservation ethic, or land ethic, did not spring from the brow of a child who observed that the Emperor wore no clothes. Rather, the ethic was sewn together by a tailor whose thumbs and back were bent from decades of stitching. Although it came late in life and long after he had become admitted to the Guild, the ethic was his true masterpiece.

The ethic, as Leopold himself would have been the first to admit, does not present final and universally true answers to operational questions. It merely gives an approach to handling resource problems. For example, in the nineteenth century the Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), a pretty and unusual bird, was exterminated in the eastern United States and became extinct in 1914 when the last zoo specimen died. In the late 1960s, monk parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*), an Argentine species, became feral in the New York metropolitan area. The question has been posed whether to exterminate this alien population while it still might be feasible to do so. A dilemma is created by the thought that the monk parakeet might be a roughly approximate substitute for the now extinct Carolina parakeet. However, the monk will not fit into the exact

same ecological niches that the Carolina did, and will certainly affect ecosystems in ways that the native species never did. A relevant Leopoldian question would be: would the biotic community be more damaged by permitting the monk parakeet to remain, or would more damage be created by trying to exterminate these birds? Partial control should also be considered. The point of the parakeet digression is that Leopold does not rise from the grave through his writings and tell us that the monk must go, or that it should be allowed to stay; life is simply too complex for philosophy to dictate operational decisions. Leopold's ethic does, however, present an emphasis on the biotic community as an entity of value. While it may not tell us what to do with the monk parakeet, it suggests that the Carolina should never have been completely exterminated. The ethic would also suggest, among other things, that the great whales should not be driven to extinction by commercial enterprises.

Ian McHarg has developed an essentially Leopoldian approach to landscape architecture and land use planning, incorporating into the decisionmaking process the value of land not solely in terms of market price, but also of its value for alternative uses in terms of the uses themselves. Important questions possibly undermine the acetate overlay technique, but McHarg's methodology forces the conscientious decisionmaker to consider such values as the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. The element of conscientiousness is, more than anything else, the essence of Leopold's philosophy and the major lesson of reading *Thinking Like a Mountain*.

The value of the Leopoldian ethic lies not so much in the restraint but in the struggle it represents. Because of that, we who have followed must struggle, but struggle less. Better resource management should result.

CHANNING KURY*

*Member of the Washington Bar