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VIEWPOINT

The Leopold legacy for soil conservation

TWO great leaders in conservation met in 1933—Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett and Professor Aldo Leopold. As chief of the new Soil Erosion Service, Bennett was seeking advice on watershed demonstration projects for soil erosion and flood control. He had appealed to most state land grant colleges and universities. Officials at the University of Wisconsin responded early on. Leopold was part of the small delegation from the university that traveled to Washington, D.C., to counsel with Bennett.

Previously, Leopold had favorably impressed R. H. Davis, the new SES regional director in LaCrosse. Leopold had convinced Davis that wildlife management should be an integral part of the national SES program and each watershed demonstration project. Bennett likewise readily accepted this advice because he wanted all aspects of good land use to be included in the demonstrations. He believed that each acre on a farm or ranch should be used for and treated in accordance with its capabilities. Bennett loved the land and understood its many features; Leopold held deeper ecological-based perceptions about land use.

I will always believe that Aldo Leopold saw a sizable opportunity and hope in Bennett’s comprehensive farm conservation plan approach through the demonstration projects (and later through conservation districts) for extending the concept of land husbandry. In fact, he discussed this during his many seminars with us young SES staff people at Coon Valley, Wisconsin. He wanted to see developments go beyond “conservation treatments as superficial” and become effective realizations that “in land, just as in the human body, the symptoms lie in one organ and cause in another.” He did not want soil conservation practices that, to a large extent, would be only local alleviations of biotic pain as he called it. He knew the difference between “land doctoring” and the “science of land health.” His port of entry was through the integration of biology (via wildlife management) in plans for farms and other watershed land.

Leopold and Bennett were indeed co-fathers of the wildlife management aspects of modern-day soil conservation on farmland. It was Leopold who integrated wildlife management into the nation’s first watershed demonstration project in Wisconsin’s Coon Creek watershed.

Leopold also spent many days and nights in the Coon Valley project area in 1934 and 1935. In the beginning he engineered most of the wildlife management work for the project. The first biology-wildlife manager on the Coon Valley staff was knowledgeable but inexperienced. Habitats for wild animals needed study and inventory. With such in-

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formation each comprehensive farm conservation plan could be developed to encompass wildlife aspects. It was Leopold who outlined how all of this should be done.

As the project economist responsible for balanced coverage in the farm conservation plans, I had to learn as much as possible about wildlife management principles. In so doing I took part in many survey operations. Moreover, in staging farmer meetings about the project and its operation we went beyond physical and economic considerations to get across some of the esthetic values to be gained—what scholars today might include as ecological and ethical considerations.

Most of these insights were gained from Leopold, especially in the many “talk sessions” our small staff had with him after supper and well into the night. Determinations were high to make all aspects of the farm conservation plan successful in operation. This was true for the wildlife management parts, like all others. When deep snows came in the first two winters, food stations were established to help prevent undue mortality among wildlife. Again, it was Leopold who engineered this emergency step, which later was not needed to supplement in-field food and cover left by farmers.

The concepts applied in the Coon Creek project spread into many additional projects throughout the United States and continued in the early work of conservation districts. But then the principles and determinations of the Coon Valley days began to wither. Pressures were great for large numbers of farmers to participate in what could loosely be characterized as soil conservation; only parts of a farm were planned and selected practices applied. One of the first exclusions was the exacting attention to Leopold’s biological entry, through the wildlife management door.

Fifteen years after his first Coon Valley implants, Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* offered a final, perceptive plea for conservation: “Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.”

The 1985 farm bill may correct some of this slippage. But unless implemented with Leopold’s principles and the Coon Valley experiences in mind, little will be gained beyond the notion of “land doctoring.” It is not easy to apply in practice those teachings from Leopold’s “science of land health.”

Everyone who knew Aldo Leopold had a feeling of kinship with a master. His conversations effused sincerity and love for nature and intolerance for undue harm or destruction of natural resources. Like many great leaders, it is often lamented that “the mold was lost when he was born,” 100 years ago. Perhaps a successor will arise and assume leadership in continuation of the land ethic trail he blazed.

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