

Aldo Leopold

1886-1948

Good recreational land has been despoiled to produce submarginal agricultural land, representing a clear waste of human effort.

The desire of people for material things has been the key whereby most leaders have attempted to open interest in conservation. Aldo Leopold was singularly free from utilization objectives. Nature to him was a charming goddess whose worship lifted man above himself. So sustained was he by the marvels springing from the earth that he was quite unmoved by mere creature comforts.

He desired the public to be more sensible of nature. Why should not its pulse beat faster at the sight of a woodcock winnowing at twilight or long lines of geese flying northward over melting snows? What could afford more lasting pleasure than masses of blue gentians or clumps of nodding lady's slippers? Man in his power and conceit had

overrun the earth laying waste as he went. Better would it be if he were more humble and realize that the atom in his body today may be part of an oak tomorrow. The vast interdependence of all plants and animals, of which man is only one, must not go unheeded if humanity is to survive.

Long accustomed to the magnificent solitudes of the west, it was difficult for Leopold to accept many of the artificialities of modern life. His was the spirit limned in the lines of Stephen Vincent Benet: *Go play with the towns you have built of blocks, the towns where you would have bound me! I sleep in my earth like a tired fox, and my buffalo have found me.*

Like that other great son of Wisconsin, John Muir, he championed

the establishment of wilderness areas. Here would be the proper laboratory to study nature, learn of her ways, and be contrite.

He took a canoe trip on the Flambeau, the virtues of which for camping were known by report since boyhood. Alas, it was fast losing its primitiveness. A boat landing here, a cottage there, destroyed the illusion of wildness. Still there were to be seen at intervals a bounding buck, croaking ravens, and eagles soaring aloft. One could hope to see a beaver arrowing its way across the stream or hear the howl of a timber wolf. This noble free-booter, reduced to near extinction, could no longer hold the deer in check. Heavily cropped trees showed that the deer population had overtaken the food supply and that the long, cold winter would take its toll by starvation. This artificial curb was a far cry from that of nature and served no useful purpose.

The alert worker in the natural sciences soon comes face to face with that synthesis of natural phenomenon called ecology. Conservation must start from the fundamental concept that all life comes from the land. Leopold would go so far as to define culture as the understanding of the land and its life. Man is of the land but no less so is "the meanest flower that blows." The soil so precious to our welfare should be cherished and the penalty for its abuse, social ostracism.

No great social movement of lasting effect can arise which does not appeal to the emotions. No leader realized better than Aldo Leopold that success in conservation would not come until a genuine love and appreciation of nature was developed in the hearts of the people. This consummation reposed at the end of a tortuous and stony trail but the result would be consonant with the effort.



*The late A. W. Schorger, a distinguished conservation leader himself and a former member of the old Conservation Commission, wrote a series of tributes to leaders in the field for a centennial conference held in Madison in 1949. This is the last of the four he wrote.