

A Sand County Almanac

by Aldo Leopold

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About the author

Aldo Leopold was born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1887, and was educated at Yale University, where he studied in the newly formed forestry school. In 1909, at the age of 22, he accepted his first posting with the U. S. Forest Service, at the Apache National Forest in the Arizona Territory. He spent the next 15 years in the Southwest before transferring to the service's Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1924. Leopold was a founder of the Wilderness Society (1935), director of the Audubon Society, and a member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Special Committee on Wild Life Restoration. Days after news reached Leopold that *A Sand County Almanac* had been accepted for publication, he died of a heart attack after he and his wife had joined others in spraying down the edges of a grass fire on a neighbor's land. He was 61.

Discussion questions

What are the characteristics of the natural environment in your area that you enjoy the most? Have you noticed any changes in them over the past few decades? What effect have the changes had on your community? On you, personally?

Powerful ecological and natural history writing gives us a call to action, which we may or may not heed. What factors interfere with our ability to make necessary changes, both in public policy, and in the ways we live our daily lives?

What is more important to you: economic progress and development, or conservation? Can the two be balanced? How?

Additional readings

Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire*, 1968.
J. Baird Callicott, ed. *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, 1987.
Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*, 1962.
Bill McKibben. *The End of Nature*, 1989.
John McPhee. *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 1971.
David Quammen. *The Song of the Dodo*, 1996.
Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*, 1854.
Terry Tempest Williams. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, 1991.

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In 1935, Aldo Leopold and his wife Estella bought a played-out, 120-acre farm near Baraboo, Wisconsin, 40 miles north of Madison, where Leopold was the one-man department of wildlife management at the University of Wisconsin. The Leopolds made the chicken coop into living quarters (thereafter known as “the shack”) and, along with their five children, used the farm as a weekend getaway. It lay “in the backwash of the River Progress,” Leopold happily declared.

He planted thousands of pines in the sandy glacial soil, hunted grouse, canoed, and meticulously recorded the details of the changing seasons. These observations and his thoughts on conservation would grow into the book for which he is remembered and revered, *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, shortly after his death.

Natural-history writer Gregory McNamee describes *A Sand County Almanac* as “a classic of nature writing, widely cited as one of the most influential nature books ever published.” In one famous episode, Leopold writes of killing a female wolf early in his career as a forest ranger, coming upon his victim just as she was dying, “in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. . . I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

“Like most of us, Leopold bristled with apparent contradictions,” Donald Dale Jackson wrote in a 1998 *Smithsonian* profile of him:

He was a soaring idealist and a down-home pragmatist. . . He could be arrogant and headstrong; he could also be considerate and unselfish. He was a man of both thought and action who could write a book and build a

fireplace. Perhaps most important, he was a Middle American who lived most of his life between the coasts. . .

The opening section of *A Sand County Almanac* guides us through a calendar year, from a skunk’s tracks across the slushy snow of a January thaw to the banding of chickadees in December. Leopold is a generous companion, patient, insatiably curious. Everywhere he sees a network of causes and effects, of history. His prose is straightforward and quietly laden with fact, but also steeped in his emotional bond to the place. Often he writes with exceptional grace. Here he watches the flight of Canada geese:

The flock emerges from the low clouds, a tattered banner of birds, dipping and rising, blown up and blown down, blown together and blown apart, but advancing, the wind wrestling lovingly with each winnowing wing. When the flock is a blur in the far sky, I hear the last honk, sounding taps for summer.

Like Thoreau before him, Leopold worked best from small to large, from close detail to general theme. There is an elegaic tone to many of this observations, yoked with a call to pay attention. He describes an isolated patch of cutleaf Silphium, “spangled with saucer-sized yellow blooms resembling sunflowers” growing along the fence of a small country graveyard. When he returns later in the summer, the fence is gone and the plant has fallen to a road crew’s mower.

“This is one little episode in the funeral of the native flora, which in turn is one episode in the funeral of the floras of the world,” he writes, adding, “We grieve only for what we know. The erasure of Silphium from western Dane County is no cause for grief if one knows it only as a name in a botany book.”

Leopold’s views on conservation and wilderness had been taking shape since childhood, tempered by his employment with the U.S. Forest Service and his work as a citizen-conservationist. In 1924, his arguments had been instrumental in setting aside half a million acres as the Gila Wilderness Area in New Mexico, the first official wilderness reserve on federal land. In his first book, the largely technical *Game Management* (1933), he had concluded:

. . . twenty centuries of progress have brought the average citizen a vote, a national anthem, a Ford, a bank account, and a high opinion of himself, but not the capacity to live in high density without befouling and denuding his environment. . .

But the most concise and forceful statement of Leopold’s beliefs can be found in a short essay called “A Land Ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac*’s final section. Its ideas have so thoroughly entered the public discussion over the past 50 years that it’s easy to forget how radical they were. Environmental historian David Worster believes that Leopold’s land ethic is “the single most important new idea about land we have had since the institution of private property.”

Leopold’s proposition is simple, but far-reaching. The land as a whole—soils, water, plants, animals, humans—should be understood as one community. Past conservation practices have been based primarily on economic gain, which Leopold finds “hopelessly lopsided.” We should see ourselves as “biotic citizens” and recognize an obligation “over and above self-interest”—in short, we should develop “an ecological conscience.”

The challenge, he argues, is to “quit thinking about decent land use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what

is economically expedient. 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’s legacy includes forest management policies designed to keep ecosystems intact, the landmark National Environmental Policy Act (1969), and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. On the 50th anniversary of Leopold’s death, Mark Van Putten wrote in *National Wildlife*: “Grounded in rigorous science yet voiced with the soul-deep passion of one who cannot live in a world without wild things, Leopold’s land ethic gave the environmental movement a moral force similar to this century’s other great causes: civil and women’s rights.”

Although it was critically well received, sales for *A Sand County Almanac* remained modest until it was rediscovered by the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960s, which took to it zealously. Soon it was being taught on campuses across the country, using an expanded edition edited by Leopold’s son Luna. By the late 1980s the book had gone through over 40 printings, and was considered, along with *Walden* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, one of the main intellectual underpinnings of environmentalism in America.