

# The Evolution of Aldo Leopold

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Aldo Leopold was a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who blazed a trail for modern-day conservation efforts. In his writings, Aldo Leopold expressed his evolving view of predators and deer, and his broadening beliefs of conservation that led to his ultimate theory of conservation "Land Ethic" that has impacted conservation methods to this day.

Leopold grew up hunting and exploring in the wilderness of Iowa. After graduating with a master's degree in forestry from Yale, Leopold went to work in a national forest in Arizona where he became aware of the diminishing game population. Because deer herds were not as healthy and plentiful as hunters preferred, efforts to totally eradicate predators became the focus of Leopold's work. In his essay "The Varmint Question" published in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, he dealt with his attitude on predators: "If the wolves, lions, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, skunks, and other varmints were only decreasing at the same rate as our game is decreasing, it might at least be said that there was no serious occasions for worry, but that they are decreasing is an established fact in the mind of every man familiar with conditions" (48). This statement reflects Leopold's contempt toward the predators who preyed on the same animals he hunted.

Leopold became an authoritative figure of game management while working with the forestry service. His main goal was to provide as many hunting opportunities as possible. He did this by building refuges, eradicating predators, and restocking the land and waters with game. His passion for hunting and outdoor recreation was obviously his priority at this time in his life.

Gradually Leopold's views were broadening. Many of his ideas stemmed from his previous work with the forest service. Looking back at the results of his actions, Leopold realized how easily the environment could be manipulated.

As Leopold was sorting through these new ideas, he ran across the work of a philosopher whose conservation ideas encompassed the entire Earth. Leopold stated: "Possibly, in our intuitive perceptions, which may be truer than our science and less impeded by words than our philosophies, we realize the indivisibility of the earth... and respect it collectively not only as an useful servant but as a living being" (*Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests*, 18). That idea was an essential concept of Leopold's final theory of conservation.

Leopold was given a position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as an educator and researcher of wildlife management. Leopold believed that research was becoming too specific because conservationists were focused on specific parts of the effort. In his essay, "Land Pathology" from the *River of the Mother of God: And Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, Leopold stated that, "there is only one soil, one flora, one fauna, one people, and hence only one conservation problem" (213). This exhibited Leopold's increased awareness of conservation problems.

Leopold was given an opportunity that solidified his ideas toward conservation. He was a member of a group of foresters chosen to study forestry methods in Germany. What Leopold saw in Germany was the result of careless overuse of natural resources, with attempts to mend the situations with schemes that caused further havoc.

After years of studying deer populations, Leopold reworked his position on predators, realizing that wolves preying on deer would allow the herd to reach a healthy state. He then began to fight for the reintroduction of deer's natural predators. In his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain" published in Flader's book, Leopold articulated the compassion he had felt for wolves since an earlier hunting experience:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and I have know ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to

her and to the mountain. I was young then and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean a hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view (329-330).

Leopold's true love of wildlife was evident in this statement as was the development of his respect toward predators.

Leopold realized that the general public was far from concerned about the degenerating health of the land. Leopold stated in a forward published in J. Baird Callicott's *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds... he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well, and does not want to be told otherwise" (286). Leopold understood just how needy the environment was of the public's help, but the public did not see the need to help the environment. Through this, Leopold became aware of the need for a communal code of the land. Leopold spent years working toward a complete plan of action, which he defines in the essay "Land Ethic," the paramount essay in his posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold stated as published in Calliot's *Companion to Sand County Almanac*: "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo Sapiens* from conquerors of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (178). Leopold made it clear that he believed that humans feel that the earth is at their disposal when they should live without dramatically making an impact on it.

"Land Ethic" is a concept that is still used in conservation today. Leopold's ideas have not been lost in the years since his death of a heart attack in 1948. Through his teachings, conservation efforts have had many triumphs, one of which is the successful reintroduction of wolves and other large predators. Aldo Leopold's final beliefs are the foundation of the modern-day conservation movement.

## Works Cited

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