

Key Concepts and Discussion Questions for Select Essays in A Sand County Almanac from **The Aldo Leopold Foundation**

Foreword

Key Concept: *Community*

Leopold encouraged people to expand their vision of the world around them to include the natural world in their community as they would their neighbors. When people begin to look at plants, animals, soils, and waters in that context, they may consider them in a different way.

Questions for Discussion

- Compare your values with Leopold's: Is the ability to see geese more important to you than television? Are you one who can live without wild things or one who cannot? How do various groups in American society currently determine the value of wild things? How is this demonstrated? How do disagreements about values play out?
- Leopold talks about the need to "get the company back in step." Who is the company? What does Leopold suggest might be needed for the company to get back in step? Has the definition of conservation changed or stayed the same since Leopold's time? What does Leopold refer to when he talks about "community" in the essay?
- Who is part of your community? Your family, friends, neighbors? Does it include the trees in your yard or the birds at your feeder? How about the soil in your garden? How have attitudes toward the natural world changed since Leopold's time? Since the first settlers arrived in America? In all human history?

Activity Ideas: Have something to contribute? [Email us a suggestion](#). [What is this for?](#)

The Good Oak

Key Concept: *Connections*

We are connected to the world around us through the food we eat and the resources we use. Work can connect us to the pieces of the natural world that support us and to the history they embody.

Questions for Discussion

- Leopold worries people no longer truly know where heat or food comes from. Think about what you had for breakfast. Do you know where it actually came from? Have you ever been to a farm? Do you heat your home with coal, natural gas, wood, corn, electricity? How is the electricity generated? Do you agree that

there could actually be a “spiritual danger” in not knowing the source of your food and energy? Why or why not?

- This essay not only connects the natural and cultural aspects of our land, it also describes one of the Leopold family’s physical activities, making wood. Have you ever cut, split, hauled firewood? What tools did you use?
- The oak tree acts as a history book telling the history of conservation in Wisconsin. Imagine using a tree in your yard to tell a history of your town, neighborhood, and family. What would your story be?

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Axe in Hand

Key Concept: *Decisions*

Leopold asserted that each piece of land looks the way it does today because of past decisions. He suggests that any decision reflects our personal and collective values and biases. Each person will formulate their decisions differently, but by thinking about the ultimate effect of your actions, you can choose the evidence you will leave behind for others.

Questions for Discussion

- Leopold states that pines are his favorite trees. Do you have a favorite kind of tree? What is it about that particular species that you like? Does liking it make you want to think of ways that you could favor its growth?
- How has the land where you live changed within your lifetime? Are there decisions you have made that have become your “signatures” on the land?
- Leopold writes there are many definitions of a conservationist; his own definition is one who is thinking “while chopping, or deciding what to chop.” Can you relate to this idea? How would you define a conservationist?
- Leopold writes, “Signatures of course differ...and this is how it should be.” Can you think of examples where people have made very different decisions, both wanting to do what is right for the health of the land?

Activity Ideas: coming soon! Have something to contribute? [Email us a suggestion.](#) [What is this for?](#)

Marshland Elegy

Key Concept: *Impacts*

Leopold’s sobering message asks us to consider how we can protect and cherish something at the same time. He warns that beyond the impacts we make when we degrade land in multiple ways, the act of admiring nature can have impacts of its own.

Questions for Discussion

- Leopold uses very evocative and descriptive language like “silence” giving way to “pandemonium” of “trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries” to describe a new day on the crane marsh. Have you ever seen or heard cranes?
- Can you tell the difference between cranes, geese, herons, and swans?
- “A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place,” writes Leopold. Have you ever had an experience where time seems to stand still, or where you experience something that you can imagine having happened time and again over the course of history?
- In art appreciation, your understanding and knowledge increases as you learn more about the techniques and mediums used by impressionist painters or sculptures. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful that you weren’t able to describe it adequately with words?
- Can the process of appreciating nature be compared to appreciating art?
- Do you agree that if you know more about something it becomes even more beautiful?
- Leopold describes the unfortunate paradox in wanting and needing to “fondle” things in order to better understand them with the reality that this handling, in particular with natural things, can often lead to its destruction. Have you ever picked a beautiful flower only to see it quickly wilt?
- Can you think of ways that could people can appreciate and understand parts of the natural world without unintentionally destroying them?

- **Activity Ideas:** Have something to contribute? [Email us a suggestion.](#) [What is this for?](#)

Thinking Like a Mountain

Key Concept: *Humility*

Leopold’s own misdeeds lead him to be very concerned about the impacts of those with good intentions, but incomplete information.

According to Leopold, blind pursuit of “success” or as he describes it “paradise” needs to be viewed cautiously.

Questions for Discussion

- Politicians are often criticized, called “flip floppers,” for changing their minds or positions on issues. However, it is critical for scientists to be able to do just this, sometimes referred to as a “paradigm shift.” Can you think about a time when you learned more about a subject and that your earlier assumptions were incorrect you were able to consciously change your mind about something?
- This essay identifies many different perspectives, that of the wolf, the hunter, the rancher, and ultimately the mountain. Leopold is challenging the reader to read landscape from the mountain’s perspective. What does that mean to you?

Leopold describes the power of seeing the “green fire” die in the wolf’s eye, but he didn’t understand until many years later why his actions felt wrong.

- Have you ever done something you thought was right, but regretted it later? What made you realize you were mistaken?
- At the end of the essay Leopold seems to be asking if complacency, or “safety,” will ultimately result in danger and that “wildness” is a type of reminder that people cannot, or perhaps even should not, try to control everything. Do you agree?

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The Outlook

Key Concept: *Ethics*

Ethics provide context for our individual actions relative to larger social values. Leopold understood that ultimately the health of land, and in turn human health, would be determined by people’s values. A Sand County Almanac ends with Leopold’s challenge to individuals and communities to join in the “intellectual and emotional” evolution of a land ethic.

Questions for Discussion

- Leopold suggests that a land ethic can never really be written, rather it evolves over time through society’s thinking and actions. Has your thinking about right and wrong ever changed? The “Land Ethic” essay challenges not only individuals but also communities to develop a land ethic. Can you think of examples from history where our society has changed the way it thinks about the natural world? Do you think American society has the kind of land ethic like Leopold describes? Why or why not? The land ethic described by Leopold advances through both an “intellectual and emotional process.” Do you rely more heavily on information or intuition when you make decisions?
- A Sand County Almanac closes with an analogy of remodeling the Alhambra with a steam shovel and proposes the problem is one of “attitudes and implements.” Do you know what the Alhambra is and where it is located? If you were going to remodel it, which would be more important to determining the goals and outcomes of the project, attitudes or implements.

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