

THE *Leopold* CONFERENCE

In memory of Luna B. Leopold, 1915-2006

A Report of the First National Leopold Conference

APRIL 20-21, 2007

The Relevance of the Land Ethic in the 21st Century

In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, ex cathedra, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.

Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac



ALDO LEOPOLD penned this reflection just after World War II, a time of global threat to human values. He called for an evolution in ethics, a widespread understanding that our community includes all people as well as the interrelated elements of planet Earth—its soils, waters, plants, animals and atmosphere, or, collectively, the land. “In short,” he wrote in his classic *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949, “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it.”

The overwhelming population trend nationally and globally has been movement away from the land, culturally as well as physically. At the beginning of the last century, eighty percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas, with twenty percent in cities; now the percentages are reversed.



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Richard Louv, Jane Lubchenco, Nina Leopold Bradley, and Carl Leopold continue their discussion of the role of a land ethic in the 21st Century on the Leopold Center porch after dinner.



Leopold Conferees gather outside of Aldo Leopold's historic shack for an evening social hour with Leopold family members. Left: Susan Kieffer, Richard Louv, Tom Lovejoy, and Walter Reid. Right: Gene Likens, Gus Speth, Nina Leopold Bradley, and Estella Leopold.

Globally, the population is more than six billion and growing, with fifty percent of people living in rapidly expanding cities. A study in 2000 indicated that most Americans can identify over 1,000 corporate logos on sight, but fewer than ten plants and animals in their own backyards. The question must be asked: Is Leopold's land ethic still relevant?

In April 2007, a dozen scientists and conservation leaders made a pilgrimage to Leopold's sand county 'shack' in Wisconsin to consider the relevance of his land ethic for the twenty-first century, to ask as he once did whether we can "learn to live on a piece of land without spoiling it." Drawing upon our own personal and professional experiences, as well as Leopold's writing and time spent

in the environs that inspired him, we concluded that Leopold's central tenets still apply to a remarkable extent.

As Leopold understood, a land ethic begins with ecological insight and love and respect for the land, and it evolves from there "in the minds of a thinking community." Ultimately, it reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the

Leopold Conference Action Points

As Leopold conferees, we call on leaders and other citizens to:

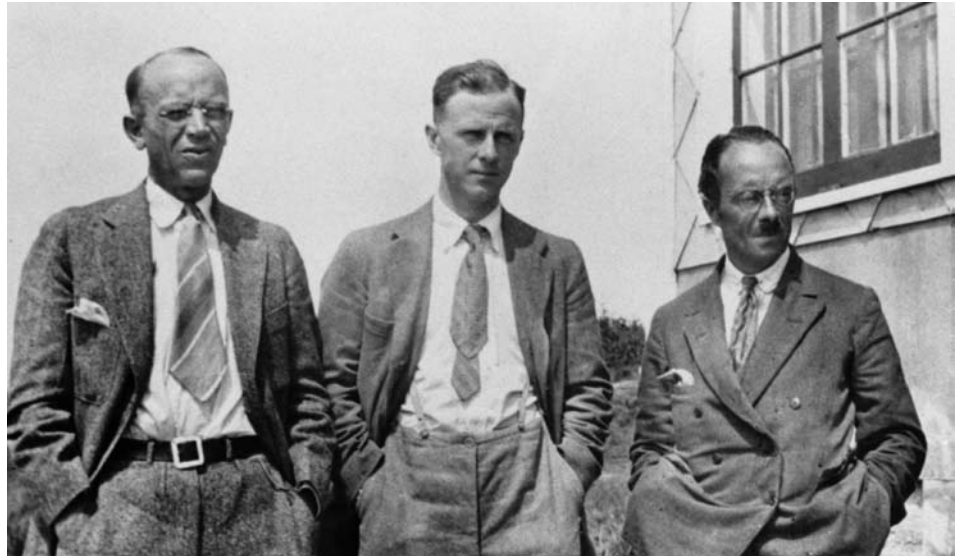
- Reduce our ecological footprint individually and nationally, striving for carbon neutrality
- Learn the value of ecosystem services, such as the value of water and wetlands
- Provide leadership toward getting prices right, minimizing waste, and reducing our demand on finite natural resources
- Understand the unequivocal ties between human health and the health of natural systems, and
- Foster the land ethic through a network of groups focused on conservation, experiential education, quality of life, health and spiritual concerns.



Estella Leopold and Jane Lubchenco discuss Leopold's legacy with the historic shack in the background.

land. Leopold had a penetrating consciousness of nature's integral role in human society, and his call for recognizing our ethical obligations as citizens of the land community is timeless. The land ethic that Leopold espoused is an Earth ethic, grounded in ecological and moral principles that are relevant to every place and culture on the planet.

Across generations, across cultures, spanning national boundaries and oceans, a moral consensus is now building. Informed by the growing appreciation of our connections to the natural world and to each other—and by the growing understanding of the consequences of ignoring these connections—we have felt compelled to renew the search for a “durable scale of values.” A global cultural shift akin to the land ethic Leopold called for is emerging, and its adherents hold as fundamental tenets that human welfare is tied to the health of natural systems and their constituent plants, animals, water, oceans and air, and that ultimately we have a moral obligation to maintain what



In 1931, Leopold attended the Matamek Conference in Labrador, Canada, a gathering of experts convened to exchange information among all fields of natural science. There he met a number of scientists who would influence Leopold's own thinking over the rest of his career. Above, Leopold is pictured with Charles Elton, a legendary zoologist from England, and William Rowan, a waterfowl expert with whom he later collaborated on waterfowl habitat research in Alberta.

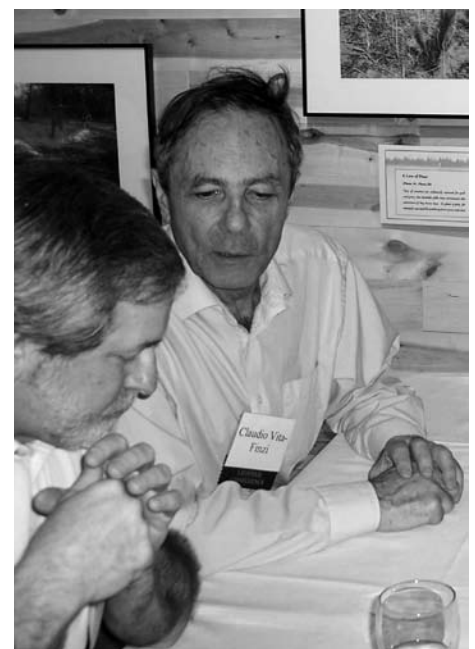
Leopold described as “the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.”

The emerging land ethic is just as critical to growing urban populations as to rural, where life and livelihood are most obviously tied to the land, because human health and economic productivity are utterly dependent on the resilience and productivity of natural systems. Natural security is

fundamental to human well-being, for nations and for individuals; we want all children to be citizens in a life-sustaining world. And nature, importantly, is a wellspring of creativity—vital to our work and to our play—where we can forge healthier and more fulfilling lives through resonant connections with the land and with each other.



Conference Convener Susan Flader, Madelyn Leopold, and Conferee Mike Dombeck chat in front of the Elton Oak, planted by renowned ecologist Charles Elton when he visited Leopold at the shack in 1938.



Conferee Claudio Vita-Finzi and Curt Meine, Leopold's biographer, have a discussion over dinner.

2007 CONFEREES

***Richard C. Bartlett**, *Vice Chairman, Mary Kay, Inc.*

Michael P. Dombeck, *Professor of Global Environmental Management, University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point*

***Susan Flader**, *Professor of History, University of Missouri - Columbia*

Susan Kieffer, *CAS Professor of Geology, University of Illinois*

Estella Leopold, *professor emeritus, Ecology and Palynology, University of Washington*

***Gene E. Likens**, *Institute of Ecosystem Studies*

Richard Louv, *author of Last Child in the Woods*

Thomas E. Lovejoy, *President of the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment*

Jane Lubchenco, *Professor of Zoology and Marine Biology, Oregon State University*

Walter Reid, *Director of the Conservation and Science Program for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation*

James Gustave Speth, *Dean of Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies*

Claudio Vita-Finzi, *Natural History Museum, London*

**Conference Conveners*

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Leopold Conferees visit with River Crossing Charter School students outside the Leopold Center. River Crossing is an environmental charter school in Portage, Wisc., whose students designed and built a rain garden for the Leopold Center's storm water runoff as a class project. Conferees, standing on the porch, left to right: Susan Flader, Walter Reid, Dick Bartlett, Gene Likens, Jane Lubchenco, Tom Lovejoy, and Gus Speth.

The starting point for dealing with seemingly intractable global problems such as climate change, poverty, and ecosystem degradation is the place we live—our own homes, work places and environs. It remains for each of us and the groups with which we work to act as responsible citizens of our communities, seeking ways to maintain and restore their health and well being. To facilitate this social evolution, each of us must create the personal connections, community partnerships, and visionary leadership needed to weave a strong and conspicuous land ethic into our social fabric. Fulfilling our moral and pragmatic obligations to other people and the land community, for our time and future generations, is about changing who we are and how we lead our lives. ■

ABOUT THE ALDO LEOPOLD FOUNDATION

The Aldo Leopold Foundation was established by Aldo Leopold's five children in 1982 to foster the land ethic through their father's legacy. Leopold's rich professional and literary legacy have inspired many to a personal ecological awakening and provided measures of personal, corporate, and government accountability.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation strives to be a model for how local and regional place-based ethics can grow to global dimensions. Drawing inspiration from the Leopold family's experience living lightly on the land at their sand county farm and restoring the health of the biotic community, the foundation has just opened the Leopold Center, a model of energy efficiency and the use of materials that are local, rapidly renewable, reused or recycled. It received the highest platinum rating ever given by the U.S. Green Building Council and was the first building ever certified for carbon neutral operations.

After years of working on Leopold's own acres and with neighboring landowners to restore local prairies, marshes, and woodlands, the foundation now seeks to foster Leopold's land ethic through an ever-growing network of individuals and community-based groups throughout the United States and abroad, helping to connect people with others in their own and more distant communities, urban as well as rural, who are working out the implications of a land ethic in their own time and place.