

2015 *Building a Land Ethic* Conference Report



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1. Executive Summary

The Aldo Leopold Foundation hosted a three day conference in August 2015 entitled *Building a Land Ethic: Teaching and Learning Across Boundaries*. The event was the first of its kind and was developed to serve a nationwide network of “Leopold ambassadors” who extend the foundation’s mission by reaching out to their own communities with Leopold’s land ethic idea through education, community service, and land stewardship. The conference served as a forum to share the diverse work required to build a land ethic with thinking communities of all kinds, nationwide and around the world.

The primary goal of the conference was to build upon the existing ambassador network by providing networking and professional development, and widening the circle to welcome new people to the fold. The content of the conference was designed to serve a cross-disciplinary audience by addressing a wide range of fields, including concurrent sessions in five different tracks. It also aimed to model a diverse and inclusive land ethic by featuring racially and culturally diverse speakers on the program, and focusing on inclusion as a sub-theme on the opening day of the conference.

Two pre-conference workshops focused on the foundation’s Leopold Education Project curriculum for grade 6-12, and on the foundation’s Land Ethic Leader program, which builds facilitation skills for engaging thinking communities in discussion about the challenges and opportunities in building a land ethic. The Land Ethic Leader pre-conference workshop was a special invite-only review session focused on examining the program’s relevance and connection with people of color. Many of the program reviewers served as speakers for the opening day of the conference. The feedback provided by these reviewers provided valuable insights not only into the Land Ethic Leader program, but into the foundation’s educational programming as a whole. The relationships forged through the conference program have resulted in the group agreeing to continue serving as an Inclusion Advisory Council for the Aldo Leopold Foundation, which will undoubtedly be a useful asset in planning future conferences.

The conference drew 171 attendees representing 34 states and three foreign countries, and evaluations showed that the event was a huge success. Debrief of the event and a review of constructive feedback point to ways that the conference can be improved in subsequent years. Future conferences either need to be longer, or attempt to cover fewer themes. The concurrent sessions also need to be spread out more evenly throughout the schedule to allow attendees to fully take advantage of the applied sessions in their tracks. The timing of promotions also needs to start earlier to ensure wide promotion and awareness of the 2017 event. Finally, the sub-theme of diversity and inclusion and its relationship to an evolving land ethic has clear potential as the primary focus for future events.

In addition to beginning planning for the 2017 event, in the coming year the foundation will be working on several fronts to strengthen its outreach program and the ambassador network as a whole. Underlying these efforts will be an organization-wide effort to advance the discussion about how to incorporate diversity and inclusion as core values at every level of the organization. We hope to continue partnering with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and others to integrate Leopold’s land ethic into refuges, forests, schools, and communities everywhere.

2. CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The Aldo Leopold Foundation is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization based in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Aldo Leopold is best known for his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), in which he sets forth his most enduring idea, a concept he termed the “land ethic”—a moral basis for how people relate to the natural world. The mission of the Aldo Leopold Foundation is to foster the land ethic through the legacy of Aldo Leopold. Its scope of work is broad and includes both on-site and outreach programs in education and land stewardship.

The inaugural *Building a Land Ethic* conference was developed as a major new initiative to advance and expand the foundation’s focus on outreach education. Outreach education programming recognizes that the work of advancing a land ethic cannot be done by a single organization. That work must be shared among a committed network of educators, natural resource professionals, landowners, artists, scientists, and citizens working to help build and strengthen a land ethic in their respective communities and contexts. The foundation’s outreach education programs actively seek to welcome these kinds of people to its national network of ambassadors. Two important programs in this effort include the foundation’s Land Ethic Leader and Leopold Education Project programs, both of which provide tools and skills for sharing a land ethic with others. Evaluations of both programs have shown that to sustain the engagement of these networks, continued contact is essential. One of the most common requests from these networks has been for the foundation to host a conference on a regular basis to allow for in-person networking and an opportunity to gain new skills, tools, and inspiration to continue to fuel their own outreach.

a.) Conference Goals

From the classroom to the bird blind and from our wilderness to our backyards, the conference was designed to be a forum to share the diverse work required to build a land ethic with thinking communities of all kinds, nationwide and around the world.

1. Building Leadership to Advance the Land Ethic. The primary goal of the conference was to connect, inspire, and grow the network of “Leopold ambassadors.” This includes those who have formally been a part of the foundation’s education programming in the past, but it also includes anyone working to advance Leopold’s idea of a land ethic in their own communities. The conference offered us an opportunity to re-fuel our ambassadors’ connection to advancing the land ethic and create a forum for them to share ideas, tools, and techniques for sharing Leopold’s land ethic broadly across disciplines. As ambassadors, attendees create a multiplier effect as they take their learning from the event back to their own leadership, teaching, and outreach efforts.
2. Serve a cross-disciplinary audience. Leopold’s call for a land ethic was neither prescriptive nor simple. To advance the land ethic today, we need leaders who can navigate in a complex landscape of ever-evolving and interconnected conservation challenges. While the overall goal of the foundation’s educational outreach efforts is to empower ambassadors to share Leopold’s land ethic with their own audiences, we felt the conference needed to focus on more than just environmental education tools and techniques. We wanted to design a program that would be

equally useful to conservation professionals working with their colleagues to explore new perspectives on natural resource management, to church members connecting their congregations to environmental issues, to engaged citizens working to connect their communities to the land. The conference addressed a broad range of issues facing today's forests, refuges, schools and communities. Concurrent sessions were split into five tracks: Engaging Thinking Communities, Land Ethic Youth Education, Working Toward Land Health, the Art of Leopold, and the Science of Leopold.

3. Model a Diverse and Inclusive Land Ethic. For Leopold's vision of a land ethic to be successful, it will need to embrace, and be embraced by, diverse constituencies across the U.S. and beyond. To present a model for conservation leadership that reflects the demographics of our nation, we featured racially and culturally diverse speakers who presented fresh perspectives on how Leopold's ideas inform (and were informed by) different cultural traditions, and which explored the land ethic idea's potential as common ground. At its core, the land ethic is about caring: about people, about places, and about all the connections between them. The simple idea of engendering this kind of holistic caring has the potential to cut across generational, cultural, professional, gender, and class divides.

b.) Summary of 2015 Conference Content and Themes

The conference, hosted primarily at the University of Wisconsin – Baraboo/Sauk County campus, spanned three days, beginning at 1:00pm on Thursday, August 13 and concluding at 1:00pm on Saturday, August 15. We also offered two pre-conference workshops on Wednesday, August 12. The overall theme for the 2015 *Building a Land Ethic* conference was "Teaching and Learning Across Boundaries." This main theme was explored further by each of the daily sub-themes, detailed in the summaries below.

Wednesday, August 12- Pre-Conference Workshops: LEP and LEL

The Leopold Education Project (LEP) is an innovative, interdisciplinary conservation and environmental education curriculum based on the essays in *A Sand County Almanac*. The curriculum is primarily promoted to educators by a network of volunteer state coordinators who host trainings to orient educators to the LEP materials. Three LEP State Coordinators co-facilitated the pre-conference workshop: Treva Breuch (Wisconsin) and Marc and Suzanne Hirrel (Arkansas). The LEP workshop was filled to capacity (25 people), and highlighted a wide range of lesson plans and techniques from LEP.

The Land Ethic Leader (LEL) workshop is a values-based discussion program which equips participants with tools to both introduce Leopold's land ethic to a wider audience and also to build facilitation skills to advance discussion about the meaning and value of conservation. This special LEL session used funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to invite 10 program reviewers representing Native American, African American, Latin American, and Asian American perspectives who were asked to share feedback on the program's potential to connect with the needs and interests of diverse audiences. By hosting the LEL review session directly adjacent to the conference dates, we were able to invite several of the program reviewers to serve as provocative and inspirational keynote speakers for the conference.

Thursday, August 13- The Land Ethic: Toward Common Ground

Thursday's program recognized that for Leopold's vision of a land ethic to be successful, it will need to embrace, and be embraced by, diverse constituencies across the U.S. and beyond. We were welcomed to the conference with an inspiring presentation by David Greendeer on the Ho-Chunk people's understanding of the connectedness between people and the Earth. Wisconsin's current Poet Laureate Kimberly Blaeser followed with a poetry reading that explored Anishinaabe traditions of place, nature, preservation and spiritual sustenance. Aldo Leopold Foundation board member and Clemson University professor J. Drew Lanham gave the first keynote presentation of the conference, focused on home ground, common ground, and moving toward a more inclusive land ethic. Facilitated small group discussions on inclusion followed the conference opening. Gathering participants into groups of 10-12 people both provided a structured opportunity for networking and allowed for in-depth discussion of the day's theme in a more intimate setting. A panel discussion concluded the day with commentary about how diversity and inclusion are advanced in various settings. The panel included Leslie Weldon (Deputy Chief for the National Forest System with the USDA Forest Service), Cynthia Martinez (Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System), and Nicole Jackson (E.E. Capacity / Outdoor Afro). The evening wrapped up with a welcome dinner and performance of Jim Pfitzer's first person Aldo Leopold performance, *A Standard of Change*.

Friday, August 14: Leopold's Evolving Legacy

Conferees took part in field trips to the International Crane Foundation and the Aldo Leopold Shack and Farm for half the day. The other half featured a keynote talk from Estella Leopold with a reading from her forthcoming book on her time growing up at the Shack with her family. A panel of Leopold scholars including Curt Meine (Aldo Leopold Foundation and Center for Humans and Nature), Stan Temple (Aldo Leopold Foundation and University of Wisconsin), Susan Flader (Aldo Leopold Foundation and University of Missouri), and Jed Meunier (Aldo Leopold Foundation and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources) looked at how Leopold's legacy continues to grow and intersect with a multitude of disciplines in 21st century society. Curt shared an overview of the many fields of study impacted by Leopold's thinking, Susan interpreted Leopold's thinking through the lens of civic responsibility, Stan spoke about how the land ethic needs to evolve in a changing agricultural landscape, and Jed closed with thoughts on sources of hope in a challenging conservation landscape. In the evening, conferees attended an open house reception at the Leopold Center to dedicate the new Leopold Memorial site, marking the place of Leopold's passing in 1948.

Saturday, August 15: Empowering Thinking Communities

The day began with a meeting called by the newly formed Leopold Education Project Leadership Team, comprised of four senior LEP state coordinators that have stepped up to help build the LEP network. The meeting, which drew 30 people, invited educators to learn about opportunities to become more involved with using LEP resources to introduce the land ethic to young people. Starting at 8:30am, conferees got to choose from an incredible selection of concurrent session presentations, touching on the implementation of Leopold's land ethic idea in practical, applied ways in various contexts including classroom teaching, environmental education, community-based conservation, art, science, and community engagement. We closed the conference with a final poetry reading from Max Garland (2014 Wisconsin Poet Laureate), followed by a keynote lecture on the challenges and opportunities of implementing a land ethic at the community level by David Orr of Oberlin College.

3. CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

a.) Attendance

A total of 178 people representing 34 states and three foreign countries attended the conference. The attendees represented a broad range of professional affiliations.

Professional Affiliations of Conference Attendees	Count	Percent
Natural Resources leadership (upper management at a public or private agency or institution focused on natural resources)	26	18.4%
College/University professor	24	17.0%
Environmental educator in a non-formal setting (nature center, park, refuge, zoo, scouts, homeschool, etc)	21	14.9%
Citizen conservationist (no professional affiliation with conservation, but working to share and apply the land ethic independently.)	17	12.1%
Natural Resources professional (land manager, biologist, ecologist, etc)	15	10.6%
None of the above accurately describes my professional affiliation	13	9.2%
Art (writer, photographer, painter, etc)	8	5.7%
Classroom educator (Grade 9-12)	5	3.5%
Classroom educator (K-8)	4	2.8%
College student	4	2.8%
Landowner	4	2.8%

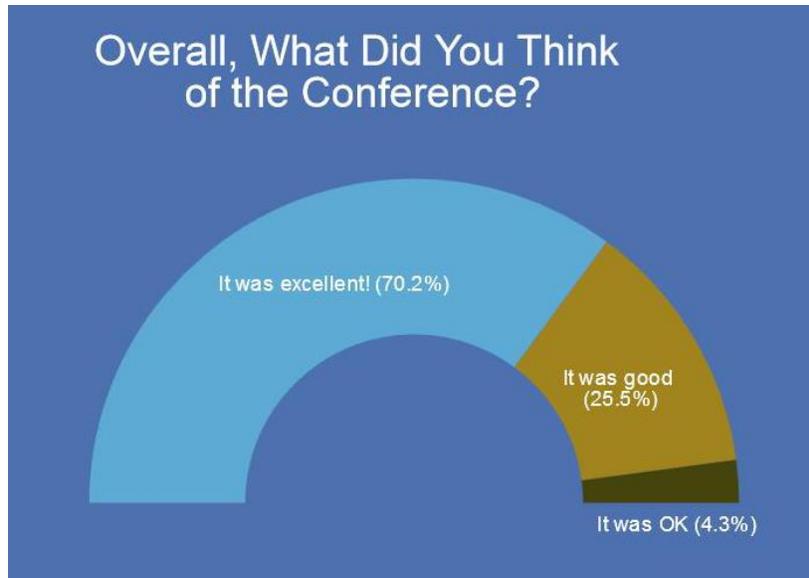
Audiences Served by Attendees

Considering the value of the multiplier effect as these attendees serve in the role of a “Leopold Ambassador” and reach out to others, we were also curious to find out what kinds of audiences our attendees work with on a regular basis. Respondents were allowed to check as many audience categories as were applicable.

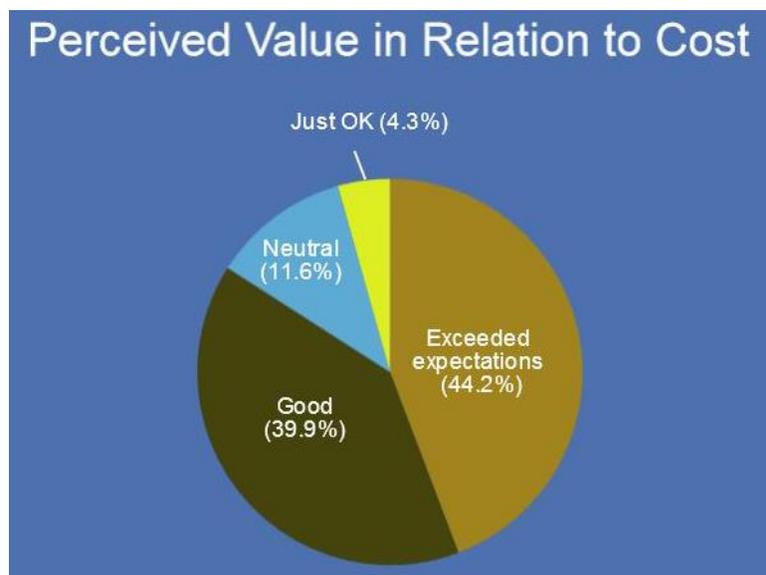
What audiences do conferees work with regularly?	Count	Percent
Citizen conservationists (no professional affiliation with conservation, but working to share and apply the land ethic independently.)	73	51.8%
Environmental educators in a non-formal setting (nature center, park, refuge, zoo, scouts, homeschool, etc)	58	41.1%
Conservation leadership (upper management at a public or private agency or institution focused on conservation)	49	34.8%
College/University professors	49	34.8%
Young people/families in non-formal environmental education settings (parks, refuges, nature centers, scouts, your own kids, etc)	46	32.6%
College students in the sciences	45	31.9%
Landowners	42	29.8%
Artists (writers, photographers, painters, sculptors, etc)	33	23.4%
College students in the humanities	31	22.0%
Classroom educators (Grade 9-12)	31	22.0%
Classroom educators (Grade 6-8)	28	19.9%
Classroom educators (K-6)	27	19.2%
Students in the classroom (Grade 9-12)	18	12.8%
Students in the classroom (Grade K-8)	17	12.1%
Students in the classroom (Grade K-5)	16	11.4%

b.) Evaluation Highlights

We had a high response rate to the post-conference evaluation. (141 completed responses out of 178 attendees, for a total of a 79% response rate). We began the evaluation by asking for an overall ranking of the event. Response was overwhelmingly positive:



Understanding that attending a conference in any location requires a significant investment of both time and financial resources, we utilized support from conference sponsors to keep the registration fees as low as possible (\$150 was the early bird member rate to attend the full three day conference). The evaluation showed us that the majority of attendees felt good about the value of the conference in relation to the investment required to attend.



Another measure of success are the responses to a question we asked about whether attendees would consider attending the next conference in 2015:



Comments from attendees:

“WOW. What a powerful weekend. What an INCLUSIVE learning community: Indigenous knowledge, literature, natural sciences, social sciences, art, music, theater, history, ethics, media, social media, ceremony, celebration, field experiences, inquiry, critical and creative thinking, collaboration... LOVE, LOVE, LOVE: for the land, for Aldo Leopold and his family, for the work of helping our species survive on this pale blue dot. I am grateful... profoundly grateful.”

-Lisa Eddy, high school teacher

“Returning home from the Building a Land Ethic Conference was challenging. I spent much of today reflecting on this amazing conference. Aldo Leopold wrote: ‘There are two things that interest me: the relation of people to each other and the relation of people to land.’ This conference helped me understand the ‘people to each other’ portion. A focus of this conference was the inclusiveness of more people to value and protect natural resources.”

-Vince Lamb, naturalist

“The balance for structured and unstructured dialog was great.”

-Jeff Pritzl, District Wildlife Program Supervisor

“I want to thank you and everyone at the Leopold Foundation for an incredible conference experience. I am so inspired by the people I met, staff, attendees and presenters alike, who came from such diverse backgrounds, but who share such a profound passion for Leopold’s continuing work. The conference theme of inclusiveness wasn’t just a theme; it was put into action throughout the event, and will inform how I teach and how I interact with my environment and community on a daily basis. That alone is a rich indicator of success on your part.

-Susan Jacobs, Professor

c.) Lessons Learned

Post-event debrief and a review of the constructive critique within the evaluations provided some valuable lessons for how to improve subsequent future events.

1. Not enough time for the broad scope. Staff agreed that the scope of content we attempted to cover may have been a bit too ambitious in a relatively short time period (essentially three half days). Several evaluation comments also indicated people would have liked more time to engage with speakers, topics and themes more deeply. There were also many requests for more time for Q&A and informal discussion after talks. Some people suggested that we narrow down the focus for the 2017 event to one single theme and use the entire conference to explore it more deeply. Others saw value in the broad focus on different topics, but felt that we really only had time to touch the tip of the iceberg and would need to expand the timeline to fully explore multiple themes.
2. Revisit strategy for applied/concurrent sessions. Our focus on a cross-disciplinary audience and content was good in some ways, but it kept our keynotes at a very high level and left the work of covering how the land ethic is being put on the ground in various contexts to the concurrent session presentations on Saturday morning. There were definite challenges to this strategy. Because of the way the schedule was planned, attendees were only able to choose three concurrent sessions out of a possible 21 options. This limited their ability to get to all of the applied sessions that would have been valuable to them, so we need to revisit the way we plan and offer concurrent sessions in the future to address this. In the future we will likely spread out the concurrent session offerings throughout the conference and design the schedule to reduce competition between sessions.
3. Plan farther ahead to help with promotions. The timeline of securing funding for the initial gathering and hurdles with confirming the conference venue meant that the dates for the conference were not set until January 2015, creating a very compressed timeline for promotions. For the 2017 conference, we plan to have dates set at least a year in advance so that we can begin promotions in the fall and ensure a much wider reach. We'd also like to do a better job of advance promotion of the social media strategy for the conference. We had some success engaging a wider audience with live tweets during the panels, but we feel that the social media audience could be expanded with advance promotion about the opportunity for a larger audience to tune in and engage from afar.
4. Diversity and Inclusion needs to be integrated throughout. The questions on the evaluation addressing the "Toward Common Ground" content generated more comments than any other section. This was a mix of positive and critical feedback, and most of the critique mirrored the "not enough time" feedback already expressed above. Several people expressed disappointment that the speakers did not attend the entire gathering. This may not be a realistic expectation, but the request also shows desire for deeper engagement. Some attendees also challenged us to explore diversity and inclusion in conservation not only through the lens of race and culture, but also by covering the value and need for other kinds of diversity (age, income, geography, profession, viewpoints). Attendees appreciated the presence and voices that were part of the Thursday program, but the range of comments and suggestions point to the fact that we need to work harder to facilitate a meaningful focus within the issue of diversity and inclusion throughout the conference, perhaps by identifying it as a primary theme, addressed in different ways throughout the gathering.

The lessons learned during our Land Ethic Leader review session also gave useful insights on how the Aldo Leopold Foundation can better address diversity and inclusion through all of its programs. Some specific feedback and insights from the group are summarized below.

- **The Land Ethic Leader Program Has Value.** The reflective discussion component, the discussion (and dissection) of Leopold’s land ethic idea, and the land ethic quotes exercise all resonated strongly with the group as powerful tools to help build relationships, make room for non-Leopold voices and models in defining a modern land ethic, and welcome diverse perspectives to the conversation.
- **Reframing Leopold and the Land Ethic.** As a white man, Aldo Leopold does have certain limitations in connecting with diverse audiences. However, the group felt that his land ethic idea had strong potential as a unifying element if contextualized and presented differently. One way to do this is for the foundation to more intentionally raise the profile of environmental leaders of color that have articulated and applied a land ethic across cultures. Leopold’s cross-cultural marriage/family connections and his framing of a land ethic as inclusive of caring for land *and* people in community should remain a strong focus as well.
- **Continue using this group as a resource.** Throughout the program, we discussed the context of the all-white staff of the Aldo Leopold Foundation as co-leaders of the program. The group suggested we look into developing a train-the-trainer module to prepare people of color in broader geographies to step up and serve as co-leaders if we wanted to develop a strategy of offering future Land Ethic Leader programs focused specifically on the theme of diversity and inclusion in conservation. The program reviewers offered themselves up as an immediate potential resource to serve in this role as opportunities arise.
- **Develop a plan.** The biggest takeaway from this review session was that the issue of diversity and inclusion should not only be addressed through a program such as Land Ethic Leaders. Rather, this work needs to be embraced and integrated into every level of the organization, starting with the board of directors and flowing through the organization’s staffing, strategic plan, and direct programming. The group recommended that the foundation contract with a consultant to help develop an organizational diversity and inclusion plan, including helping refine the broad goal of reaching “more people of color.” The group felt this goal would be difficult to achieve (with LEL or any program) without more thought being put into refining target audiences and desired organizational outcomes in more specific terms.
- **This is Hard Work, but it is Critical.** The group stressed that in work on inclusion and diversity, it is critical to have long-term commitment and be humble and open to feedback. The group credited the Aldo Leopold Foundation for being willing to take the first step of going deep inside to try and understand its biases. They felt that this approach was critical preparation for reaching across differences.

4. NEXT STEPS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT

The 2015 *Building a Land Ethic* conference was a successful event on many fronts, and the evaluation gave us great insights on how to improve not only subsequent conferences, but our outreach programming overall. Following are several key next steps the foundation's education and outreach team will be working to advance in the coming year. These also represent areas for future investment and growth in the partnership between donors who supported the conference and the Aldo Leopold Foundation.



1. **Continue the work and focus on Diversity and Inclusion.** The Land Ethic Leader review group has agreed to continue serving as an ad-hoc Inclusive Land Ethic advisory council for the Aldo Leopold Foundation. The group had its first conference call on October 15 and has made plans to meet quarterly to continue advising the foundation on incorporating the values of inclusion and diversity into the organization. The group also indicated they would find great value in meeting in person on an annual basis. As a first step, the council recommended that the foundation identify and hire a consultant to guide our efforts to integrate diversity and inclusion throughout all levels of the organization. We anticipate the scope of this work to include training and education for staff and board, revision and improvement of program and website content, and the development of a comprehensive diversity and inclusion work plan for the organization.
2. **Build our capacity to track and maintain connections with ambassadors.** We have been developing relationships with Leopold ambassadors since the foundation's inception, but have not had dedicated staff capacity to work with this group of people until recently. We have just added an Outreach Education Coordinator position that is focused on building these relationships and continuing to forge new ones. This person's work will also include building a

centralized ambassador database to help us track on these relationships. To grow the network, we also envision integrating contact capture on our website to target anyone who accesses the foundation's educational resources (discounted copies of *A Sand County Almanac*, web-based LEP lessons, Aldo Leopold fact sheets, etc). We also plan to launch a survey inviting educators that use *A Sand County Almanac* or Leopold's land ethic in teaching to share some basic information about themselves and the contexts in which they teach to further help with growing and engaging with our ambassador networks.

3. **Refine, improve, and integrate teaching tools.** In addition to relationship building with ambassadors, we will be refining the suite of educational tools and programs that can be utilized by these ambassadors to share the land ethic in the classroom, in the field, at work, and in communities. The primary targets for improvement are the foundation's website, the Land Ethic Leader Curriculum, and the Leopold Education Project (LEP) Curriculum. The improvements to all of these will be heavily informed by the Inclusion Advisory Council's input. Additionally, the LEP curriculum came to us needing some structural improvements, so we will be focusing on those as well. The Aldo Leopold Foundation took over the Leopold Education Project curriculum from Pheasants Forever in 2013 after their education program changed focus. We inherited the curriculum in a less than ideal state—it currently exists in the form of five separate physical resources containing over 70 individual lessons. Some of the lessons and resources have been developed as recently as 2014, and some have not been updated since the curriculum's inception in 1993. The LEP materials as they exist now have value but need to be merged into a single, easily useable resource. Currently, if an educator wanted to get all the available LEP resources, the cost would total nearly \$100. We feel that we could bring this cost down substantially by culling and combining the materials from the five existing LEP resources into a single print resource that includes the best and most up-to-date activities, as well as material integrated from the foundation's other programming. We also would like to make a selection of the lessons available free online to make LEP accessible to educators who may not have a budget for environmental education materials.
4. **Plan the 2017 conference.** We hope to set the theme, schedule and determine venue and dates in early 2016, and will begin working to identify sponsors and speakers soon thereafter. We expect marketing efforts to begin in fall of 2016. We look forward to continued partnership with the U.S. Forest Service on the 2017 event.

5. Conclusion and Thanks

The inaugural *Building a Land Ethic* conference convened a network of people from across the country and beyond who are committed to using Aldo Leopold's ideas to bring people in their communities together around common environmental values, and their shared vision of a land ethic. We would like to thank the U.S. Forest Service for their generous support of the 2015 conference. The ongoing growth of the partnership with the donors who supported the Aldo Leopold Foundation's conference helps all parties demonstrate the tremendous value of building ambassadors for Leopold's land ethic.

All of the keynote lectures and panels from the conference were videotaped, and have been posted for public viewing on the foundation's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/LeopoldFoundation>

The full conference program and other highlights can be found on the foundation's website:

<http://www.aldoleopold.org/Programs/conference.shtml>

Major sponsors for the 2015 conference:

Estella Leopold



Thanks to these other individuals and organizations that have provided additional support to the program:

- *The International Crane Foundation*
- *Racine, Walworth, and Dane County Chapters of Pheasants Forever*
 - *Sprecher Brewing*
 - *Luann Sewell Waters*
 - *Organic Valley*