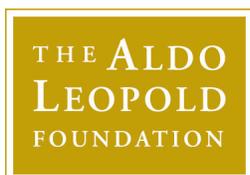




# The Guiding Virtues of the Land Ethic Discussion Guide



Provided by the Aldo Leopold Foundation  
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## *Introduction:*

When Aldo Leopold wrote “The Land Ethic” in 1948, his call for a new relationship with the ecological community was a powerful shift in the field of western conservation and ethics. The key-log or golden rule, “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,” has guided environmentally concerned citizens or “plain members” of the ecological community for decades. However, seventy years later, a lot has changed. New generations face new challenges of increasing urgency and consequences. We must develop our own land ethics that encompass new perspectives and knowledge that we have acquired. As Leopold wrote, “I have purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written’... It evolves in the minds of a thinking community.”

Yet, we can still look to the past for a framework for expressing our relationship with the natural world (and each other.) Academic discussions of ethics date all the way back to Ancient Greece. Greek philosophers often viewed ethical dilemmas through a lens called “virtue ethics.” Essentially, determining whether an action is right or wrong is based on our character rather than a rule or the consequences of the action. For example, I might move a spider outside instead of killing it because I am kind or humble.

Back to Leopold, it can be difficult to apply his “golden rule” to decisions you make on a day-to-day basis. What does it really mean to “preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community”? But I can sit down at the end of day and ask myself, “Was I cooperative? Was I humble? Was I kind?” As stewards and citizens of the 1600-acre reserve encompassing the Leopold Shack and Farm, we asked ourselves, “What virtues motivate our work? How do we aspire to live with the land and how does that manifest in our practices?” These are questions we grapple with every day and *The Guiding Virtues of the Land Ethic* is less an exhaustive list and more an exploration of ourselves and the land – a case study into modern-day land ethics.

## *Guiding Activity:*

We all live our own land ethic predicated on how we relate to the ecological community around us. The Leopold Foundation’s land ethic is just one way to describe the virtues that govern our interactions with the ecological community. If you had to describe your land ethic in terms of virtues or character traits, how would you do it? And one step further, how do you live that ethic everyday?

## *Virtue: Resilient*

- What “wounds” do you see in the world around you? How do they make you feel?
- When is a time that you faced failure? How did you respond to it? What did you learn?
- Have you ever witnessed the land recover from negative ecological impacts? What virtues were required of the human community to make that happen?

### *Virtue: Cooperative*

- What responsibilities do landowners have to the land? Why do they have those responsibilities? What responsibilities do those of us who do not own the land have? Why?
- What is one public-good project that you have worked on? Who did you collaborate with? What made for successful collaboration?
- How do you cooperate with non-human members of the ecological community? How do you describe that relationship?

### *Virtue: Intentional*

- How have you committed to improving the health of our ecological and human communities? How do you hold yourself accountable to it?
- Do your intentions matter when the outcome is the same? Why do you think restoration of native communities is important? What does “healthy” land look like to you?

### *Virtue: Humble*

- Has experience or further research ever changed your mind about a topic? What did it take to change your mind?
- What roles should humans play in the ecological community? How has your perspective evolved over time?
- What experiences on the land have made you feel wonder? Why? What makes us feel wonder? relationship?

### *Virtue: Just*

- What is justice? How is it relevant to both human communities and the ecological communities? Do non-human organisms deserve justice?
- How do we administer justice?

### *Further Reading*

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