



An Island County Almanac

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” Thus wrote Aldo Leopold in ‘A Sand County Almanac’.

An early graduate from Yale University's School of Forestry, Rand Aldo Leopold worked for many years for the U.S. Forest Service in the Arizona and New Mexico territories. He was also a game consultant, and chaired the country's first Department of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin. He helped found the Wilderness Society and the Wildlife Society and was active in numerous conservation organizations.

With the hope of addressing ethical issues and educational challenges, Leopold put forward an example relating to the issue of southwestern Wisconsin's topsoil erosion. In 1933 the public offered assistance to farmers who adopted remedial practices for five years. This was widely accepted. Once the five-year period was over, the farmers only continued practices that offered economic gain for themselves, disregarding practices which were profitable only to the community.

In response, the Wisconsin Legislature passed the Soil Conservation District Law in 1937 that allowed farmers to write rules for land use themselves. Even with the incentives of free technical service and the availability of specialized machinery for loan, rules that would benefit the community continued to be ignored as no rules were written. A small amount of progress did occur, but not enough to address the pertinent problems.

Today there are some 3,000 conservation districts across the USA, nearly every county having one, even though they are called by different names in different regions.

Long respected in his own fields of forestry and wildlife management, Aldo Leopold was a prolific writer for scientific journals and conservation magazines. In 1937 Leopold became increasingly focused on reaching the general public with his conservation message. Working over a twelve-year period, Leopold wrote, and re-wrote, essays that informed people of how the natural world worked, and inspired people to take action to ensure the future health of the land and water that sustains all life.

A Sand County Almanac was published in 1949. It was edited and published by his son, Luna, a year after Leopold's death from a heart attack while fighting a fire on a neighbor's property. It is considered to be a landmark book in the conservation movement, describing the lands around his home in Sauk County, Wisconsin, and his thoughts on developing a "Land Ethic." Over 2 million copies have been printed and it has been translated into nine languages.

In the original publishing, the book begins with the actual “Sand County Almanac,” which is divided into twelve segments -- one for each month. There are anecdotes and observations about the local flora and fauna's reactions to the seasons as well as mentions of conservation topics. The second section of the book, "Sketches Here and There," discusses a few other wildernesses in the U.S. and how conservation, or lack thereof, affects them.

The book ends with “Land Ethic,” which is his plan for conservation. Leopold's idea is that that land is not a commodity to be possessed; rather, humans must have mutual respect for Earth in

order to not destroy it. He also puts forth the idea that humans will never be free if they have no wild spaces in which to roam.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation continues his work today, promoting conservation and the founder's land ethic. The Legacy Center is an educational and interpretive facility near the Leopold "Shack," on the land where he died in 1948 fighting a brush fire. Exhibits and guided tours interpret Aldo's life and legacy. A. Carl Leopold, his son, continues his work at the age of 88.

The building itself is also a unique attraction, featuring technologies that allow it to produce as much energy as it consumes. Solar power, geothermal heating and cooling, low water usage, and sustainably harvested building materials are among the components that should earn the Legacy Center a coveted US Green Building Council Platinum certification. You can learn more about Leopold and his land ethic at www.aldoleopold.org

In the late 1920s and early 1930s a career soil scientist in the USDA, Hugh Hammond Bennett, became convinced that soil erosion was a national menace and that its solution lay in tailoring conservation practices to fit the capability of the land and the desires of landowners.

The crops, the land, and the climate were so diverse that specialists in agronomy, forestry, soil science, biology, engineering, and social sciences contributed to conservation methods. They worked with farmers to find solutions that benefited the land and fulfilled the landowners' aspirations.

In 1933, the Soil Erosion Service, began working with farmers in the Coon Creek watershed of southwestern Wisconsin to transform the square, eroding fields into what one sees today—a conservation showplace of contouring, strip-cropping, terracing, and wise land use that benefits the soil, air, water, as well as the plant, animal, and human life of the whole watershed. The Coon Creek Watershed Demonstration Project was integral to the creation of this new agency to conserve American land. Later renamed the Soil Conservation Service in 1935, this USDA agency was the forerunner to today's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Today the NRCS funds the farm planner position at the San Juan Islands Conservation District, and the district helps local farmers with technical assistance and advice to enable local farmers to conserve our local flora and fauna while keeping their land in productive and profitable use.

This article was written by Steve Hussey, a Natural Resources Planner with the San Juan Islands Conservation District.