Aldo Leopold and Understanding his “Land Ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac*

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Throughout *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold writes of the adventure and enlightenment of his experiences while rehabilitating an overworked farm in Wisconsin. He poetically documents the behaviors of the many plant and animal species that come back to his land, and grow back in his fields.

In Leopold’s early life he had grown up amongst nature, but by his teenage years at the turn of the century, he had witnessed the loss of his beloved thick forest to clear paths for railroad tracks, and the darkening of his pristine lake due to drains pouring in from his town. Determined to protect the natural environment from complete destruction by his fellow man, Leopold graduated from college with a degree in forestry and quickly rose up the ranks to be head of a national forest in the Southwest United States. It was on this refuge that Leopold first began to understand the great complexity and heart of the animal world. In the chapter “Thinking like a Mountain” Leopold writes of his time on a cliff in the forest and mistaking a wolf for a deer. Leopold was left with no choice but to shoot the wolf, but had calmed his conscience with the idea that less wolves means more deer. But in witnessing the death of this wolf he saw the “green fire” leave her eyes, and knew that the mountain itself was mourning the passing of this great creature. Everything in nature is intertwined. The natural organisms and landforms of the world are bound together in their struggle for survival.

Sadly, the development of the human world has led to the destruction of the natural world. Building and inhabiting every corner of the earth has lead to the devastation of most of the habitats of the earth’s wildlife. Leopold realized that the reason for such gross mistreatment of the land was greatly due to the ideals of the population. It is the common mindset that land is owned and once something is owned it is acceptable to treat it however one wants, and in the lands case it has been treated very poorly for much too long.

Leopold states in his final essay “The Land Ethic”, “There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land… is still property. The land relation is strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity” (Leopold 238-239).

Leopold explained that the blatant and negligent destruction of land and nature must be stopped to prevent further atrocities, and that it is the obligation of the people to not only stop the misuse of nature, but to reverse the effects of this misuse. Leopold claims that the current conservation movement has affirmed the great value of nature, but the value must be portrayed and persuaded to all of society. The government has asked communities and businesses to do what they are comfortable with to clean up the environment and be less wasteful, but according to Leopold it is going to take hard work and discomfort for the natural world to be prevalent, prosperous and in harmony with the urban, modern, hardly manageable world of today.