

## Reflections on *A Sand County Almanac*



### Do you recall the first time you encountered a “Wow!”,

when your views on life suddenly changed in ways that eventually became, for you, quite profound? We’ve all had these experiences. One of my more memorable ones was my first encounter with *A Sand County Almanac*.

It was 1978. I was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Aldo Leopold’s home university. We had just come back from a sabbatical in New Zealand and I was restless. In New Zealand and at Wisconsin, I was working in water quality and land use with scientists and the public. I was becoming aware that soil science was more than just laboratories and experimental plots. In other words, I was ready for a change in my professional paradigm.

For my birthday that year, my wife Betty gave me a beautiful illustrated coffee-table copy of Leopold’s monthly essays at the “Shack.” Exquisite color photos accompanied each month’s essays. I recall like it was yesterday, sitting in the backyard swing in our home in Middleton, sipping iced tea while getting lost in the poetic words of this great man. I was hooked. My scientific and personal life would never be quite the same.

Leopold’s writings influenced me as they have many others. I began to question the status quo, of our society and of our institutions of higher learning, as well as the way we treat the land. I quickly obtained a copy of *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* and began reading Aldo’s philosophy, which I continue to this day. The last essay, “The Land Ethic,” especially held great meaning. It helped me reflect on my Iowa agricultural heritage and my professional and personal present. I have used the land ethic throughout my post-“wow” career, from Iowa to the Orient. I also was fortunate to get to know Aldo’s daughter, Nina Leopold Bradley, and to direct soils

Dennis Keeney (center) visits Aldo Leopold’s “Shack” in 1989 with the conservationist’s daughter, Nina Leopold Bradley, and her husband Charles.

research at the Leopold reserve near Baraboo, Wisconsin.

In 1988, when presented with the opportunity to live and build on the land ethic at Iowa State University’s new Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, I didn’t have to think too long before accepting the challenge. The past 11 years have flown by, but the land ethic remains unchanged in my personal beliefs and those of the Center.

Since coming to Iowa I have delved into most of Leopold’s writings, thanks to the fine efforts of Leopold historians such as Baird Callicott, Susan Flader, Curt Meine and Jack Tanner. Many of Leopold’s works not in *A Sand County Almanac* are just as rich and challenging. Regular readers of this column have encountered my interpretation of them before.

*A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* was published October 27, 1949, more than a year after Aldo died. The manuscript had been accepted by Oxford University Press, but final editing was done by family and friends, headed by his son Luna. The book was initially called “Great Possessions,” but finally the title “A Sand County Almanac” was selected. It has sold more than 1.5 million copies. Although Rachel Carson, author of *The Silent Spring*, is perhaps more widely known in the environmental movement, the writings of Aldo are even more diverse and timeless.

If you have not had the chance to read *A Sand County Almanac*, I urge you contact the Leopold Center for a free copy. We have no other offering in our library that gives more background on sustainable agriculture or better expresses what the Leopold Center is all about.

*Dennis R. Keeney*  
Dennis R. Keeney



## An enduring classic on its 50th anniversary



### A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There

Aldo Leopold

Oxford University Press, New York, 1949

[editions in print 1968, 1987, 1989]

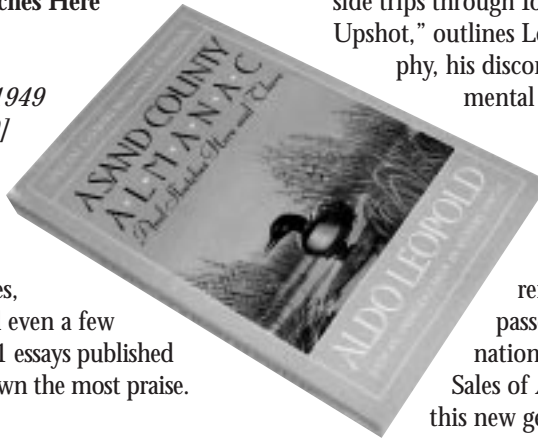
256 p. \$25 (\$10.95 paperback)

During Aldo Leopold's 61 years, he published nearly 500 works including technical reports, speeches, textbooks, newsletters, reviews, and even a few poems. But it was his collection of 41 essays published 18 months after he died that has drawn the most praise.

Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* has been compared to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the works of John Muir. His essay subjects—the birds, animals and plants surrounding his weekend home in Wisconsin's farm country—might be considered commonplace, but his passion was not. All focused on his profound appreciation of nature and connection to the land that was, as he put it, "a right as inalienable as free speech."

The *Almanac* contains three parts. The first is a month-by-month record of natural history observations at an abandoned, washed-out farm on 120 acres north of Madison that the family began to buy in 1935. Next come Leopold's essays about his learning experiences elsewhere—in the Southwest during his early days with the U.S. Forest Service, on hunting trips to ancient Indian ruins in Mexico and to Canada, also

side trips through Iowa and Illinois. The third section, "The Upshot," outlines Leopold's well-known "land ethic" philosophy, his discontent with the status quo, and environmental dilemmas that remain 50 years later.



In its first two decades, *A Sand County Almanac* had modest sales of only about 20,000 copies, reaching mainly the scientific community. In 1968, it was reissued in paperback, just as Congress passed the landmark Wilderness Act and the nation was becoming environmentally aware. Sales of *A Sand County Almanac* skyrocketed with this new generation of readers.

Biographer Curt Meine writes that Leopold has been called the "priest" and "prophet" of the environmental movement while *A Sand County Almanac* has become its "bible" or "scripture." All this, he added, is ironic because Leopold spent his life rebelling against "dogma, orthodoxy, and thinking in grooves." But this also was inevitable, given our society's growing environmental awareness.

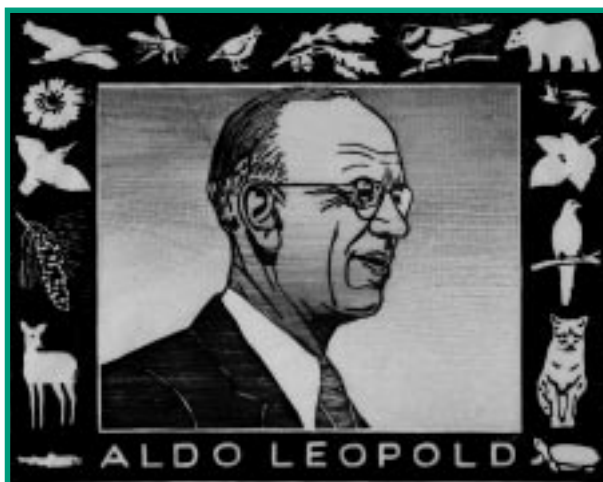
Leopold's *Almanac* has now reached its 50th anniversary. Meine writes that it remains compelling "not just because it so memorably documents the events of a year, but because it also records the journey of Leopold's life. That life was marked at every step by an expanding comprehension of the natural world and humanity's place within it."

— Laura Miller, Newsletter Editor

There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot. *Foreword*

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. *The Land Ethic*

Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf. *Thinking Like a Mountain*



In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members and also respect for the community as such.

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value ... in the philosophical sense. *The Land Ethic*

### About the art work

The Aldo Leopold print in this issue comes from a wood cut by artist David Sauke of Boone. Sauke was commissioned to do the work in 1986 as part of Iowa State University's Centennial Celebration of Aldo Leopold's birth in Burlington, Iowa. He also designed a stamp cancellation used by the city of Burlington as part of the celebration activities. Sauke worked in cherry and fir, then printed the image in watercolor.





## Looking for Leopold: Where have you found him?

Decades after they were written, the words of Aldo Leopold continue to ring true. So true, in fact, that Leopold's words end up in many public places—engraved on plaques, published in books, journals, newspaper columns and newsletters, even carved into park benches.

We never know where they'll turn up next. But we're more pleased than surprised, because this is what happens when someone so artfully puts passion into words.

To help us celebrate the 50th anniversary of *A Sand County Almanac*, we invite *Leopold Letter* readers to send us photographs of places where they've seen the words of Aldo Leopold. It may be in parks, on public buildings, or anyplace where Aldo's ideas and ideals are preserved.

We'll publish photographs as we have space as part of a "Looking for Leopold" feature in the *Leopold Letter*. Mail



Newsletter editor Laura Miller found this Aldo Leopold quote outside a nature center at Fall Creek Falls State Park in eastern Tennessee earlier this summer.

photos in a sturdy envelope to the Leopold Center, 209 Curtiss Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-1050. Be sure to tell us where and when the photograph was taken, who's in it, and how we can contact you. We'll return all photographs.

Just for responding, we'll donate five copies of *A Sand County Almanac* to your favorite library (please indicate name of institution in your note). Here they can be read by patrons, used by book study groups, and inspire others to follow Aldo Leopold's land ethic.

We hope to hear from you soon!

— Laura Miller, Newsletter Editor

## Conference builds on Leopold legacy

Just as Aldo Leopold pulled from various disciplines to create his "land ethic," so will scientists, educators, political leaders and philanthropists be drawn together to discuss a conservation agenda.

The Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters in Madison will sponsor a national conference October 4-7, "Building on Leopold's Legacy: Conservation for a New Century." It features 48 workshop sessions that examine cutting-edge cases of community-based conservation projects from around North America. Topics range from restoration of Florida's Everglades to watershed protection on the Alaska coast, drinking water protection in New England and problems of urban sprawl in deserts outside Tucson. Leopold Center director Dennis Keeney will speak about the Center's experience at Iowa State University.

Beginning in August, an interactive web site was launched for an on-line discussion. Abstracts of each session will be posted, along with an open invitation for comments or opinions. The site is at <[www.wisc.edu/wisacad/landethic](http://www.wisc.edu/wisacad/landethic)>.

Paul Johnson, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and former head of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, will moderate a day-long session with some of the nation's top environmental leaders. Their job will be to agree upon a conservation agenda and action plan.

The conference is in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *A Sand County Almanac*. A distance learning component will include satellite and Internet broadcasts.

**Did you know** there is no Sand County in Wisconsin? The name was chosen by editors for Wisconsin's Sand Counties Region, named for its sandy soil.

**Did you know** there's a chicken coop on the National Register of Historic Places? That would be the "Shack," a one-room structure that the Aldo Leopold family renovated for their weekend retreat in Sauk County, Wisconsin. This is where Aldo thought about and collected information for many of his *Sand County Almanac* essays.



**Did you know** *A Sand County Almanac* almost got another name? Leopold's first working title was "Great Possessions," then "Marshland Elegy and Other

Essays," also "Thinking Like a Mountain." Book editors encouraged the family to consider a more urgent title, "Our Mounting Loss," "This We Lose," and "Fast Losing Ground."

**Did you know** that Aldo Leopold looked seven years for a publisher to print his collection of essays? He was rejected by four publishers (one publisher twice, the one who first asked him to consider writing a "good book on wildlife observations"). Oxford University Press accepted Leopold's book for publication on April 14, 1948, one week before Aldo died of a heart attack while helping a neighbor fight a grass fire. The finished book was issued October 27, 1949. Since then, it has been translated into eight languages.





A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh. With almost imperceptible slowness it rolls a bank of fog across the wide morass. Like the white ghost of a glacier the mists advance. *Aldo Leopold's "Marshland Elegy"*

## Bear Creek project just keeps rollin' along

By E. Anne Larson  
Communications specialist

*The secret of success is constancy to purpose.* —Benjamin Disraeli

Since 1990, the Leopold Center's interdisciplinary Agroecology research team has toiled to restore a stretch of Bear Creek running through Ron Risdal's cropland near Roland in Story County. Their goal: to re-establish vegetation along streambanks and decrease the amount of sediment and farm chemicals carried into the creek by runoff.

For nearly a decade, the team has worked with area landowners to expand the riparian buffer to what is now a five-mile stretch of the creek. Their "constancy of purpose" is paying off in many ways, including yet another national recognition as a "National Restoration Demonstration Watershed" by a federal cooperative effort called the Clean Water Plan. Bear Creek was selected as one of 12 projects nationwide by the nine-member coalition. Just last year, the project was designated as a national research and demonstration site by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Tom Isenhart, Agroecology team and ISU forestry department member, is excited about the opportunities the recognition opens for the project. Says Isenhart, "We're thrilled by the recognition. It validates what we're doing but even more, we can now go to the landowners and say, 'Look at what *you've* accomplished!'"

And, of course, Isenhart says, the visibility enhances the project's credibility, thus helping the team's efforts to gain outside funding. To date, funding has come from the Leopold Center, USDA, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency,



Photo courtesy ISU College of Agriculture Information Office.

U.S. Geological Survey, Iowa Department of Natural Resources and Pheasants Forever.

While the interdisciplinary nature of the project is a model for other research, Isenhart emphasizes that the partnership of disciplines came out of necessity. "Nobody has all the abilities—and showcasing interdisciplinary work wasn't our goal," he says. "I believe the most important ingredient was that we worked with actual landowners." Isenhart adds that building the buffers on actual farmers' land lent an immense amount of credibility to the project.

### Where do they go from here?

So where does the Agroecology team go from here? "Our plan is to continue to enroll more landowners and establish riparian strips along even more of Bear Creek," Isenhart explains. The team also is working to put information on the Clean Water Action Plan web site, <<http://cleanwater.gov>>. The Bear Creek pages will include a number of related links on riparian buffer management.

In 1998, Trees Forever, Novartis, Iowa Farm Bureau and other agricultural organizations began a project to establish 100 buffer demonstration sites in Iowa. The project recommends using the Bear Creek system of buffers, wetlands and stabilized streambanks as a model. (Fact

The proud "parents" of the award-winning Bear Creek Watershed Project and members of the Center's interdisciplinary Agroecology research team are (left to right): Bill Simpkins, ISU Geologic and Atmospheric Science; Joe Colletti, Dick Schultz, Tom Isenhart and Steve Jungst, Forestry; and Jim Raich, Botany.

sheets about establishing riparian buffers are available from ISU Extension or on its publications web site at <<http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1626A/homepage.html>> and <<http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1626b.pdf>>.

### Public events

As word of Bear Creek gets out, the brisk pace of visits to the site will only increase. In fact, the federal coordination team of the Clean Water Action Plan, accompanied by Julie Elfving from EPA Region 7, visited the site in late August.

Plans are also underway for a field day for landowners and other interested people in September. For details on the date and time, contact Isenhart at (515) 294-8056.

### About the Clean Water Action Plan

The cooperative federal effort was organized to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Clean Water Act. Vice President Al Gore asked several federal agencies to develop and implement a comprehensive plan that would help revitalize the nation's commitment to water resources. The result was the Clean Water Action Plan, released on February 19, 1998.

Participating agencies include the departments of Agriculture, Interior, Defense, Commerce, Energy, Transportation and Justice; Environmental Protection Agency and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Since its establishment, the coalition has documented 111 key actions affecting watersheds, protecting public health, controlling polluted runoff, developing incentives for private land stewardship, protecting public lands, restoring and protecting wetlands, and expanding citizens' right to know.



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On the World Wide Web at:  
<http://www.leopold.iastate.edu>

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture seeks to identify and reduce adverse socioeconomic and environmental impacts of farming practices, develop profitable farming systems that conserve natural resources, and create educational programs with the ISU Extension Service. It was founded by the 1987 Iowa Groundwater Protection Act.

The *Leopold Letter* is available free from the Leopold Center at 209 Curtiss Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011-1050; (515) 294-3711.