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Review: For the Health of the Land

By Aldo Leopold

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Aldo Leopold. *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and other Writings*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999. 243 pp. ISBN 1-55963-763-3 (cloth); 1-55963-764-1 (paper). US\$22.95 cloth; US\$15.00 paper.

Aldo Leopold is probably the most widely read environmentalist today. *For the Health of the Land* is a collection of previously unpublished essays, and it adds to the Leopold oeuvre. The book is a detailed exposition of what Leopold in his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) popularised as a "land ethic." The present volume presents us with Leopold's concept of "land health."

The book is divided into three sections. Part One, "Conserving Rural Wildlife," showcases Leopold's writings on game management. In his inaugural piece, "Game Management," Leopold seeks an answer to the question: "Is there not some way in which a part of the tremendous 'breeding potential' can be realized-some way in which, by increasing the wild survival, an abundant annual crop of wild game can be restored?" (p. 28). Game management-which Leopold defines as the "art of raising game as a wild by-product of the land" (p. 30)-might be an answer to the above question. In the next essay, "Helping Ourselves," Leopold provides an example of private game management-the Riley Game Cooperative that Leopold and Reuben Poulson organized. Leopold's emphasis on a people's initiative rather than a state-sponsored program emerges clearly in this essay with his call for "other farmer-sportsman groups to set up game production" centres. Leopold writes:

There are 12,000,000 acres of farmland in southern Wisconsin, capable of carrying at least 6,000,000 game birds, of which 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 could safely be shot annually, if and when they are brought into existence. There are possibly 100,000 shooters on this area, which means that each could shoot 20-30 birds per year, if and when the farmers and sportsmen will get together, under shooting-preserve licenses or otherwise, and provide food and cover so that the birds can multiply. The state cannot provide food and cover. Farmers can. The Lord helps those who help themselves. (p. 40)

In "The Wisconsin River Marshes" Leopold turns to marshland economics, recommending rehabilitation of farmers from these areas too more

productive farms. In "Coon Valley" Leopold reasserts his faith in a reorganization of farming, forestry and game cropping to produce a more harmonious system of land-use. As an inspiring illustration to his arguments in the above essays, Leopold discusses similar techniques being used successfully in Silesia (then in South-eastern Germany), in "Farm Game Management in Silesia." In one of the most entertaining pieces in the collection, "Be Your Own Emperor," Leopold charts the history of game hunting, rejecting the nature dominating "pioneer tradition" in favour of localised research. Leopold writes:

I plead that the wild life cover, at least on waste corners and fencerows, now become an expression of localized scientific reasoning and the owner's personal taste, rather than a badge of compliance to social regimentation. (p. 78)

Leopold's preference for the wild-in-the-heart-of-the-tame is reiterated in his statement "I submit that the slick and clean countryside is neither more beautiful, nor-in the long run-more useful than that which retains at least some remnants of non-domesticated plant and animal life" (p. 78).

Part Two is a series of short essays on songbirds, animal and plant life in winter, the farmer's relationship with rabbits and foxes and so on. A more practical section of the book, this part emphasises Leopold's approach to conservation and wilderness preservation.

Part Three, "A Landowner's Conservation Almanac," begins with the essay "The Farmer as a Conservationist" which opens with the description of conservation as a "harmony between men and land" (p. 161). While agreeing that conservation means "restraint" (p. 162), Leopold argues that we need to do more than exercise restraint; we need to work at "keeping the resource in working order, as well as preventing overuse." As Leopold redefines it, conservation is therefore "a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence or caution" (p. 164). "History of the Riley Game Cooperative" is the partner essay to "Helping Ourselves" in Part One. "Planning for Wildlife" suggests a new scheme. Based on the assumptions that restoring wildlife "adds to the satisfactions of living" and "wild plants and animals are parts of the land-mechanism, and cannot safely be dispensed with" (p. 194), Leopold suggests a scheme for what may be termed an *ecological archive*. Leopold pleads for the preservation of samples (the archive) of the local wilderness condition. Such an archive would then serve as standards for society to measure its effective and safe utilisation of the land.

"Biotic Land-Use" proposes a new chain: land health with stability and

stability with diversity. Leopold defines his land ethic as an interconnectedness of all life: "Conservation is the attempt to understand the interactions of these components [soils, water systems, wild and tame plants and animals], and to guide their collective behaviour under human conditions" (p. 199). This is Leopold's idea of land management. The components of such a management include flood and erosion control, pasture management, agronomy, forestry and wildlife management. Leopold argues that the measure of success of any such "technology" (as he terms it) is the maintenance of the original fertility of soil.

In "What is a Weed?" Leopold continues his plea to consciously protect and encourage *native* plants. "The Outlook for Farm Wildlife" is an appraisal of land management initiatives of the past decades. He notes the three major weaknesses of these decades: destruction of wildlife habitat, disorganisation of the wildlife community with several species demonstrating increasing pest behaviour and, the slow progress of private initiative in wildlife management.

The final essay, "The Land-Health Concept and Conservation" (culled from a pencil draft after Leopold's death) begins with a definition of land-health: "the capacity for self-renewal in the biota" (p. 219). Leopold discusses the several factors involved in the damage to land-health, and the urgent steps required to restore it. Leopold discerns violence in our attitude to land. Any land, Leopold argues, must first be converted in its plant successions, topography or water relations before it can support an industrial economy. Leopold comes down heavily upon the attitude of leaving the "conservation of the merely beautiful to the state." Admitting that this attitude has produced some national parks, forests and wilderness areas, Leopold points out that this "subterfuge" has also produced "a million farmers who year-by-year grow richer at the bank, poorer in soil, and bankrupt in spiritual relationships to things of the land" (p. 224). Leopold recommends four areas where we need to pay particular attention in order to maintain land-health: integrity of parts (species preservation in relation to soil and water of the biota), reduced violence in land use, emphasis on both utility and beauty, and reordering of human density. This passionate essay concludes with Leopold admitting that land-health is a subject for sentimentality and personal faith. Leopold writes: "objectivity is possible only in matters too small to be important, or in matters too large to do anything about" (p. 226).

For the Health of the Land is a valuable volume of writings. It is vintage Leopold: ironic, bitter, pragmatic, and philosophical in parts. The volume is important for Leopold's faith in the citizen's efforts and cooperative action. Leopold is astute to acknowledge-though not overtly-that things like land-

management cannot be left to the state alone. A farm work ethic based on a land-ethic is a very personal and "local" affair. Leopold's democratic approach to land management suggests a high degree of autonomy and decentralisation. Emphasising local expertise and concern, Leopold argues that a project as vast as an ecological consciousness and earth-consciousness must first begin in one's own backyard (the Riley Cooperative is a case in point). The emphasis on a retention of the "wild-within-the-tame" is Leopold's attempt to be pragmatic in the economy of land-use, where utility and profit (both indisputable elements in attitudes towards the land) must combine with a sense of diversity and interconnectedness.

For the Health of the Land is a very readable volume. The effort of the editors to compile this collection is laudable and will surely go a long way in providing a better understanding of one of the most influential thinkers on land ethics and a committed practitioner of conservation philosophy.

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