

LEOPOLD'S ENDURING WORDS

People journey from around the world to visit Leopold's Shack

Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" continues to offer conservation guidance 75 years after the publication of his environmental classic, *A Sand County Almanac*.

By Jeanne Townsend Handy



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It was almost possible for me to imagine Aldo Leopold sitting in front of the "Shack," his dog nearby, listening for the dawn chorus to begin. "I seat myself on a bench, facing the white wake of the morning star," he described. "I get out my watch, pour coffee, and lay notebook on knee. This is the cue for the proclamations to begin." He knows the voices of the birds and takes note of their awakenings: the field sparrow calls first, followed by the robin, indigo bunting, oriole, and wren; then the multitudes join in until "all is bedlam."

That Leopold spent time documenting the stirring of birds from his bench outside a rehabilitated chicken coop speaks to a foundation built on his many years managing and restoring land, studying, and teaching. It speaks to his deeper ability to observe, appreciate, ponder, and to conceive of an interconnected community composed of diverse individuals. It was perhaps upon this bench that the life-long experiences and insights of a man now considered by many as the father of the modern conservation movement came together, providing the spark for a philosophy called the "land ethic" and a book called *A Sand County Almanac*.

The displays at the Leopold Center help visitors understand Leopold's land ethic and his influence on the field of ecology



“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively the land.”

— Aldo Leopold

Today, people from around the world travel to the Shack site in Baraboo, Wisconsin, to walk in Leopold's footsteps, internalizing the echoes of his thoughts among the trees and prairie. In 1935, Leopold purchased a devastated farm for use as a weekend retreat and a place to explore the power of habitat restoration. “A rare bird or flower need remain no rarer than the people willing to venture their skill in building it a habitat,” Leopold claimed. Birds and other species did indeed return to the land upon which Leopold and his family planted thousands of trees and undertook the country's second prairie restoration – with the first restoration, also guided by Leopold, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum. The Shack and its cast of natural characters are at the heart of *A Sand County Almanac*, now considered to be one of the most influential works of environmental literature.

The fall leaves covering the ground offer a brilliant contrast to what seems an almost mystical dwelling. I step inside and add my name to the simple sign-in book lying upon a table built by Leopold from driftwood. The signatures above mine belong to visitors from such places as Alaska,



A display case at the Leopold Center holds copies of the 15 translations of *A Sand County Almanac*

Washington, and Saskatoon, Canada. Why in a world so dramatically changed does Aldo Leopold continue to resonate with them, and with me, 75 years after the publication of his most well-known and final book?

There is no doubt that Leopold's eloquence reaches people in a way that is beyond easy explanation, like music and art. But along with the eloquence is the certainty that there are years of experiences underlying his words. Leopold lived from 1887 to 1948, developing groundbreaking insight



The first two prairie restoration efforts in the U.S. were guided by Aldo Leopold, the second at the Shack site

as a land and game manager in the newly established forest service, as the country's first professor of wildlife management, and as a restorationist. He wrote reports and lectures and management books while contemplating species connections. He would eventually gather his experiences and insights into a book of deceptively simple essays that condense tough concepts and remove barriers between species, between fields of study, and between geologic time and the present—essays that expand the concept of community and resound like undeniable truths. “In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it,” he proclaimed.

Leopold's ideas were far ahead of the thinking of his time and preceded the emergence of the conservation movement. However, his concepts were not exclusionary. He believed everyone had a role to play in building an ethical, caring relationship to the land community: managers of vast wilderness areas and small properties, university scientists and citizen scientists, farmers, hunters, artists, and philosophers. Like the multitude of species that make up an ecosystem, there are roles for each of us.

Buddy Huffaker, Executive Director of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, believes that people seeking a personal role in tackling the conservation issues of today can look to the three-

part structure of *A Sand County Almanac* for guidance. He explains that the first section revolves around planting, learning, and observing before moving to the middle section that Huffaker paraphrases as such: “Okay, I have some ecological literacy, let's diagnose issues and problems and start to come up with conservation solutions.” The final section, he says, “wrestles with the philosophical reframing of our relationship to each other and the natural world.”

What is not found in the book is the suggestion that Leopold has definitive answers or fixed solutions. Rather, he prompts us to take up the challenge to find our own way to a land ethic, stating, “I have purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written.’” No matter how much the world and our scientific knowledge of it may evolve over time, he realized if we base our efforts on the fact that we belong to one multi-species community, and help each other accordingly, we will continue moving in the right direction. The fundamental directive, says Huffaker, “is you start by getting started; you do what you can do.”

Then in 2007, the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center opened a mile down the road from the Shack. It was on this land that in 1948 Leopold came to help his neighbor extinguish a grass fire. And it was here that he would collapse from a heart attack and die at the age of 61 – a year before the publication



The Leopold Farm and Shack became a National Historic Landmark in 2009

of *A Sand County Almanac*. While a memorial at the site commemorates his death, the center and the student fellowship housing located here look to the future, with the center presenting exhibits to help visitors understand Leopold’s history and impact. It is also a gathering space and home for the Aldo Leopold Foundation staff as they continue spreading the land ethic. Leopold’s enduring words have now reached across the globe through fifteen translations of his seminal book.

Before leaving the Shack site, I take a seat on Leopold’s bench and consider the importance of the notebook he placed upon his knee as he listened intently for the dawn chorus he so wonderfully described in the essay, “Great Possessions.” Today, Leopold’s notebooks provide valuable information regarding the presence or absence of species and the timing of their movements. Researchers have taken his field notes and reconstructed a “soundscape” representing the bird chorus he heard at the Shack, taking thirty minutes of his notes and compressing them into a five-minute recording that uses bird songs from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



The bird-chorus

Could Leopold have imagined this future impact as he concluded his observations and headed back to the Shack with his dog on that long-ago morning? “I can feel the sun now,” he wrote. “The bird-chorus has run out of breath...We turn toward home, and breakfast.” ✦

To plan your own trip to the Aldo Leopold Shack and Legacy Center visit www.aldoleopold.org

LEOPOLD & CRANES



Red-crowned Crane sculpture at International Crane Foundation

In his essay “Marshland Elegy,” Aldo Leopold pondered the millennia-spanning connection of Sandhill Cranes to the land while lamenting their potential loss. Today, Sandhill Crane populations have rebounded, and Leopold remains associated with these birds through the conservation goals of the Aldo Leopold Foundation and the International Crane Foundation, both located in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Together these organizations host the Great Midwest Crane Fest each November.



greatmidwestcranefest.org



Bios

Jeanne Townsend Handy holds an M.A. in Environmental Studies and is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists. She received the Jacqueline Jackson Award for writing excellence from the University of Illinois at Springfield for a collection of her published works covering habitat restoration, threatened species, and environmental contamination.



Tom Handy spent a career in visual communication at SIU School of Medicine while also pursuing freelance photography. More recently, his visual pursuits have included watercolor painting. Tom’s photographs and paintings have appeared in numerous publications and exhibits.