

The (Grass) Farmer as Conservationist: Aldo Leopold's Legacy

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Alongside our copies of Voisin and Savory on the bookshelf, we should add a new book of essays by Aldo Leopold titled 'For the Health of the Land' (Island Press, 1999). This book is not about grazing. What it is about is a philosophy of farming that addresses all types of production and takes us beyond forage, crop, and animal management to a basic foundation of land health.

Aldo Leopold was an internationally recognized conservationist whose work was inspired by our own Wisconsin landscape. He taught at UW-Madison in the 1930s and 40s and owned a farm along the Wisconsin River in Sauk County. Back in the days before *Silent Spring* and Earth Day, long before the Endangered Species Act and non-point pollution became the divisive issues they are today, Leopold suggested thought-provoking solutions to environmental problems that can still make a difference, if we adapt them to today's realities.

During Leopold's time, the United States experienced its first agricultural crisis with the dust bowl and massive soil erosion problems nationwide. While acknowledging the work of his contemporaries in the newly formed Soil Conservation Service, Leopold argued for a more holistic view of conservation that was founded on ecological principles rather than a reactive, problem-solving approach to environmental problems. Even as the agricultural community brought soil erosion under control, Leopold predicted new problems on the horizon as agriculture moved toward increasingly high-input systems still lacking in long-term land health goals. The systems we've developed are highly productive and provide Americans with a stable and inexpensive food supply, but they have contributed to some of the environmental problems which we are now seeking to address.

In contrast to the polarized climate of the agriculture-environment debate today, Leopold had a vision of farmland conservation whose premise was that both the farmer and the land must benefit from conservation practices. In an essay titled *The Farmer as Conservationist*, he states, "Conservation means harmony between men and land. When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, we do not." (P. 161).

In other words, farming must be both environmentally and economically sound. If environmental protection can be maintained only by outlays of money and effort, either the conservation practices will be abandoned or the farmer will not be able to make a living. Leopold didn't advocate any particular farming practices, instead focusing on instilling a land ethic in which individual farmers know the capacity of their land and use practices that protect its long-term productivity. Managed grazing is one approach that fits his definition of harmony between farmers and land: a system which allows harvest of forage while protecting and building soil, a system patterned after the natural ecosystem it replaced.

But even back in the 1930s, the role of economics as a driving force away from conservation was recognized. There were pressures in agriculture to increase production and maximize profits in what Leopold describes as "our self-imposed doctrine of ruthless utilitarianism." This model is still a strong factor in today's farming systems and is reinforced by many of our educational tools which encourage us to view farming as a business. It is, of course, and we must view it as such if it is to be profitable, but if that is all farming is—simply a means

of turning a profit--I can think of a lot easier ways of accomplishing that! In "The Outlook for Farm Wildlife," he describes this dichotomy and asks readers to think about how we define 'success' in farming (p. 217):

1. The farm is a food-factory, and the criterion of success is salable products.
2. The farm is a place to live. The criterion of success is a harmonious balance between plants, animals, and people; between the domestic and the wild; between utility and beauty.

Here we can recognize elements of Savory's Holistic Resource Management, in which the farm is viewed as a functioning ecosystem and is managed for multiple values, including, but not limited to, economic ones. While Savory focuses on soil and water management, Leopold's focus was on wildlife and biodiversity, both as an indicator of healthy land and as a contributor to quality of life.

Why do we need hawks, sandhill cranes, coyotes, or toads on our farms? Promoting biodiversity for its own sake is a challenge when we look at individual species (look at the controversy surrounding the Endangered Species Act). Realistically, no individual species is likely to be all that important in the grand scheme of things, but together the species and their relationships to one another create a web--what ecologists call 'the web of life.' In this analogy, as individual species drop out, the strands holding them together break and the whole web weakens. Somewhere along the line, we'll lose one too many species and the whole thing will collapse. Of course we can't save everything, but if we start with that goal, we can go a long way toward saving enough strands to hold together a functioning ecosystem, whether it's a rain forest or a farm. As Leopold put it: "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

The diversity that we preserve on our farms can enrich our lives and add to our enjoyment. Leopold promoted the benefits of farm wildlife, including everything from hunting game animals, to control of rodents by hawks and owls, to simple pleasures like bird watching. When you spend time each day walking pastures, you have the opportunity to observe the changing seasons and the rhythms of the complex community that exists on the farm. I remember hearing a grazer at the Grazing Conference a few years ago talk about bringing his wife a bouquet of a different wildflower every week all summer long. He was amazed at the diversity he found in his pastures and at the fact that he'd never noticed these things before. I get many calls from producers of all types asking for help identifying a bird they've seen or about how to manage pastures, woodlots, and wetlands to encourage wildlife.

One of the best parts of the new book is a series of essays originally published in the Wisconsin Agriculturist. In them, Leopold encourages farmers to take the time to get to know their land and understand the relationships among the living things that share that land. The essays follow the seasons, sketching pictures of the different aspects of the farm wildlife community over the course of the year, suggesting ways of enhancing the wildlife habitat value fencerows and other waste areas on the farm, and providing suggestions to farmers on how to encourage beneficial wildlife. Leopold also taught a course on Wildlife Conservation as part of the UW Short Course offerings for farmers.

In this book, Leopold also acknowledges that some wildlife species are damaging to crops. Even back then some species had gotten out of balance with the rest of the ecosystem. As we all know, remedies to overpopulation problems continue to elude us. He suggests that one remedy is to work toward restoring a functioning ecosystem which imposes checks and balances on pest species. He places both the blame for these problems and the responsibility for finding solutions on the shoulders of conservationists and wildlife managers. This will never be a perfect system, however, and he gently suggests that farmers should make themselves comfortable with sharing some of the land's bounty with wildlife.

A primary theme in Leopold's writing was encouraging farmers to take pride in the fact that their farms harbored many and diverse species of wildlife and native plants and to view this as a reflection of good land management. Leopold argues that "the landscape of any farm is the owner's portrait of himself." In the essays

compiled in *For the Health of the Land*, Leopold seeks to rekindle a deeper understanding and appreciation that balances economic needs with the long term health of the land.