

# THINKING LIKE A LEOPOLD

Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.  
lafitch@shaw.ca

To say Aldo Leopold was the dean of ecologists, the father of wildlife management, and the torch-bearer for wilderness might seem presumptuous but he was all that, and more.

I never had the opportunity to meet Aldo Leopold. He died, too early, two years before I was born. I didn't encounter him until about 1968 when I picked up a slim volume of *A Sand County Almanac* in a university library. That tiny paperback still sits in my bookshelf. I hope the statute of limitations has run out on my failure to return it. In my defense I have read, reviewed, and referred to it more than any other book I've owned. It allowed me to get to know and appreciate the philosophy and wisdom of Aldo Leopold.

His ability to draw lessons from circumstances and experiences, to admitting to have made mistakes, and to convey messages on conservation in an easily absorbed form is a strength found in all of his writings. And so, as many read the Bible, I read Aldo Leopold. I find truth, inspiration, and timelessness in his words.

Another bit of understanding of his success at writing so clearly on conservation came to me on the visit to the "shack", the Leopold family refuge in one of the "sand" counties of Wisconsin. The "shack" was an old chicken coop converted into a cabin on worn out, orphaned land adjacent to the Wisconsin River.

I visited the "shack" on April 1 a number of years ago. As Mark Twain recounted, "This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four." I didn't feel foolish but rather felt I was on my way to a shrine, as important to me as Mecca is to Muslims and the Vatican is to Catholics.

From the original 80 acres the tract has grown to over 200 acres, administered by the Sand County

Foundation. There was no sign, no memorial, and no one else at the laneway off Rustic Road 49, but I saw the shape of a building beneath the forest canopy at the end of the narrow trail. Snow fell, big flakes at first then turning to pellets that ricocheted off the dry oak leaves.

The "shack" sits on the edge of an open field of restored native grass, beneath a canopy of large pines. It is unassuming, even undistinguished, with weathered boards, just a slight step above its beginnings as a chicken coop. Amenities are non-existent and it is like stepping back in time to a rudimentary homestead of the early part of the twentieth century. Logs, planks, and simple benches are arrayed around the yard — just the venue for campfire discussions on conservation issues, I think.

Faint goose music echoed, amid the traffic noise from nearby Interstate 90. Fox Sparrows and juncos scratched in the openings and when alarmed, flew into the thick tangles of underbrush and vines. Snow started to accumulate and I leave, reluctantly. I'm surprised to see that two hours have gone by while I absorb and meditate. I didn't feel the time slipping by.

No, Aldo Leopold did not speak to me. But the spirit of the place did. At the shack I sensed awareness that science and conservation are nourished by a personal contact with the soil, the landscape, and wild creatures. From this humble place worn out by greed and neglect, Leopold, a patient observer, discerned cycles, patterns, associations, linkages, connections, and truths. The place remains part laboratory, part classroom, surely a memorial, and still a landscape in transition from the bootlegger who skinned off the trees and fertility and dumped it back, taxes unpaid, on the county in the early 1930s.

I have the Sierra Club reprint of Leopold's classic, initially published in 1949 (\$0.95). "Classic" is the appropriate term since *A Sand County Almanac* is a work that never loses its influence or relevance. It was read, then reread,

and the messages started to flow from it, as I started to gain an appreciation of the import of the words, stories, layers, metaphors, and teachings. The book is now well-thumbed, dog-eared, and taped together, with passages on virtually every page underlined and highlighted. It's full of marginal notes, many from other Leopold sources. And, I still find new treasures, new explanations hidden in the passages every time I turn the pages. Leopold's words sparked early inspiration and over time enriched it with subtle wisdom.

Leopold's body of work in *A Sand County Almanac* has been described as an amalgam of ethics, esthetics, and ecology — alliterative and unifying. As a biologist, early ecologist, teacher, philosopher, and writer he drew on his keen observations of landscapes, wildlife, and people to address the issues he saw confronting and confounding conservation. I am in awe of his writing style, the clarity, brevity, and simple elegance of expression. What is equally evident and profound is that his observations, conclusions, and his wisdom are as relevant today as they surely were decades ago when he put his pen to paper.

It's hard not to be moved by his convention of conveying truths through stories. Stories still have a power to communicate, even to unreceptive minds in today's fractured, social media world. His stories are circular, and work at many levels and senses. They engage to find common ground and despite our electronic and digital worlds we have not yet lost the genetic hard wiring to listen to stories. Nor should we, I think. "The universe is made of stories, not atoms" said someone wise. History might record, and I believe Leopold thought that monumental changes are only possible when the stories people tell each other about the world provide a unity of concern.

Leopold's writings are my philosophical touchstone, a place to reaffirm my position and obligations.

His words are also a constant reminder that he took risks, based on carefully thought through principles. When he was wrong, he said so, and used the example to indicate we should never hew to orthodoxy in our thinking. The maintenance of our world, the natural one that supports the economic and social interests of the human contrived one, requires the courage to speak up.

Leopold has helped, continues to help me, in moments of uncertainty, in episodes of controversy, and in times of isolation to persist. I believe, as I think he did, that skilled advocacy in the public arena, aided by information from specialists will advance progress towards a world Leopold envisioned — one where we realize we are part of the land and have obligations to that which supports us.

We could stand the advice and perspectives from more Aldo Leopolds, especially over billionaire robber barons, ecologically illiterate politicians and an economic system predicated on constant growth rather than sustainability.

*Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a past Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary. He is the author of Streams of Consequence — Dispatches from the Conservation World. 🐦*

## POETRY

### Leaves in Autumn

silently they fall  
a golden carpet they make  
rustling under foot

**Brian K Jeffery**  
5800 4th Avenue  
Regina, SK S4T 0K3

# CALL FOR RESOLUTIONS

The resolutions considered during the Business Meeting at each year's Fall Meet are important expressions of member concerns on environmental issues. The Nature Saskatchewan Board of Directors is responsible for acting on all resolutions that are passed by the members. This includes sending resolutions directly to the responsible government ministry and pursuing further action and/or meetings with government and others, as deemed appropriate.

Anyone wishing to submit a resolution for consideration at the 2023 Business Meeting, is asked to send a written draft to the Nature Saskatchewan Office (info@naturesask.ca) no later than **Friday, August 18, 2023**. This provides an opportunity to receive feedback from members of the resolutions committee that can help to improve your resolution. It also helps us prepare for the meeting. Please note that resolutions not submitted to the Nature Saskatchewan office by **5 p.m. on Friday, September 8, 2023** will be considered only with the agreement of a two-thirds majority of those attending the business meeting.

### Resolution Guidelines:

1. Resolutions must be in keeping with the society's mandate, bylaws and goals.
2. All resolutions must be submitted in writing.
3. A resolution is, essentially, an exercise in communication. Simple, clear language and focus on one topic or issue is most effective.
4. Supporting information presented in "Whereas" statements must be accurate and factual.
5. Resolutions should be no longer than one page, and preferably less.

## POETRY

### Gordie's Old Pasture

Mandy had taken  
a picture of him  
which even far off  
and blurry,  
she captioned rightly,  
"Handsome young buck."

This morning Patch  
on the leash,  
came on point,  
as did the buck  
to each other  
just beyond the length  
of one sure shot.

We held each other  
in our stares.  
His towards me  
purely functional.  
Mine in wonder as  
this poem percolated.

He was as still,  
as powerful,  
and as beautiful  
through the misted  
autumn air,  
printed in perfection  
in the tan and  
russet grasses,  
the background of white  
gold, black, twisted aspens  
and grey streaked blue sky  
as any masterly  
Eastern silk rendering.

### George Grassick

Box 205  
Lumsden, SK  
S0G 3C0  
ggrassick@sasktel.net