

Aldo Leopold's Odyssey: Rediscovering the Author of *A Sand County Almanac*

By Julianne Lutz Newton

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Julianne Lutz Newton. *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey: Rediscovering the Author of A Sand County Almanac*. Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2006. 472 pp. ISBN: 1-59726-045-2 (hardcover); US\$32.95.

Aldo Leopold (1867-1948) believed that a citizen "must feel for the soil, water, plants, and animals the same affectionate solicitude he feels for family and friends" (p. 203). This quote, one of many in the book, is from *A Sand County Almanac*, a literary masterpiece and Leopold's most well known work. Published by Oxford University Press one week before his death, it has since been reprinted and translated into other languages a number of times. Leopold's lifelong work in conservation sought to harmonize nature with a demanding, consuming American culture. His focus was on maintaining soil, the basic natural resource. His extensive observations and research led him to believe that "land was healthy when it retained over long periods of time its ability to cycle nutrients efficiently and continuously" (p. 338). This nutrient cycling, visualized in his "biotic pyramid," showed food chains as living channels which conducted energy upward and the death and decay which returned energy downward to the soil.

Newton's focus is on Leopold's professional life, with background reflections from his earlier years. His odyssey mostly begins at twenty-two years of age, when he took a job as a forest ranger. After serving in this position for fifteen years, he returned to the Midwest, settling in Wisconsin. He continued working in various positions related to forestry and wildlife until 1933 when he accepted the position of professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin, the first such position. Leopold was also engaged with outside activities involving the environment, for example, as a founding member of the Wilderness Society and serving for a time as president.

Leopold was at odds with the widespread misuse of private land, the allocation of political power in favor of corporations, the extremes of American individualism, and profiteering at the expense of conservation. He was appalled that nature was viewed merely as the raw material of wealth and believed that "a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided" (p. 258).

Leopold's drive to do something about soil depletion culminated in his

becoming something of a renaissance person of nature who developed a philosophy that was grounded in science and reality. His keen interest in wildlife led him to investigate the reasons for the decline of certain species. He authored *American Game Policy* (1930), the first comprehensive national strategy and the guiding statement on wildlife management until the 1970s. His writings introduced key phrases, such as "conservation ethic" and "ecological conscience," and he became well known for "land ethic."

Biographies of Leopold abound; however, Newton incorporates previously unpublished archival material and comments by individuals familiar with Leopold's work. The text is supplemented by illustrations and photographs, some taken by Leopold, and there are extensive notes, a bibliography and index. The copy examined was an uncorrected proof without the index. The book should appeal to general readers, those familiar with *A Sand County Almanac*, and others interested in the management of soil, forests, and wildlife.

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