
Editor's Introduction: Encountering Leopold

My first two encounters with Aldo Leopold, the subject of this special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, were in two wildly different contexts.

In 1983, after undergoing Peace Officer training with a cohort of fellow Rangers and Lifeguards who were becoming permanent employees of the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, we went through an interpretation module, which was designed to help us explain to the public the value of, and need to protect, the state's cultural and natural resources. The module included a session on environmental ethics, which was my first such class ever, even though at that time I was well into my graduate program in Social Ethics at the University of Southern California. It was in that session I first heard about Aldo Leopold, a towering figure whom many today consider to be the greatest environmental ethicist of the twentieth century, maybe ever.

My second encounter came a few years later, after I obtained a full-time academic position. Because of my longstanding interest in progressive social movements with a religious dimension, and growing interest in environmental ethics (despite the lack of coursework), I had been drawn to the radical environmental movement. I sought to understand and evaluate the movement's moral, spiritual, ecological, and political claims, while deepening my understanding of the then nascent field of environmental ethics and wrestling with its various approaches. By 1990, I had read widely the movement's tabloids and begun to attend its wildlands retreats, as well as a variety of its campaigns in which activists protested and directly resisted what they considered to be the desecration of the planet's remaining, relatively intact, ecosystems. From the written sources, as well as the movement's music and ritual-resembling dramatic performances at gatherings, I quickly realized that Aldo Leopold was a saint-like hero to many of these activists. Indeed, as I wrote early on, his story of receiving an epiphany as the 'green fire' died in the eyes of a wolf that he shot had become for Earth First! activists 'a mythic moral fable in which the wolf communicates with human beings,

stressing inter-species kinship' (Taylor 1991: 260). I noted, as well, that the wolf's green fire had 'become a symbol of life in the wild, incorporated into the ritual of the tradition', included in itinerant 'green fire' road shows that were reminiscent of revival meetings but with a biocentric mission, which culminated with participants 'howling in symbolic identification with the wild and wolves' (Taylor 1991: 260). I could see then, and have observed subsequently in many other settings within the global environmental milieu, that there was a religious, or at least a religion-resembling dimension, to the ways Leopold's ethics and narratives were being creatively integrated into environmental enclaves and movements.

It is difficult to imagine two more different social contexts to first encounter Leopold: within a large resource agency empowered to enforce the law, and among radical environmentalists devoted to breaking laws they believe encourage the destruction of nature or the protection of desecrating agents. These encounters, and subsequent ones that I have been tracking for decades, evidence Leopold's broad appeal (Taylor 1995a, 1995b, 2001a, 2001b, 2010). They also illustrate that there are different ways that people understand Leopold's ethical and spiritual beliefs and perceptions.

This special issue of the *JSRNC*, ably orchestrated by guest editors Gavin Van Horn and Jane Caputi, makes a significant scholarly contribution to our understanding of Leopold's ecological, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual beliefs and perceptions. Van Horn does an excellent job introducing the individual articles, so here I will simply add that, as Leopold's star rises as a preeminent environmental ethics guru, it is important to bring him into sharper focus. Was he a moral and spiritual revolutionary promoting a biocentric ethics grounded in an evolutionary and ecological worldview that would overturn the prevalent religious understandings of his day, as Baird Callicott has long seen him and argued strongly in this special issue?¹ Or, was Leopold a pragmatist who sought to work

1. See Callicott 1989 for his seminal, early essays on Leopold, and Callicott et al. 2009, 2011, for direct responses to Norton. Leopold biographers generally share the view of Leopold as an advocate of a biocentric worldview transformation, while recognizing that he was also a pragmatic individual when it came to specific, contemporary issues (Flader 1974; Meine 1988; Newton 2006). I have also analyzed Leopold's views and widespread influence in Taylor 2010: 31-35, 38, 44, 57, 75, 77, 79, 203, and especially 210-12. In 1971, Callicott was the first to offer an environmental ethics course in North America, while teaching undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. Two years later, Holmes Rolston III joined him, also helping to establish the fledgling field's first graduate program; meanwhile a number of scholars in Australia and the United States began publishing in the area, especially

within the constraints of the plural religious and moral values people already hold to foster incremental environmental progress, as Bryan Norton has contended?² Or was Leopold both a pragmatic person who recognized social and political obstacles and who worked within the available institutional systems, accepting and even promoting compromises to achieve sometimes modest conservation gains, while ardently pursuing a deeper and more radical spiritual and ethical revolution, hoping that just such an outcome would arise through an ongoing process of social evolution? The articles in this issue, and the sources to which they point, provide an excellent point of entry to answering these and a variety of other questions that naturally arise from an encounter with Leopold. I hope your own encounters with Leopold will be as fascinating and enriching as mine have been, and that you enjoy the related ferment presented in this special issue of the *JSRNC*.

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after Eugene Hargrove established the journal *Environmental Ethics* in 1979. During a survey of the watersheds in the emerging field, Rolston concluded, 'Environmental ethics was unknown in Western philosophy until the mid-1970s' (2011: 19–20).

2. See Norton 2005 (especially Sections 2.3, 2.4; Chapter 3, Chapter 6; Section 12.7) and 2011.

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