In his Foreword, Aldo Leopold states, “Part I tells what my family sees and does at its week-end refuge from too much modernity: ‘the shack.’” However, Leopold documents much more than simple family observations and activities. He leads us (we, the readers, are beside him as he reveals what he sees) through the seasons as we join him on his walks through woods, swamps, and meadows introducing the flora and fauna of the family farm in Wisconsin. The one-on-one encounters with each creature, flower, plant, and tree, which he knows so well after years of observations, provide us with an opportunity to learn something about each one as well as about weather, American history, evolution, botany, and behavior (both animal and human). This personal contact, through him, almost guarantees that we will leave this section with a greater understanding of, appreciation for, and attachment to each new acquaintance.

One December, perplexed by the lack of grouse tracks after a deep, soft snow, Leopold leads us through the woods as we discover by simple observations that the grouse prefer walking on logs or flying short distances rather than walking (as they usually do) through the deep snow.
By following a skunk whose hibernation has been interrupted by a January thaw, we wander with Leopold throughout the woods and meet a meadow mouse and learn about the grasses that make up the system of tunnels that act as his home; a rough-legged hawk, his mouse dinner, and his method of hunting; and an owl on the prowl for rabbits who may be tempted from their usually-cautious behavior by oak seedlings exposed by the thaw.

In February, standing by Leopold as he cuts through the trunk of an 80-year old oak felled the July before by a lightning bolt, we learn decade by decade of some regional history--of the people who migrated their way west through the 1860’s; the decimation of the prairie chicken and the wild Wisconsin turkey through the 1870’s; of droughts in the late 1880’s; fire in the 1890’s; and a host of other social, environmental, and political happenings.

Season by season, he continues to expose us to the life cycles that make up the grand ecosystem of his Wisconsin property and just beyond. By sharing with us the stories of his favorite creatures, his favorites trees, his favorite ways to observe, appreciate, and bask in nature, simple things seem suddenly very important--rising at 3:30 a.m. in July just to listen to the birds wake up one by one and greet the day with their own unique call; listening to the geese in March as they proclaim their return to their ponds; gathering in the yard each evening from April through June 1 to watch the male woodcocks perform their mating “dances.”
Regional Reflections

Broadening his perspective, Part II of Leopold’s book contains essays chronicling his reflections on certain places observed and appreciated through his life and career. But these are not just fond remembrances of places once visited. These are collections of creatures and plant life that function together as ecosystems, and these are laments for the fading and inevitable disappearance of unique environments.

He discusses the sand counties of Wisconsin, how in the 1930’s they were considered poor because the land was not considered good for farming. Yet many people stayed in these areas. Curious, Leopold buys a sand farm. He discovers the natural beauty of the sandy county in its sandhill cranes, woodcocks, clay-colored sparrows, lunaria, pasque-flowers, and lupines and observes that these are not seen as assets to the economists who claim farmable land as more valuable. He prompts us to think on what basis we use the terms poor and rich when referring to land.

He remembers the White Mountain, in Arizona, the top of which can only be reached by horseback. Isolated and subject to extreme weather conditions--deep winter snows, canyons rushing with icy waters in May, and sudden thunderstorms in the summer--the mountain dares men to tame it. Later in life, fearing that the landscape could not possibly have remained pristine, Leopold chooses not to re-visit the White Mountain because of what “tourists, roads, sawmills, and logging railroads have done

Aldo Leopold, 1966, p. 137)

Within the essays on Oregon and Utah, we learn about plant and animal pests--how invading species have been suffocating natives since the mid-1700’s. One

Aldo Leopold, 1966, p. 164), cheat grass, has transformed vast
areas and has replaced the native grasses. Because the herds chewed the native grasses down to nothing, cheat grass was able to come in and establish itself. Leopold is angry at conservationists who are so removed from the physical reality of the areas they proclaim to want to protect, they do not see what is going on. It is very important to him and it would seem imperative that an advocate, to have credibility or true knowledge of an area, visit and experience the area.

Leopold unfolds these observations, I believe, hoping that we can learn from them and apply them to ecosystems for which it is not already too late to protect and preserve.

**Philosophies**

Leopold moves us now to an even larger venue where he sets forth his philosophies, on land ethics and the wilderness, in the broadest of terms.

Leopold proposes that just as an individual maintains behavior towards another individual based on ethical standards, there should also be an ethical standard between an individual and the land and the animals and plants on the land. Writing in 1948, he feels there is no such ethic. Because our relationship with the land (in 1948 and, to a great extent, in 1998) is based on economic standards of ownership and dollar values, we are prevented from evolving to this new standard. We must, according to Leopold, consider the land [defined as “soils, waters, plants and animals” (Aldo Leopold, 1966, p. 239)] as a member of our community. And because ethics teach us to respect members of our community, we should treat the land with the same respect that we would any individual. We must change our relationship with the land in
that we think of land as an adversary to be subdued and controlled rather than an ally to be valued and respected.

In our society, the land value is judged using economic standards. Leopold suggests considering ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical standards. Because most flowers and birds have no commercial value, there is not enough done to preserve their existence. Until there is a change in how we value things, there is no incentive to preserve that which has a low dollar value.

Leopold calls for the preservation of representative wildernesses for a number of reasons. He feels it is important to keep alive the “primitive acts of canoeing and Aldo Leopold, 1966, p. 220) because they are very American. Wilderness recreation is as valuable as is the intensity of the experience. In other words, to maximize your experience in and appreciation of the wilderness, the farther away from civilization you should go.

Leopold believes we should also preserve wilderness so that it may be studied and better understood. The land is a huge, complex and often-misunderstood organism. There is still much to learn from the wilderness relating to soil, natural predators and large carnivores, root systems, and many other areas.

Relevant Today?

Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac was published in 1949, the year after he died fighting a brush fire on a neighboring farm. His writings are based on personal observations, a career in the U.S. Forest Service, and years of effort to develop and articulate a philosophy on a land ethic (Thomas Tanner, ed., 1987).
Reading this book 50 years after it was written, I find it appealing, troubling, and, yes, relevant. Appealing because Leopold’s literal snapshots are interesting and delightful. I feel as though I have experienced many parts of his property by seeing and hearing through him. His thoughtful musings on nature mixed with a touch of anthropomorphistic license paint a vivid picture of life on his farm. Troubling because he reflects on species and environments that have already become and others that soon will be extinct by society’s trends and progress. Relevant because we, in this country, as well as others of the world community wrestle with the philosophical and ethical issues raised by Leopold. Nature continues to lose ground as world societies sacrifice the land for economic gain and human survival.

By presenting three perspectives that grow broader with each new section, Leopold attempted, I believe successfully, to demonstrate the interconnectedness and the oneness of the land and all of the life that it supports. He attempted to introduce us to nature with the hope of enlisting our support for its preservation. Each new reader will have to decide how active to become in that quest for preservation.
Bibliography
