

## **Living Leopold: the land ethic and a new agrarianism**

*“Bread and beauty grow best together.”* – Aldo Leopold

In 2009, we celebrate the centennial of the arrival of the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold to the Southwest as a ranger with the U.S. Forest Service. Over the course of a diverse and influential career, Leopold eloquently advocated a variety of critical conservation concepts including wilderness protection, sustainable agriculture, wildlife research, ecological restoration, environmental education, land health, erosion control, watershed management, and famously, a land ethic.

Each of these concepts resonates today – perhaps more so than ever as the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century grow more complicated and more pressing. But it was Aldo Leopold’s emphasis on conserving whole systems – soil, water, plants, animals and people together – that is most crucial today. The health of the entire system, he argued, is dependent on its indivisibility; and the knitting force was a *land ethic* – the moral obligation we feel to protect soil, water, plants, animals, and people together as one community.

After Leopold’s death in 1948, however, the idea of a whole system was broken into fragments by a rising tide of industrialization and materialism. Even environmentalism played a role in the breakup of the world Leopold encountered a century ago by cleaving nature from work and segregating the ecological from the economic.

Fortunately today a scattered but concerted effort is underway to knit the whole back together, beginning where it matters most – on the ground. Leopold’s call for a land ethic is the root of what is being called a *new agrarianism* – a diverse suite of ideas, practices, goals, and hopes all based on the persistent truth that genuine health and wealth depends on the land’s fertility. In Latin, *agrarius* means ‘pertaining to land’ and this resurgent movement includes a dynamic intermixing of ranchers, farmers, conservationists, scientists and others who aim to create a regenerative economy that works in harmony with nature. It starts with land health and local food production, the foundations of ecological and human well-being, and extends to watershed rehabilitation, riparian restoration, progressive cattle management, biodiversity conservation, open space protection, good land stewardship, and much more.

Aldo Leopold is the spiritual mentor to this hopeful effort.

Agrarianism is on the rise for three main reasons: first, it requires that we feel “the soil between our toes,” as Leopold put it, meaning it requires an intimate understanding of how land actually works. In turn, this encourages what Leopold saw as the role of individual responsibility for the health of the land. “Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal,” he wrote, and “conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.” In other words, the new agrarianism is *ecological* – it blends scientific understanding of land health with local knowledge into a manageable whole. One goal of this blending is to build **resilience**, which is the ability to handle shock and change. And as the earth warms under climate change, building resilience is becoming crucially important.

Second, it’s economic. Unlike environmentalism, which never developed an economic program to go along with its preservation and human health programs, agrarianism is a practical retort to industrialism. It confronts our economy, the source of most environmental ills, and thereby gives the average American an alternative to participating in an unsustainable model of economic growth. By implementing sustainable profit and work at local scales, this effort points us in a hopeful direction. It’s not theoretical either – it exists and it works, as evidenced by the many examples of good **stewardship** across the nation.

Third, the new agrarianism walks the talk of a land ethic. It encompasses soil plants, animals, *and* people, striving for a harmonious balance between all. “There is only one soil, one flora, one fauna, and one people, and hence only one conservation problem,” Leopold wrote in the *Sand County Almanac*. “Economic and esthetic land uses can and must be integrated, usually on the same acre.” A land ethic means **coexistence** – between urban and rural, domestic and wild, people and nature, bread and beauty.

Additionally, and perhaps just as importantly, a new agrarianism sparks **joy**. It requires care and affection and love and laughter to succeed, including affection for one another.

There is one more reason why this movement is on the rise: *we are all agrarians now*. Our health and wealth depends on what we choose to eat, how we produce our energy, where our water comes from, who benefits from sustainable practices – and each has its root in the land. As we edge deeper into the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the issues of resilience, coexistence, food, and hope, couldn’t be more important.