SESSION 1
Leopold’s Evolving, Emerging Place
in American Environmental History

Friday, April 3rd, 2009

This panel of environmental historians, nature writers, and Leopoldian biographers articulates Aldo Leopold’s place in the pantheon of great, historical environmental figures. How did Leopold develop his most enduring ideas, what place did these ideas have in their time, and how might we reinterpret these ideas for guidance in light of today’s monumental environmental challenges? Before moving forward it is always important to reflect on what came before.

Panelists
Gus Speth
Paul Sabin
Curt Meine
Susan Flader
Bill McKibben
Julianne Warren
Jed Purdy

GUS SPETH

I want to welcome everyone to this day of celebration and reflection and what I hope will be, for lack of a better phrase, platform building. We’re honored here at the school, and also I’m sure I speak for our cosponsor, the Aldo Leopold Foundation, which is cosponsoring this event with us. We’re just honored to have all of you here. What a group — what a very distinguished group of people. 100 years ago Aldo Leopold graduated here from what was then the Yale Forest School. He was here in the very early days of the school, the era of Roosevelt and Pinchot and Dean Graves. And we like to think that it had a lot to do with his late career, but I certainly would be the last to pontificate on that subject with so many distinguished Leopold historians near at hand. I will leave that to them.
We are here celebrating that 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary because I think it’s a fair statement that Aldo Leopold is the most important person to have graduated from our school, our most distinguished alum, in a way.

But we are also here not merely to celebrate this centennial, but to celebrate Aldo Leopold, the Founder of the profession of wildlife management; some would argue a father of our national wilderness system; and early pioneer, one of the creators of, what was then in his period, the new science of ecology; and most importantly, though, Aldo Leopold the man, who wrote \textit{A Sand County Almanac}, created the land ethic, and put humanity in its place, a place in nature as plain citizen, the philosopher who told us that nature had rights and that we have a duty to respect them. A radical proposition then, and a radical proposition now.

We’re not here just to have a celebration, though. We want to consider, first, Aldo Leopold’s relevance for today’s world; second, to repeat, or contribute, to recasting his message for today; and, third, to consider how more and more people might be brought to see the world as he saw it. So, that, I think, is our charge today. And we’ll have fun doing it, too.

We have divided the substantive discussions into four questions or themes. And for each there is a panel. We want to have debate and discussion. Everyone should feel free to chime in. We don’t want this to be a traditional panel discussion with people up here talking to the audience. This is really a discussion among all of us.

I’m told that there are some provocateurs in the audience who may have orthogonal points of view on different issues. And we hope that they will speak up and stimulate the conversation. But in the end I hope that everybody will have a good time. This is in part a celebration. There is a family here. It’s Aldo and
Estella Leopold’s family in a way, people who have worked their lives - many of them – studying these issues and this man. And so, it’s good to have this group together, and it’s good to have our school here and others here throughout the day. I hope that during the breaks, as I’ve already seen, there will be a wonderful warmth and excitement about the conversations.

So, with that introduction, I will establish a pattern of introducing people without a lot of elaboration. I want to set the precedent in that regard by introducing Paul Sabin, a very distinguished, despite his youth, professor of environmental history at Yale. He will moderate and introduce this first panel.

Paul is, I will just say, a wonderful friend and a great scholar. And I’m delighted that he’s agreed to be our moderator for the first panel. Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

PAUL SABIN:
Thanks, Gus. Thanks for the opportunity to be here today. After rereading A Sand County Almanac this week in preparation for today’s session, I think that it really is particularly appropriate to start this centennial celebration by considering Leopold’s place in American environmental history.

When Leopold graduated from the school a century ago, I don't think there was any history being taught here at the school, but in rereading the book I was struck by how central historical thinking was to Leopold’s conversation ethic. In the opening chapters of the book, he draws on history for his lyrical and his humble appreciation of nature. And I think you might say that, in his efforts to place humanity in nature, Leopold did this in part by placing nature and humanity in history.
In the Good Oak, as the saw cuts back through the oak, each ring brings forth another chapter in conservation history, the drought or the dustbowl, the new forestry laws of the 1920s, the extinction of the passenger pigeon, all the way back to the 1860s. “Only when the transect is completed,” he writes, “does the tree fall and the stump yield a collective view of a century. By its fall the tree attests to the unity of the hodgepodge of history,” he writes.

One might even call Leopold an early environmental historian. In the “Land Ethic” essay he writes, “Many historical events hitherto explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were actually biotic interactions between people and the land.”

Recent environmental historians have argued that American history looks different when environmental factors are considered, and Leopold argued this case more than 50 years ago, speculating that if some worthless sedge had succeeded the Kentucky cane lands as opposed to valuable bluegrass, the course of western settlement might have taken an entirely different path.

Leopold thought that when the concept of land as a community really penetrated our thinking, then history would be taught in this spirit with appreciation of the role of these biotic interactions.

In fact, in the early part of the essay on the “Land Ethic,” he wrote that it was the logic of history that calls, that hungers for a land ethic.

So, with Leopold’s own appreciation of the importance of history in mind, I think it’s a great moment to turn to our terrific panel assembled here this morning. Our panelists include Curt Meine here on my left, conservation biologist and writer,
based in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin, who’s an author of a great biography of Aldo Leopold.

He’ll be followed by Susan Flader who is a Professor Emerita at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and has also published widely on all of Leopold’s life and career.

And then, we will turn to Julianne Warren who is the author of a recent book, *Aldo Leopold’s Odyssey*. She’s a Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at Washington Lee University.

Then we’ll turn it to Jed Purdy who is a Visiting Professor of Law here at Yale Law School this year, and also a Professor of Law at Duke. And he’s the author just this past month of a new book called “A Tolerable Anarchy: Rebels, Reactionaries, and the Making of American Freedom.”

Then we’ll conclude with Bill McKibben, the author, editor and activist, who is the author of many books including *The End of Nature*, his first breakthrough, I guess you might say; and more recently, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. He most recently founded 350.org, an international grassroots campaign to mobilize a global climate movement.

So, with no further ado, I’d like to turn it over to Curt who’s going to start us off this morning.

**CURT MEINE:**

Wes Jackson (sitting there four rows back) has said to Courtney White (sitting over there): “We live in the most important moment in history.” I will leave it to Wes and Courtney later on in the day to explain that comment in greater detail.
But it’s in this spirit that I’m going to open up this morning’s discussion by talking about Leopold’s legacy in the large context of conservation history. And I’m going to start actually with an allusion to a place where my friend Peter Brown (on this side of the room!) has been working with his colleagues at McGill University. This is an image of the east shore of Hudson Bay, from an airplane as we headed up to the Cree village of Wemindji a couple of years ago.

I use this as an opening because there’s a nice connection here. When Leopold was a student here at Yale, he would return on his summer vacations to the Midwest and to the family’s summer place up at the north end of Lake Huron in the Les Cheneaux Islands. There he nurtured for many years a great dream: to take a long canoe trip from the Great Lakes up to Hudson Bay. This was going to be his great wilderness experience. He never did it. It always remained just a dream in his mind, but many decades later Aldo Leopold did arrive in a sense on the shore of James Bay. This poster was from the meeting that Peter helped organize a couple of years ago, “Leopold’s Land Ethics: Stories of Wisconsin,” and the presentation I offered up on the shore of Hudson Bay.

I use this as an example - and I could use many – of Leopold’s legacy growing through connections that continue to be made across geographic boundaries, across cultural boundaries, across disciplinary boundaries.

Just last month we had a bit of a “pre-union,” with many of the people here today in, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Of course, after Aldo graduated from Yale here he went to the Southwest, and so people in that region are celebrating Leopold’s arrival there in this centennial year as well. It kicked off in February with a meeting to consider the diverse cultural roots and expressions of the land ethic.
And so, the discussion of Leopold’s legacy at that meeting and in all the events this year is going to be one of continuing exploration.

I’m going to try to do my best in the next two minutes to put a big frame around the morning’s discussion. And I’m going to use a very simple, almost primitive, Venn diagram that I often use to frame the big story of environmental history.

When I’m asked if there’s one book that one should read to learn the entire story of conservation and environmental thinking, I always answer that such a book doesn’t exist yet, because it’s too large and complex a set of fields of knowledge that one needs to know and integrate, and no one has done it yet. This is how I’ve tried to frame the challenge lately. I find this useful mostly for myself. Maybe you’ll find it useful, too.

We can read many books and articles that examine various aspects of the history of the conservation science (I’m using the term conservation here. You can plug in your preferred term - environmental science, or perhaps sustainability science.) There’s obviously a history to the science, with many fields involved. We can list all the different disciplines relevant to conservation science, each with their own history. And we could enjoy many long books and lectures on each of these. There’s quite an expansive bookshelf of material out there on the history of various dimensions of conservation science, and our understanding continues to evolve. But conservation is not a matter of science alone. Conservation science intersects with conservation practice.

In the realm of conservation practice, we can identify many particular activities - everything from historic reforestation efforts through things like predator control (so important, of course to Leopold’s story), and see that these practices have their own rich history. Likewise, there is a rich history involving the development
of conservation ethics and philosophy. These humanistic aspects of conservation would again include a variety of fields, from literature to theology to environmental history and environmental ethics. Finally, there is the realm of conservation policy. Within the policy arena we might include such endeavors as ecological economics and land use policy, each again with their own history.

And so, we can look to many critical scholarly contributions that provide us with narratives of the developments of conservation science, practice, philosophy, and policy. But what is most interesting - and difficult - in grasping the large story of conservation history is that all of these realms interact in complex and dynamic ways. If you really wanted to write the ultimate text in conservation history, you would need to examine all the complex feedback loops at work here. For example, a new advance in science suggests a new ethical insight, which suggests a new practice on the ground, which might suggest a change in policy, which might in turn lead to a new ethical insight. Around and around and around it ricochets as history advances. And, of course, all of this happens within a complex and ever-changing social and cultural context. And beyond this is the world itself, the ever-changing natural world that includes all of the above.

Leopold for me has been such a rich and continuing source of understanding and inspiration because he worked in all these realms. And you can track him bouncing around among these circles. That is what I have always found so amazing in Leopold’s life story. It provides a unique transect across the history of 20th century conservation science, policy, philosophy, and practice. Understanding that story has helped me, at least, to get a better handle on where we are and where we’re going.

PAUL SABIN:
Thank you.
I’m delighted to be back at Yale. And what I wanted to do today is to trace very briefly the trajectory of Aldo Leopold’s reputation in various fields in the period since his death, especially after the publication of *A Sand County Almanac*. When we get about a decade later, it will be as I observed it in my own career. But I was just a kid when *A Sand County Almanac* was published, a year after Leopold’s death. It had been accepted a week before his death and appeared in almost exactly the same form except with a different title, and was loved by a devoted but rather small following for the first decade or two after his death.

In the mid-1950s Weyerhaeuser had an ad campaign that featured Leopold advocating tree planting - tree farming - against a backdrop of clearcut land. And he was safe enough at that time for Weyerhaeuser to use him, also well enough known. But in the long run-up to the Wilderness Act of 1964 when Leopold was repeatedly invoked as the father of the wilderness system, and when the Forest Service, his erstwhile employer, was very much opposed to the National Wilderness Preservation Act, a congressional designation of wilderness, Leopold began to become rather persona non grata within the ranks of professional foresters. As I became aware of him in the 1960s at about this time, there were a number of things that happened to cement that sense of dismissal or disparagement as a flaky idealist or even of professionals somehow being threatened by this guy from their past.

The juxtaposition of three events around Earth Day 1970 deepened this disparagement of Leopold within professional ranks: first, the publication of Rod Nash’s *Wilderness And The American Mind*. At the time, Earth Day 1970, this was about the only history out there that dealt with these issues. The book
focused on Aldo Leopold, and it cemented his connection with the wilderness idea - from the point of view of the professionals, the most subversive idea.

Second, the publication of *A Sand County Almanac* in its first mass market paperback edition in 1968, when it finally began to be grabbed by young college students in the first Earth Day and during the awakening of the 1970s. And, third, the furor over clear-cutting by the forest service, which reached its fever pitch in the late sixties, early seventies.

So Leopold, when I began studying him, was quite disparaged within professional ranks, except for those people who were Leopold devotees, who had been his students in wildlife ecology or had worked closely with him in forestry. But they were getting old by that time.

When I published my *Thinking Like A Mountain* in 1974, almost subconsciously I was addressing it to those professionals who were so distrustful and threatened by Leopold, to make the point that there was so much more to Leopold than just wilderness, that he had a view of the system, and that he had been well respected by professionals in all the various fields that Curt put up on his Venn diagram, and he deserved respect no less in our own day.

In the later 1970s, Leopold was adopted by two new fields: the New American Society for Environmental History was established in 1977, and the *Journal of Environmental Ethics* began publishing in 1979. We’re going to have a whole session about environmental ethics later today with Baird Callicott, one of the fathers of that field; but suffice to say they were a rather marginalized segment of the philosophy profession. And I know that some of my colleagues thought that Susan Flader was not a historian; she was just an environmentalist. So, we were all kind of marginalized in our own fields.
And then came the polarization of the early eighties with the Earth First movement growing out of deep ecology on the left, and on the right corporate executive seminars on Leopold and habitat management, indicating that Leopold could still, in spite of the polarization, appeal to people from across the conservation spectrum. It has been his unique role in environmental history to have that wide appeal, each person reading into him what they want to see.

By the late 1980s, we had the rise of two new professions: restoration ecology and conservation biology. When the Chief of the Forest Service in 1992 issued his celebrated memorandum on ecosystem management saying that Gifford Pinchot had set the guiding philosophy for the 20th century to be followed by Aldo Leopold’s community-based concept for the 21st century, Leopold was accepted back into the family of resource management.

But even more significant to me has been the reception of Leopold’s philosophy and the inspiration he has provided for the incredible movement of community-based conservation in rural areas, urban areas, all across the country, celebrated in the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation in 2005, reflected in Courtney White’s Quivira Coalition of ranchers and farmers and environmental leaders in New Mexico, and celebrated in Paul Hawken’s book, Blessed Unrest, in which he says there may be millions of these community-based groups around this country and throughout the world.

Case in point: the students from the River Crossing Charter School in Portage, Wisconsin, who designed the rain garden that was dedicated along with our new Leopold Center in April of 2007.
So, the question for the future remains: can Leopold speak to all these different cultures, to groups who have not been in the center of the environmental movement, but have philosophies that may very well be congruent with it, groups who may take strength and cohesion from a sense of what they share?

We began to explore some of these dimensions in the other centennial this year, the centennial of Leopold’s arrival in the Southwest, at a cultural conversation on these issues, on the significance of Leopold’s land ethic in the Southwest and its relationship to Native American and Hispanic cultures there. And Leopold is actually in the national middle school textbook of language and literature in China, so every school child in China can read one of his essays in translation from *A Sand County Almanac*.

So, here’s Leopold in crop art at Wes Jackson’s Land Institute, which I think is a very appropriate location for his thinking and his relevance today. He has come to embrace a much wider coalition of interests that we look forward to exploring in the future. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

**JULIANNE WARREN:**

Hi. I’m glad to be here. I’m going to talk a little bit about how some of what Leopold offers from the past might interact with the present and the future.

How should we dream today? Should we dream at all? We, in the past few generations, seem to have entered an anti- or post-utopian age in which we’re afraid of a lot of things. We’re afraid of losing ourselves at one extreme or the other. On the one hand, the worlds we can imagine are so volatile that they are like flitting larks — there one second and gone the next. On the other hand, the
worlds we can imagine are so rigid and imposing that they strangle the very ideals that birthed them; they, in other words, create prison cells for bodies and for souls.

So, how do we escape such polarity? Can we? Have we somewhere along the way become incapable of imagining worlds that are both flexible and secure — or are there still imaginable possibilities for a future in which each of us and all of us, together, might prosper? Underlying that question: How do we deal with conflicts of interest, different kinds of things that claim our attention, particularly among people who want to be part of making a better world, particularly among we who are concerned about righting the relationship between humans and the rest of nature?

By way of illustrating the kinds of internal divisions with which Aldo Leopold struggled so much and which continue to go largely unaddressed today, I want to call your attention to a couple of recent New York Times articles. One is an interview with eminent physicist Freeman Dyson (29 March 2009). Dyson seems to think we need to choose between protecting the existing biosphere, which he believes is of lesser importance, and fighting what he considers the more repugnant evils of war, poverty and unemployment.

The second recent article is titled “Environmentalists In A Clash Of Goals” (24 March 2009). Here we learn that in California, two groups of people, both called environmentalists, both, that is, caring about the conditions of nature, are fighting with each other. In one corner, are the people who support installation of thousands of solar panels in the Mojave Desert to collect energy for electricity generation that would hopefully replace carbon-emitting fuels. In the other corner are the people who are against doing so, concerned that the panels will harm desert ecosystems and further endanger already threatened species like its
native desert tortoise. Here is a stand-off, in other words, between global climate change and biodiversity loss.

So, how do we bridge the gaps between these conflicts and concerns? How do we reconcile differences found even within our own endeavor to right the relationships between people and the rest of nature? How do we make hope real and grounded in a world that feels like it might crash down on our heads at any moment? How do we imagine a fragmented world as whole again and, at the same time, protect access to its riches of meaning for unique people, for all people.

So, these are some of the “real easy” questions that Aldo Leopold also encountered and grappled with decades ago. And in his work as a forest resource manager starting out in 1909, by the 1930s as a wildlife manager, he had well-discovered by experience that the coordinated or multiple use approach to efficiency conservation didn’t work very well, in part, because of inevitable conflicts of interest. Inevitable because, as Leopold put it, the basic fallacy in this approach was that it “seeks to conserve one resource while destroying another.” A fisheries crew, for example, might be re-stocking trout in a stream into which soil was eroding because a forestry road crew was cutting a road bank alongside it. Meanwhile, a timber-cutting crew might be felling trees and removing brush needed by game species as cover. And predator-killing efforts might be unchecking population growth of deer, which would eat up the forest’s capacity to regrow. Nature was so ecologically complex, Leopold found, that people just couldn’t coordinate single-track measures.

In the 1930s, Leopold the game manager, initiated community projects in Wisconsin aimed at promoting wildlife species on private lands by uniting the efforts and hopefully the interests of nature lovers, sportsmen, and farmers alike.
“Utopian?” he wondered to himself about his work. And then he answered himself: “Perhaps, but what is the other alternative?” Well, he ended up pretty frustrated in the long run. The projects didn’t really work out the way he had hoped. They eventually fell apart. A few years later, he wrote: “Conservation without a keen realization of its vital conflicts fails…it falls to the level of a mere Utopian dream.” Conservation was so culturally complex that it needed to embrace not merely economic interests, but a constellation of ethical, scientific, aesthetic, social, and spiritual concerns.

So, how far did Leopold go with regard to so many challenges? He came a long way, but he left a lot undone. One of the things he left unfinished was a new conservation ecology textbook he hoped would help flesh out his evolving vision of people living within the physical and moral context of nature understood as a whole. He came to call that goal “land health.” Nature was always changing on its own terms. The new science of land health Leopold was proposing would seek to understand these terms. It would go on to ask how and in what ways people could change nature without compromising its evolutionary and ecological capacities for the ongoing generation of life and without exterminating life forms that had their own value. No doubt everyone here is well-versed with the land ethic. The land ethic is, of course, tied to Leopold’s vision of land health, which is tied to what Leopold believed was vital to reconciling conflicts within the conservation movement — a common understanding of nature that would expand people’s notions about land beyond merely single-track and economic ones. Leopold tried hard to take all this dynamic complexity of nature — in its totality ever ungraspable to human minds — and to put it in various mental packages with words or images, toward which people could relate. The land pyramid, of course, is a central concept. It’s rooted down there in the soil. So, you have this rootedness. But it also is a very dynamic idea. The land pyramid is self-organized and can be conceived of as such because of the sizes and
reproductive strategies of organisms and the ways that they’re connected by food relationships. Rooted in the soil—the foundation of the pyramid—a flower grows, which is eaten by a gopher, which is eaten by a fox, which is eaten by an eagle at the apex of the pyramid. All of these life forms return by death and defecation nutrients back down to the soil and so it goes, on and on.

Leopold also used a diagram in his classes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that shows even more of the dynamic nature of this concept. The trend of evolution over long periods of time was to increase the diversity of life. And, as he explained it, the more diversity there was, the longer nutrients could stay cycling in place — from bedrock to soils and waters, plants and animals and back again to soils - building up fertility within the system at a rate equal to or greater than it was lost, with nutrients eventually being pulled down hill by gravity and in wind and water currents to the sea, out of which, in due course, it would be raised to form new lands and new pyramids, and on it would go. There was, in Leopold’s mind, this probable positive relationship between soil fertility and biodiversity as joint indicators of healthy land, which was also dynamic, resilient land, which was also beautiful land.

And, to follow, people would prosper most enduringly and richly if they disrupted self-organizing land pyramids as little as possible — that is, if they understood themselves as plain members of them. If an action tended to preserve the regenerative capacities of the whole of nature intact and functioning — keeping as many parts as possible in their characteristic numbers and relations to each other — then it was a right thing, and if it didn’t, then it was a wrong thing. This created boundaries for human actions, but also a great space for human creativity in respectful relation to nature’s ways.
And so, in closing, by way of offering food for thought: Does Leopold’s ecological vision of nature and people living in concert offer contemporary promise for helping to bridge gaps today and to reconciling a host of seemingly conflicting interests within the endeavor to right people’s relationships with the rest of nature? Can Leopold’s now-historic vision of land health — both rooted and flexible in its reality — help fertilize today’s imaginations and inspire dreams of a better world?

[APPLAUSE]

JED PURDY:

I want to talk a little about how the land ethic emerged from the politics of wilderness conservation. And so, when Leopold and his coventurers in the Wilderness Society created the Society in 1935, they had the political goal of mobilizing public power to set aside vast tracts of land permanently free of development.

At that time there were two ways of making political arguments for land preservation. The first was the way of Gifford Pinchot, the utilitarian argument that had been established late in the 19th century that certain resources should be publicly managed for the use and economic benefit of the whole country over generations. And in the early pages of Wilderness Society advocacy, you see effort after effort to explain the value of wilderness in utilitarian terms. It’s talked about as a resource for public health, a resource for science, a resource for economics.

And it’s not entirely persuasive to most of the people involved in the argument, including, I think, Leopold. Leopold’s rejection of economic arguments for wilderness conservation and indeed for the value of nature as such in the A Sand
"County Almanac I think emerges from this frustration with the program of the Wilderness Society.

The second way, when they began their project of justifying the preservation of land, was spiritual. It was the way of John Muir, and it was rooted in the idea of sublimity, the idea that certain kinds of spectacular landscapes gave unique access to aesthetic and spiritual experience, that the sublime places that were more than the mind could hold would in a way rip your soul open, change your mind through your perception, and ennoble and emancipate and enliven your experience.

But this was an idea that then was reserved to the kinds of places that became national parks. It wasn’t yet an idea that you could express about nature as such, about wild places or the world as such, and be understood. You couldn’t say in public nature has this spiritual meaning for us and therefore we are making to you a political argument that it should be preserved.

And it seems to me from going back and looking through the pages of Wilderness Society arguments that the great innovation that Leopold and the other people involved in the movement were working on in the forties was to extend the idea of the spiritual importance of the natural world and its capacity to enrich our minds and our way of seeing from the most spectacular places to nature as such, and to develop an account of how the integrity and complexity and continuity of the natural world enlarged and enhanced a mind that could encounter it and apprehend it.

This is what he’s getting at, of course, in the famous last passage of A Sand County Almanac where he says, “Our aim is to build receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.” It’s glimpsed at other pages in the book where he says
things like, “In the way of moving toward thinking ecologically, sit in the dark and think of everything you have ever tried to understand.” There is in that a sense of what the world presents to us. It’s not the sublime landscape of Yosemite that opens you up and is more than you can encompass. It’s a world of interconnections that you can on the one hand understand and understand richly, but whose complexity on the other hand is so vast an extent and an intrication that it outruns the capacity of the mind to hold it all in one place at any time. That’s a kind of sublimity in order.

And that was a way they found to talk in public about how nature matters, which began as part of the program of wilderness, but became then part of the spiritual and aesthetic and political account of environmentalism in the natural world as such when environmental politics exploded in the late sixties and early 1970s. I think this is part of where it comes from.

Why is that worth thinking about? I think one reason it’s worth thinking about is that it’s conventional, though I think not here, to talk about the conservation period of public lands, preservation, and the period of environmentalism that begins somewhere between Rachel Carson and Earth Day as a kind of new thing, an event without a history. And I think that that’s not right. I think there is a continuity in the attempt to understand what the world means for us, and that Leopold and his coventurers are an important bridge there.

I think the other thing that’s worth understanding here is that although Leopold is an innovator in environmental ethics with the land ethic, this is ethics very much as part of public life, ethics not as a sort of practical branch of mathematics that’s confined to philosophy departments, but a sort of refined version of our ordinary complaint and exhortation and deliberation and attempt to get other people to go along with us in seeing the world a little more in the way that we’ve come to see
it, and an attempt specifically to translate extraordinary spiritual experiences of epiphany and encounter into something we can actually say to one another about what we should do.

So, that’s what I wanted to say about it.

[APPLAUSE]

BILL MCKIBBEN:

Well, every panel has a ringer, and that’s me. I’m not only not really a Leopold scholar; I’m not even really a scholar scholar.

[LAUGHTER]

I’m a writer and an activist, and an enormous fan of Aldo Leopold, both as a thinker and I must say as a writer - one of the great, clear, beautiful prose stylists that the last century in the U.S. produced.

I’ve been in the midst of this sort of organizing work that seems to take up most of my time right now. I did a project in the last couple of years for the Library of America, this anthology of American environmental writing since Thoreau, a sort of great doorstop of a thing, that allowed me the privilege of just going back and rereading lots and lots and lots of things, and trying in a sort of feeble way to discern that arc that ran through it all. And there is an arc, I think, and it’s one that everybody’s gotten out here. Accepting Thoreau, who foresaw everything with a prescience that’s almost impossible to credit, that arc goes in a sense from this focus on wildness and sublimity and from John Muir up to the present. I think if there’s an emblematic writer of the moment, it’s probably Wendell Berry, his discussions of the human community and how we’re going to live. That’s a
long arc, you know, from Yosemite to the farmer’s market as the sort of central idea. And, of course, there’s plenty of Muir left in all of us and in this movement and everything.

But how that arc happened is extremely interesting to me, and one of the key hinge moments in it is Leopold in mid-century. In part, one of the things I always get when I’m reading Leopold, and one of the things that makes him so attractive, is the sense that he’s struggling in his own mind to figure out how this is playing out, this great change, in the course of his career and the course of his writing.

I think what he did more than anything was introduce this idea of community into this discussion in a profound way. Now community began, in a sense, with a kind of technical meaning, an ecological sense. Ecology was the great emergent science, I think, of the 20th century. Forget nuclear physics. 300 years from now this is the thing that people will remember. And the technical idea of community was very important. And as it began to blossom in his deeply humanist writing, it also began to bleed over out of its technical understanding into a much larger human understanding that laid the groundwork for this reassessment of what human community means, too, and how on earth America and the rest of the western world is going to ever get back into the human birthright of some kind of balance with the natural world around it, and with the other people around it: the great tasks of the moment, and ones that have become in subsequent years far more urgent even than when Leopold was writing.

The other great contribution is this ability to think of things - and it goes with this idea of community, of course - as a whole. The metaphor of the Round River is a great example, to take things out of their parts and into the whole. And that’s a task that’s become, I’m afraid, even more pressing and difficult now. We have no
choice but to think, at this point with regards to climate, of the entire biosphere as a whole, and to grapple with the fact that we’ve introduced this huge, exogenous variable, this flood of carbon that had been locked up for hundreds of millions of years and now is flooding into the atmosphere and wreaking havoc with absolutely every community that any ecologist, including Leopold, has ever described. It is threatening to just absolutely overwhelm all that we understand about the living world around us.

And in a very short order we have to figure out how to deal with that. And it’s there that we reach the point in a way where environmentalism becomes too small a container for all of this, the movement that Muir started and that Leopold was a visionary part of. I mean, if we’re depending on the Wilderness Society or the Sierra Club to deal with global warming, it’s like saying World War II is starting, let’s call out the Food and Drug Administration. This now involves everything. It involves economics at its deepest levels. It involves politics and sociology and psychology.

But the moment where that great broadening really begins, I think, in many ways is with Leopold, and it’s why he’s such a central character and has so much to offer us as we try to grapple with the true emergency that we’ve fallen into, an emergency that I will close by saying is time-limited. No more the notion of the kind of great, long sweep of environmental history and things righting themselves over time, stability. If we don’t get this carbon thing right in the next few years we won’t get it right, and the earth will be unbelievably different going forward, unbelievably poorer.

And, hence, in closing, I’m as deeply attracted to the part of Leopold that not only wrote about these things, but worked hard on them. And I hope you all will check out this huge global campaign we have underway called 350.org. I won’t bother
to explain it here. It’ll take too long. But the web site is very clear, and I hope you all will join us and join people around the world in particular places this October in really powerful political witness about exactly the set of questions and issues that Aldo Leopold so profoundly raised more than a half century ago.

[APPLAUSE]

PAUL SABIN:

So, I’ll follow up a little bit on the comments of the panelists. Thank you all for your remarks. I have one question for Susan and Curt. I know both of you have been very involved with the Leopold Foundation and more recently with the film that’s going to be screened this afternoon, I believe, “Green Fire.” I wonder if you could speak a little bit about your experience both as Leopold scholars and biographers in interpreting Leopold in this context, and the effort to manage and figure out what elements of Leopold’s history to draw forward through these mechanisms.

SUSAN FLADER:

Well, I'll start with it. What we had to decide was how we were going to present Leopold. Should it be simply a review of his life and all of the many facets of his career, or should be we connecting him with what Bill McKibben and really everyone on this panel has been talking about: what’s happening today? And we decided that we wanted to make that connection. Curt actually was the one who was arguing that this is going to be our only chance to really do a comprehensive view of his life, and he’s now on the hot seat because in the end we decided that we wanted to make that connection with what’s happening with multifaceted community-based conservation that’s going on all over this country and elsewhere in the world. And we wanted to show that what people are engaged in, in their own local communities, in the places where they live today, can take
an integrating philosophy from Aldo Leopold and an inspiration from things he did
during his own career.

And this was very difficult to try to portray in film because how do you deal with
the life of a person and everything that’s going on today in the same context
within 56 minutes or whatever the length of the film. Our solution to it, eventually,
was to put Curt on the camera as one who bridged the Leopold scholarship and
career and all of these different facets of what’s going on today, at least in this
country, but also to a large extent elsewhere in the world.

He’s become the on-screen guide, and I’ll turn it over to him to make a few
comments about whether it works or not.

CURT MEINE:

Our editor, Ann Dunsky, is in the room here somewhere, I don't know if I passed
her screen test yet, but rather than talk about the film, I think let me just make a
couple of quick points, and so we can get some more questions in.

In my own role as a biographer, historian, interpreter of Leopold, I wear one hat.
But I’m also a conservation biologist who is active. If I don’t do Leopold full time,
I’m out there also trying to make a difference in the world, as we all are.

But there are very quickly three things that I always try to do whenever I’m in
public role with my Leopold hat on. First is the relevance of the land ethic across
the spectrum of land use from the most wild lands to the most urban lands. To
me this is a really critical need. Leopold did not segregate land when he wrote
the land ethic. And my shorthand, snarky way of saying this is we need to leave
no acre behind.
The land ethic is as relevant in the city neighborhood as it is in the Gila wilderness; second, that the theme of community that Bill McKibben just mentioned is critical to this, the different kinds of communities and the different definitions and evolving definitions and evolving realities of community life. Wendell Berry is so keen on this.

And then, the third thing - I’ll just quote the line I normally use. If you read the land ethic, you’ll see what I like to call Leopold’s most important sentence. Toward the end of the land ethic he has a sentence that says, “Nothing so important as an ethic is ever written. It evolves in the minds of a thinking community.”

So, here he is in his essay “The Land Ethic” saying no one writes the land ethic. And I think it’s a stroke of genius, maybe his greatest stroke of genius, because with that he liberates the idea. He opens it to the larger thinking community – to us. He opens it to different cultural traditions. And so, in any audience I can say it’s not about Leopold; it’s about this culturally evolving idea of a land ethic that we all have to contribute to. There’s no option. We all have something in our different traditions, places and cultures that have to be brought to that table. That’s what keeps a land ethic alive, and that’s what we hope to build into the film.

**PAUL SABIN:**
Great, thanks. I want to pick up on comments both by Bill and Jed in particular, but also open it to the panel. Leopold’s been mentioned in the context of Thoreau, and earlier writers about nature. And I wonder if you could speak a little bit to both where he’s similar to these early writers but also how does he
differ from them. I guess I’m interested in trying to tease out some of the
tensions between Leopold and his predecessor, previous writers, and maybe
those that might come afterwards as well.

JED PURDY:
I completely agree with what Bill said, and very nicely stated what I would have
wanted to say. I think the recognition that the natural world, and our participation
in it, has spiritual significance, moral significance for us, emerges except in
Thoreau in relation to relatively isolated and particular kinds of places. And it’s
really in Leopold’s thought and in the movements that Leopold is involved in, that
it’s extended into the human relation to the natural world as such in all kinds of
communities and all kinds of land. So, it’s that extraordinary active expansion
and integration and finding a way to talk about it that has some continuity with the
old discovery of the spiritual register of the human-nature interaction that’s really
the watershed here.

BILL MCKIBBEN:
That seems completely right to me. You know, at a certain level it’s such a
strange task for human beings to have to come to terms with this stuff, right? For
most human beings, for most of human history, it’s been entirely innate, more or
less.

And then, we went through this period in the west and in America particularly
where it became entirely foreign to us. We somehow very quickly evolved this
entirely different concept of things. And one senses in Leopold this great ability
to read and understand both the past and the future in an interesting way, and to
sense in his own self, since this is how any writer senses anything, the great
desire for a deeper community. And also nostalgia for the one that he’d grown
up in, all those sorts of things. I think he’s a sort of hinge in this very interesting process.

**CURT MEINE:**

And just real quickly, one of the differences between Leopold and Thoreau, for example, is that the science of ecology came along. And if you think of that Venn diagram again, that’s where the new science inspires a new way of writing. And Leopold is able to think consciously about translating this new science into language that a Wisconsin farmer could understand and appreciate.

But then afterwards, you can look back on it. And I’m recalling a comment by our friend, Gary Paul Nabhan, whose writing I’m sure some of you are familiar with. Gary likes to make the point that Leopold gives permission to scientists to write for the average person, to write in a poetic and lyrical voice. It’s okay. You can still be a good scientist if you’re a good writer.

**PAUL SABIN:**

Well, this is intended to be an interactive day, so I want to open up the floor to questions for the panelists. If you could, I guess, stand up and speak loudly so that everyone in the audience can hear you, that would be terrific.

[INAUDIBLE]

**CURT MEINE:**

There are a few direct quotations and references, both quotations as well as citations. The one that comes immediately to mind is in “Thinking Like A Mountain,” although it’s a misquotation. He references Thoreau in “Wildness Is The Preservation Of The World” or in wilderness, and Thoreau had originally written “In Wildness.”
He was familiar with Thoreau, even as a student here at Yale. And, of course, Susan can tell you the story better than I perhaps, or Estella, that the wedding presents that all those parents gave Estella and Aldo when they were married was a set of Thoreau’s journals, which he then did digest. Boy, that was soon after he had his illness where he was on the sidelines for a couple of years, and that’s probably the period when he really absorb Thoreau.

SUSAN FLADER:
Actually, the complete writings of Thoreau, the complete Riverside edition.

BILL MCKIBBEN:
Yeah. You hardly need to sort of quote Thoreau directly. You know, it’s like Shakespeare doesn’t have citations to the Bible.

JED PURDY:
A very quick observation. Thoreau is also explicitly part of a cannon that the Wilderness Society created in describing in effect a series of prophets who had revealed the meaning of nature to us - Thoreau, Muir. Leopold not long after his death begins to play this role for them. And I think there is a kind of hazard in this. The environmental conversation is a very canonizing conversation. We’re quick to create saints, and we’re quick to assign the status of prophecy. But, of course, a prophet shows a community an idea of itself, and it’s only the community that’s capable of taking up the idea and acting on it. So, I think we always have to be aware of that sort of community and democratic dimension of this. The prophets depend on us as much as the other way around.

Audience Member:
I was just going to ask about policy makers that may use poetry in their writing of laws. I mean, the Wilderness Act is one of the few acts that I have heard that’s somewhat poetic. But have you seen that? Have you felt that? How is that? I mean, we haven't seen that since 1964, or maybe we have.

**SUSAN FLADER:**

Well, one other example of it is in the Marine Mammal Protection Act which has written into the legislation a responsibility to safeguard ecosystem health and stability of the marine system. And that was in 1972. I have a hunch that that came from Starker Leopold’s involvement with the Department of Interior and in national circles at that time. And we’ve recently been working with them to look at the idea of health in marine systems and compare with terrestrial systems. But that’s an example of language that might very well have come from Leopold.

**JED PURDY:**

Senators talked like Leopold and like Muir in debating the Wilderness Act in ’64, and also in debating the pollution statutes in the early seventies. So, there’s also a way that the poetic language, even if it doesn’t come into the statutes, comes into the core public active persuasion about what the statutes mean.

**BILL MCKIBBEN:**

We went through this period where we viewed things as technical problems that were going to be fixed with technical solutions, and so the language reflects this. A sad thing that happened in the wake of Earth Day was that we lost that thread for a while. And now we’re getting it back. The environmental movement in the last five or ten years has morphed into the global warming movement mostly because it’s the most pressing problem that we face by an order of magnitude. And since there’s no way to solve it, since it’s not a technical problem, it’s a volume problem. Right? It’s a problem of all of us living the way we’re living.
This poetry inexorably is creeping back into the discussion. You can see it in the declaration from the Rio Summit in 1992.

CURT MEINE:

And just very quickly, another I’d mention with the direct connection is through the work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service that you’ll hear about in a little bit.

Back in the nineties, if you look back on the last 15 years, one of the great, great positive trends in the conservation arena has been that we’ve finally gotten private lands back on the map. For decades, the environmental movement, frankly, was guilty of ignoring private land conservation. Wendell Berry and Wes and others, including others in this room, helped to get it back. And one of the real crowning achievements in the 1990s was the NRCS coming out with a little booklet called the geography of hope, which draws its title from Wallace Stegner, of course. And, yeah, it’s chock full of graphs and diagrams and statistics, but it also has a lot of wonderful prose in it about the value of private lands and the private land owner on the American landscape. And I think something started to happen back then when we began to give more permission to use a little different language, that you didn’t have to stick to that strict bureaucratic vocabulary all the time, everywhere, that you could again be a good bureaucrat and still be a good poet.

Wes Jackson:

The insight that Leopold had on the land organism has somehow been incompletely understood by ecologists, preservationists, and whatnot in the emphasis on biosphere rather than ecosphere. The land ethic is inclusive, but somehow or another the translation by professionals and activists alike has placed the emphasis on the biota. The nonliving world gave rise to us. We didn’t
give rise to it. And so, as a consequence, we play fast and loose with the physical part. The consequence now - the most serious problem – is climate change.

So, we’ve got to start thinking ecosphere and stop talking about biosphere. I have no objection to biophilia, but we’ve got a cognitive problem here. And as a consequence, we dump the chemicals into the agricultural lands and we dump the CO\textsubscript{2} into the atmosphere because that’s nonliving. And so, end of sermon.

[LAUGHTER]

BILL MCKIBBEN:

Point well taken, Brother Jackson.

[LAUGHTER]

This is what I was trying to get at... I mean, we’ve moved up a rung of difficulty in this whole battle now. It was because we’ve released this endless pool of carbon into the atmosphere, we’ve now got a different set of circumstances than the one that Leopold was playing with. And it’s going to require an even more encompassing ethic to make it work. Much of that ethic is going to have to be about the relations between other people if we’re going to have any hope of reigning in the flood of carbon into the atmosphere, which complicates it all enormously.

It remains to be seen whether the intellectual scaffold provided by environmentalism for the last 100 years is anywhere near sturdy enough to deal with the weight of the problems that we’re now piling on top of it. And it’s why it’s
so important to try to broaden and involve as many other sources of ethical insight as we can find, from religious communities to you name it.

It’s also, however, worth noting that this conundrum between the local and the global, between the place and the big place, is one useful thing we have going for us at the moment: the development in the last few years of the ability to picture that architecture in a slightly different way than we have before. The advent of the Internet gives rise to new possibility. This is how we do organizing. We did this thing two years ago to step it up, this big series of global warming demonstrations around the country, right? And we didn’t do a march on Washington. We had 1,400 rallies in all 50 states, including in Salina [Kansas, the home of Wes Jackson’s Land Institute]. We were able to take all those pictures and images and make of them more than the sum of their parts and three days later we get Obama and Clinton to sort of change their energy platforms and move.

Now we’re trying the same thing on a global basis this fall, at 350.org. We need to be able to do things that reflect people’s deep commitment to their particular place because all of us are linked hopefully to some particular place, but to also have some that also countenance powerfully the fact that each of those places is on an earth that’s in crisis. And that local-global dialogue is extremely interesting, and something that we couldn’t have done even a few years ago in the fashion that we’re doing it now.

So, this is a very rich conversation, and one wishes that Leopold were around to help us with it in that sense.

JULIANNE WARREN:
One of the beauties of Leopold’s idea of how the land worked as an organism is it is quite generalizeable in a sort of brilliant way, this idea of the nutrient cycling of the land and the connection between diversity and soil fertility. It’s very easy to connect that to greenhouse gases. You know, you think about “Odyssey.” That’s one of the essays Leopold was most praised for, and one of his colleagues said it was the best capsulation of ecological understanding that they’d ever seen. It really captured a fullness of understandings that if we’re going to be ethical to nature, we have to have some concept of it, some mental concept.

So, continuing to work and flush out what that is, I mean, you have the roots of trees and plants going down to the bedrock, that core of the earth formed billions of years ago, working with physical and chemical processes to release nutrients that plants can use. And then, you have the plants and other life depositing their excrement and dead bodies to the humus and the soil and decomposing and going down to the subsoil where more plants can take it up, and this endless cycle.

And Leopold - one of the ways he taught his students and was playing around is if the land is healthy, the amount of nutrients coming out of the bedrock is going to meet the amount that’s lost downhill out of the system over time. And you have trees and leaves using carbon dioxide and putting out oxygen, but then you have this whole life in the soil that’s oxidizing and using and breathing out carbon dioxide. So it’s so intimately connected with global climate change and just having an ecological concept of the whole thing in grounding that I think is really critical and also can be detailed local place to local place.
I just wanted to add one literary note. I think part of what would fill in the gap between the arc that’s been suggested by Bill between Thoreau and, say, Wendell Berry, is literature.

I was thinking when Wes spoke about John Muir’s argument with Emerson, when John Muir went into Yosemite for the first time, he carried his copy of Emerson’s essays. And if you look at the marginalia, you can see him having this very argument. That is, Emerson puts the human being at the center of every argument about nature, and John Muir keeps correcting him, correcting him again -- let’s think about rocks. Let’s think about glaciers. Let’s think about water flow. Let’s think about these grasses and why there are trees here and why there are meadows here. And I think it could be very interesting to bring literature into this and the wedding of science and literature, to show that this imagination was alive the whole time in American literature, this debate between whether we’re at the top or the bottom, the whole point of the land ethic is we’re plain citizens. I think that’s what Muir was arguing with Emerson about the whole time he was at Yosemite. I just wanted to add that.

JED PURDY:

That’s wonderful. One difference that’s so profound between Thoreau and Leopold, even between Emerson and Muir, is that those early characters were so deeply transcendentalists, and that means that I think even for Thoreau but much more clearly for Emerson, they believed that in some way the world was aspiring to become their minds. There was an ontological centrality to the structure of our minds, and by Leopold, in part because the imagination has found a way to encompass an extraordinary expansion of scientific understanding. So, you think of what Leopold understands about how the world works versus what is known to Thoreau. Thoreau is extraordinarily rich in a sense of empirical detail, and also sort of knows where the world has ponds and I have eyes. The world has soil
that moves with the thaw of the spring, and I have viscera. But there’s something almost beautifully medieval about the sense of the correspondences, and the transcendentalist view reinforces this.

The integration of science into the environmental imagination means in some ways that the mind aspires to integrate the reality of nature. The posture of humility makes a different kind of sense when that’s your world, I think.

**PAUL SABIN:**

Many aspects of Leopold’s writing in “Land Ethic” are really about a unified humanity relating to nature. I guess one of the insights of environmental history in recent years has really been the social conflict that has emerged through the process of conservation. And, in addition, you’ve also had the emergence and the rise of the environmental justice movement. And I guess, in placing Leopold in history, I’d be interested in the panelists’ thoughts on the questions of social equity and justice in his writing and his thinking, any tensions that might be present there. I think it’s an important theme to explore.

**SUSAN FLADER:**

Well, I certainly think that sense of being plain member and citizen implies social equity as well as a larger eco-equity. It implies that we’re all in this system together. And I think that we’ll hear some more about this later in the day. But even though Leopold didn’t write specifically about those relationships between human beings, he certainly cared about them.

**CURT MEINE:**

That’s such a great question. It would take so long to give a good, thorough answer to it. But Susan has written extensively on Leopold and citizenship, and especially Leopold’s evolution from the Yale trained forester turned loose on the
world to a community based conservation advocate. And it’s a wonderful theme to pursue, and you could do it wonderfully here, of course, by looking at the history of the school, actually, and seeing how those points of transition occurred through the 20th century.

But the point here is that Leopold inherited that Pinchot-vian progressive mantel of the expert out there on the land with the full force and support of the U.S. government behind him as a young district ranger. But it did not take long for Leopold to understand, especially in the culturally diverse southwest, that that model immediately had to be adapted to the local cultures, the local landscapes, the local realities. And so, through Leopold’s career, especially after he comes to Wisconsin, you see him much more aware of the fact of democratic processes and how to work that into the administration of conservation policy. And Susan again has written on this, but I think it’s a wonderful part of the story that needs more attention, this evolution from the technocratic elite guiding or running conservation to the bottom up, citizen driven conservation. And of course Wisconsin was not the most culturally diverse state at that point.

And it’s part of the future story. How do we make Leopold’s legacy more diverse? How do we find those points of connection and draw upon the rich variety of traditions out there that have their own land ethics, that have their own traditions that are congruent, to use that earlier word, with Leopold, but also maybe can pick up something from Leopold? And I think that’s where the really rich conversation is right now and will be into the future.

JULIANNE WARREN:

And if conservation is contiguous with all land, private land and public land, that means you don’t dump PCBs in a poor neighborhood. You don’t dump them anywhere. That means you figure out some better way earlier on ideally to live
life. So, there’s a certain social equity that comes from making conservation be about not only uninhabited lands but inhabited lands, and not only public lands but private lands. So, that certainly covers a lot of territory.

And the other thing that I find so interesting to think about are ways to use social pressures and processes to get people to use land ethically. At the end of the land ethic he says, “You know, the mechanism for bringing this about is social disapproval for wrong land use and social approval for right land use.” So, how can we shape the way our neighbors and we use land and live?

BILL MCKIBBEN:

Yes, Julianne makes such an important point. There’s a sense in which, if there’s a naiveté out of that Leopold discussion, that’s where it is, or part of it. The reason that we use land the way we use it is because there’s a large set of economic incentives that drive systems in that direction. And the day in which, for instance, there is a serious cap on carbon and hence its price goes up, is the day that we’ll stop doing ruinous farming, the day that we’ll stop urban planning that’s designed around the automobile, the day a lot of things will happen.

And given the time in which we have to do it, social disapproval of our neighbors is not an efficacious approach. But, at some level that’s what political organizing is about, you know, and we need that, but it has to be more instrumental and much quicker.

I think all those guys of that period had this sense that things took a very long time and you got back slowly on the right track, and it took us a long time to get into this and will take a long time to get out of it and so on, which is very true, and it’s especially easy to do if you’re on the upper end of things to begin with: life is okay. But we’re not in that situation anymore. We’ve got to move much more
quickly, and that’s what I meant about not being convinced that the intellectual scaffolding of any of this is going to be sufficient to deal with the weight we want it to bear, but it’s what we’ve got.

PAUL SABIN:
Clearly, as I think Jed was touching on, there is some urgency of the organization of the Wilderness Society, and I guess I wonder if there’s a tension there between Leopold’s ideas in terms of social approval or disapproval, but then joining in with others to form an entity that would seek legislation ultimately.

JED PURDY:
No. I guess it seems to me that what we can do politically, like anything we can do, is intimately linked to what we can imagine, what we can credibly imagine. And just as that’s true individually, it’s true collectively. And, of course, what we can imagine collectively is linked to how we can talk to one another.

So, I think that the kind of education of the imagination and ordinary forms of argument among neighbors are both the substrate and the product, but in the first instance the substrate of the capacity for political action that, as Bill says, is what we’re going to need to get to sooner than they then imagined.

CURT MEINE:
Just a very quick word on that: remember, the Wilderness Society was founded in 1935. It’s the depth and middle of the Depression, and the dust bowl years. And it’s a time that we can begin to, I think, relate to now a little more, unfortunately, in the sense of this conjoined economic and ecological mess, and that generation was in turmoil. And the Wilderness Society, even though it was a pretty elite group of people who were doing it, they were also very socially conscious, and wrestling daily. And it’s one of the most fascinating periods to
read about, especially becoming more interesting right now because you can see them trying to make sense of these connections between the economy and the natural world, and what this new initiative for protecting wild lands could potentially contribute to that conversation.

**PAUL SABIN:**

I think we have time for one last question.

**Audience Member:**

Kind of on that point, I was thinking climate change is really sort of a game changer for a lot of environmental thinking, including some of the things that Leopold was writing about - for example, ideas of pristineness, protection, even wildness. So, my question is: what’s relevant in the 21st century? Is wilderness protection? We just had a lands bill passed. Is it relevant, really, in the 21st century? Should we be thinking about that, strengthening the scaffolding that Bill is talking about, or should we be engaging in what seemed to me to be sort of 20th century types of strategies that I think under these game changing rules of climate change may not be so relevant? So, I guess the question is, what’s the relevance of wilderness in the 21st century?

**CURT MEINE:**

Out of that discussion comes the modern terminology of resilience, or the capacity for self renewal, to use Leopold’s phrase about describing what land health is.

And, Courtney, you as much as anybody in the room have done work on trying to bring these concepts to many audiences, but I think for me the thing that is really coming to the foreground are these joined concepts of community and resilience
and understanding the embeddedness of human communities in the larger circles of community that we belong to.

And so, I think again this was a theme from earlier in the conversation, but, yeah, we don’t think of community in the same way. Baird Callicott has written on this. We can’t talk of it in the same way given what we know about changing definitions of community. But the basic concept is still there. And in a time of uncertain change on scales and rates we cannot imagine and have not experienced before, how we understand resilience and continuity despite change and through change is going to be what endures in Leopold’s work.

BILL MCKIBBEN:

Look, the fight right now from what we know about the science is to preserve a world that bears any congruence with the one that we grew up in. It’s clearly going to be deeply changed and badly affected even if we do everything right from here on in. We’ve warmed the planet a degree. We’ve got another degree and a half in the pipeline even if we stop burning carbon today. So, that’s change on a scale that humans have never experienced before in their history.

The fight that we’re all in now is to keep that number from going to five, six, seven degrees in the course of this century, and a world that has precious little connection anymore to the biology and the land forms, the landscape, the seasonality, the processes, you know, a world where the ocean has a pH that’s radically different from the one it was when we were born, that sort of thing.

_The End Of Nature_ 20 years ago was a sort of argument that wildness isn’t really possible in the sense that we thought it was. But the value of wilderness, in a functional sort of Leopoldian sense, is very important because we’re going to need, even in the best of cases, big corridors to let things move back and forth.
In a more important way, as a kind of continuing touchstone for understanding, wilderness reminds humans that they are not the most important thing in the world. As long as we continue to insist that we are, it becomes unbelievably difficult to deal with all these problems. Well, wilderness is one of the great reminders of that. And to that degree, it remains relevant, I think.

PAUL SABIN:

I’d like to thank all the panelists for their remarks.

[APPLAUSE]

[END]