Both Yale and the environment lost a great friend when Strachan Donnelley passed away on July 12, 2008.

I feel the void still. Strachan and I were classmates and friends at Yale (‘64). We called him Joe then, and we were in the same fraternity and “secret” society. Though we had stayed in touch over the years, we became truly close again after I began as dean in 1999. I had known Strachan as an environmental champion, but I quickly discovered Strachan the generous donor, Strachan the academic, Strachan the sportsman and Strachan the fellow part-time South Carolinian.

The Chicago Tribune captured his many sides when it wrote that the world had lost a “nature-loving philanthropist and fly-fishing philosopher.”

When I began as dean, I created the F&e5 New Century Fund to help get us off to a fast start. Before I could start fundraising for it, I noticed that it had $1 million in it— from Strachan. Other major gifts from Strachan to support scholarships for our students were soon to follow.

Strachan did love to fish, but he also really loved hunting. His commitment to conservation, his writings about Darwin and Leopold and his determination to be agent provocateur to those who “just don’t get it” were animated by seeing the ducks come in against a brightening sky.

So it is fitting that as part of our tribute to Strachan we publish here one of Strachan’s provocative essays on these themes. He wrote “Hunting Hennepin’s Windblown Bottom” in 2006 as part of his work as founder and president of the Center for Humans and Nature, an outstanding organization that he spent his last months ensuring would carry on. Brooke Hecht ’03 is now its acting president.

— Dean Gus Speth

For Strachan Donnelley, Hunting Was Being Fully Human

Aldo Leopold is the reigning patron saint of American conservation. His Land Ethic, the culmination of the many stories and essays of A Sand County Almanac, defines the human good and bad, right and wrong, in terms of our protection and promotion of the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. He enjoins us to become members and plain citizens, rather than conquerors, of the land. By land and biotic community he means much the same thing: the abiotic and biotic elements, including flora and fauna (above and below ground), of the ecosphere and the ecosystems in which we humans inescapably live. This natural biotic community involves its own temporally deep, evolutionary past and future.

That this mode of citizenship embraces our fundamental moral status is clear and straightforward to Leopold and, indeed, seems to fit well with our natural Darwinian origins and ongoing roots in nature. (Our moral status rests, in part, on developed and circumscribed capacities of freedom, responsibility and recognition of innumerable values, human and other.) Nevertheless, Leopold realized that the Land Ethic is a further extension and broadening of human ethics as it has culturally and historically evolved. The Land Ethic as a practical ethic of human communities was for the mid-20th century a civic ethics of the future. In our early 21st century, it still is. Few, if any, of us recognize the full reaches of our biotic responsibilities to ourselves and our Earthly home. This is a major cultural and moral problem of our times.

Why has it been so difficult to recognize ourselves as full-blown, charter members of the biotic community, with all the innumerable benefits; burdens and attendant moral obligations that go along with such membership? (We, along with all natural organisms, are undeniably “wild ones,” born of evolutionary and ecological processes.) Why do we characteristically consider ourselves outside of nature? Further, why was Leopold himself so prescient and farsighted.
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About our fundamental status in the scheme of things? Others knew their Darwin and evolutionary biology, with their seeming implications—philosophical and moral.

I think a clue to Leopold's moral pioneering and originality can be found in A Sand County Almanac and precisely in passages our trouble so many of his readers and sympathetic critics. Leopold unapologetically tells several stories of hunting and fishing, including the shooting of the wild mother wolf in "Thinking Like a Mountain," from which he gained intimations of the importance of large predators to their ecosystems. Leopold describes killing his first wild (black) duck; his crafty luring, hooking and landing of a large wild brook trout; his love of autumn woodcock hunting, as well as his delight in their springtime mating dance. (He learned to take only so many woodcock in the fall as to allow enough dancers for

the ensuing spring—a fundamental insight for any adequate conservation ethics.) Despite the robust moral demands of the Land Ethic, Leopold never condemns hunting and fishing, though he does claim them to be atavistic sport. Why this moral silence? So question many of Leopold's sympathizers and critics alike. Is this a sign of moral immaturity or lack of insight? Or, rather, is there not something deeper and more nuanced afoot, something that escapes Leopold's more urban or polis-minded readers?

I will not defend Leopold by quoting, explicating or interpreting chapter and verse of A Sand County Almanac. Such a critical, academic enterprise would not forcibly get to the bottom of the matter. Rather, I will heed Leopold's example and tell my own stories. In particular, I revisit my own youth and early days of duck hunting near Hennepin, Ill., which is in a historical, storied duck-hunting and decoy-carving area along the Illinois River—the home of the Illinois River carvers Robert Elliston, Charles Perdew and others who served duck hunters, private and market, of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nearby Hennepin are Henry, LaSalle, Peru and other rural towns, which, like Cairo further south, have their own uniquely Illinoisan and Midwestern pronunciations. My father owned a farm with two small lakes in Hennepin, meant for fall duck hunting. The farm was named Windblown Bottom. My early duck hunting had its distinctively human hues. I started hunting when I was 8, 10 or 12—I cannot remember exactly—under the rigorous tutelage of my father. I was given a single-barreled, 20-gauge shotgun with a hammer cock. I was to learn gun safety and the art of shooting before moving on to double-barreled or pump shotguns, which everyone else used.

Family weekend trips to Hennepin included my mother, several dogs (Labrador Retrievers), friends of my parents and occasionally my brother, Elliott, four years older and already an accomplished hunter. We always stayed at the widow Isa Turner's house in Hennepin, which though the county seat, was a small town, everyone knowing—and watching—everyone else. For dinner, we invariably went to the Ranch House, the local supper club, where we were joined by Paul, a local contractor, and Buttons, the local police chief, and their families. Paul and Buttons were our hunting guides, both seasoned duck callers. The dinners were lively, jovial, if not ribald, and there were many Isa Turner house stories, including guests peeing out upstairs windows because it was too cold to go downstairs to the bathroom. There was also a weekend with an eccentric cousin, Thorne, who bought a new car every six months (he had a Lancia sports car at the time), driving with his head out the window as we left for Windblown Bottom in the pre-dawn darkness, cursing his windshield wipers for not working. I mentioned that the windows were merely fogged on the inside, wiped my side, and looked at the road ahead. Cousin Thorne would have none of my youthful suggestion and braved the six-mile ride in a cold morning wind.

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On rare occasions, high-flying pintail would come over the lake. Mere specks in the sky, the pintail would set and cup their wings, masterfully carving their way down to the water. Their commanding performance transformed the natural landscape of the lake and its surroundings into a background stage for their art. (Such pintail shows are always magical.) Other times, we settled for watching butterflies and small song birds.

I remember well the first duck that I shot. I was hunting with my father. It was bitterly cold, 8 degrees Fahrenheit, with a 40-mph wind. A single duck came in from the right side of the blind, flying downwind. I stuck my gun out the left side and shot. The bird dropped dead in the water and floated against the ice. It was an American goldeneye. (It is the only goldeneye I have ever seen while hunting.) I looked at my father. As I remember, neither of us said a thing.

Another time, I was shooting with my mother, Mimi. She was always more interested in the dogs, especially petting her favorite female Labrador, Widgeon, than in shooting. A flock of teal landed in the decoys. I got up, the birds flushed and I shot. Three teal fell into the water. Looking up from Widgeon, Mimi shouted, “Great shot!” and sent Widgeon out to retrieve the birds. I looked around the lake, then back at the teal in the water, filled with an adolescent son’s pride.

A curious thing characteristically would happen as the days warmed up. I would leave the blind in my hip boots and wander alone, wading amid the willows, looking for potholes and wounded ducks. Often I found them. They would flush and, with luck, I would shoot them and tuck them in my hunting coat.

On one such excursion, I wandered over to the nearby smaller lake and climbed into an empty blind. I was alone, with no decoys, but I did have a duck call. (I was very much the rookie duck caller.) A flight of 40 or so mallards flew over. I called. They turned. I kept calling and, after a number of swings over the lake, they lit in the water in front of me. I cannot remember whether I shot or not. No matter, I, all by myself, had decoyed wild birds on their home turf, a solitary bottomland lake along the Illinois River. I was visited by a feeling of excitement never before experienced.

Enough of youthful memories and stories. What do they mean? What relation do they have to recognizing our membership in Leopold’s biotic community? A lot, I think, and certainly worth exploring. Were these hunting trips introductions to nature and its wildness (here, wild ducks)? Yes. Were these trips further bondings with my family, with a new, enhanced familial status? Yes. Now I could bring something of my own to the table. Did I feel remorse and pangs of guilt when I shot the ducks and looked at their unimaginably beautiful, feathered forms lifeless on the floor of the blind? Yes. (Hunter’s emotions are decidedly not simple.)

But why did duck hunting, including killing the birds, not morally repel me then? And why does it not to this day, though I have lost the youthful trigger itch? In particular, why did pothole hunting and, especially, calling the ducks to the blind so deeply stir me?

At the time, the experiences were emotionally, if not spiritually, deep, though more or less mindless. But that was over 50 years ago. For me, they were pre-Darwinian and pre-Leopoldian. Now, I can hazard a guess at what was happening to me. I was experiencing deep, well-honed predator instincts, interests and satisfactions. I was implicated in predator-prey relations that psychologically and behaviorally bound me to natural landscapes, to evolutionary and ecological time and space. Never again could I deny an aboriginal membership in historically deep biotic communities.

Leopold could not live without wild things. Neither can I. Perhaps for both of us, hunting and fishing afforded an

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explicit, specific and decisive entry into the biotic community and prompted life-long philosophical and moral reflections. In one sense, the biotic community and predator-prey relations are amoral, natural realities and processes spawned by the Crafty Blind Tinkerer (Darwin's nature). However, for us humans, biotic communities and natural processes have come to hold a deep, complex cultural and moral significance. We know, however imperfectly, that these processes are how Earthly life, including human life, comes into being—an Earthly life laced with innumerable values moral and other (aesthetic and spiritual, centrally concerning life's innumerable and incredible forms, capacities and interactions). This amounts to stunning, bedrock philosophic and spiritual revelation. We also know that all these values, forms, capacities and interactions are mortal, finite and vulnerable to harm.

Why might recognition of our aboriginal status in nature, our membership in the biotic community—prompted by hunting, fishing or whatever other means—matter so much? Precisely because the recognition so radically underscores our moral situation and demands that we face squarely ultimate responsibilities. There are several forms of stewardship or caretaker ethics which enjoin us to care for the Earth and all the creatures that dwell therein. But if we do not explicitly and emphatically count ourselves as among Earth's creatures and as integral participants in Earthly communities, we all too easily let ourselves off the moral hook. We consider nature as not essentially mattering to us humans. However, if we own up to our membership in the biotic community, we must recognize that we are a central and significant factor in immediate and future threats to nature and, ultimately, to ourselves.

For example, there are too many of us human ones (6-plus billion and growing) in Earth's biotic communities, consuming too many of its material resources and wreaking too much havoc to ongoing evolutionary and ecological processes. What are we going to do about this daunting human overreaching and natural injustice? No doubt the Earth and evolutionary, ecological processes will survive our human onslaught, perhaps with a new abundance of biological species, but at what cost? What goodness and values, including those of human life, painstakingly evolved over natural (evolutionary, ecological and geological) and cultural time, will be lost? Ought we to collectively condone such moral and spiritual guilt, such sins against Earthly life and being?

If deep, existential recognition of our charter membership in the biotic community would help to stem this disastrous moral slide, then we must morally educate, or re-educate, ourselves in a hurry. If hunting and fishing, among other means, are effective avenues to explicit recognition of membership in the biotic community and its attendant moral responsibilities, then readers of Leopold should move past their ethical puzzlement and ponder anew his and others' hunting and fishing in their widest, biotic-community contexts. Nature's complex, dynamic and uncontrollable interconnectedness and interactions defy moral simplicity, easily drawn bright lines between good and bad, right and wrong. If we are morally going to return to our native home and community, we need to grow up, culturally and morally.

In marginalizing our membership in biotic communities and, specifically, our implication in predator-prey relations, we marginalize central, fundamental moral issues that already confront us. Let me be more specific, at risk of repetition.

In the United States and elsewhere, whether by intentional design or not, we have extirpated large predators from their native landscapes and ecosystems, with real, usually negative, consequences. Consider metropolitan areas—Chicago, New York and others—with newly engendered species and ecosystem problems, for example, an overabundance of deer, continued on next page
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Canada geese and even wild turkeys. This overabundance threatens regional flora and fauna, as well as human well-being (Lyme disease, car accidents and more). What should we do in the absence of former large predators that were a natural check to species overabundance? Arguably, we must take over their roles in keeping regional ecosystems healthy and resilient. For the sake of the biotic community as a whole, we should cull the superabundance by whatever means we deem most morally appropriate and acceptable. The roles of these large predators have become our moral responsibilities.

But this is only the beginning of our responsibilities as members of the biotic community. Actually, it is not the deer, geese or turkeys that are the greatest threats to regional landscapes and ecosystems. That prize emphatically goes to us. Again, despite the significant, innumerable and distinctive values of human existence, what are we going to do about our own superabundance and overpopulation of biotic communities, our overuse of their life-giving resources, our pollution and disturbance of natural structures and processes? As members of biotic communities, from the regional to the global, as in fact the community’s most effective large predators, we cannot in good conscience evade these facts and attendant responsibilities. Of course, this is exactly what we are doing. Whether out of ignorance, neglect or willful amoral intention, the reigning large predators (ourselves) are undeniably and inexcusably irresponsible. Here is an issue that we must not duck, but resolve humanly—that is, responsibly.

Consider further ramifications of our present irresponsibility. Given our status in evolutionary, ecological and biotic communities, to undermine biotic communities is to undermine and threaten the future of humanity, its very bodily being, the quality of its life and whatever important capacities and values—from the bodily, psychic and mental to the moral, artistic, aesthetic, spiritual and other—it harbors. Robust, biologically and culturally diverse communities are as necessary to our inner selfhood and well-being as they are to our physically active bodies. We, our whole selves, emerge out of the world— natural and cultural—and do so ongoing until we die. To impoverish biological and cultural communities is to impoverish ourselves.

In short, to continue in our present cultural, political, economic and moral ways—not to recognize ourselves as predatory organisms with a long evolutionary, ecological and Earthly past, that is, as members of biotic communities—amounts to a form of nihilism, a willful destruction of Earthly, including human, values. If some find this ironic, odd or, indeed, blasphemous, so be it. It is, as far as we can see, the truth.

Did my own road of moral and philosophic reflection begin, at least in part, in hunting Hennepin’s Windblown Bottoms? If so, what role does hunting, fishing or predation, in general, have in the genesis of civically important philosophic and moral landscapes (worldviews)? Leopold and other Darwinian naturalists, as champions of temporally deep biotic communities, would no doubt answer unequivocally a great deal, certainly more than urban, human-centered citizens might think. (The religious practices and rituals of traditional, especially hunter and gatherer, societies evidence as much.) The relatively unexplored relations of human predation (an inescapable fact of our existence) to the recognition of our deepest Earthly, moral responsibilities is a matter worth further pondering, hopefully informing evermore adequate practical and civic action.