"The Value of a Varmint"

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It is quite likely that all of you here have heard of, if not already thought deeply about, Aldo Leopold's land ethic. The most famous expression of this, located in his profoundly influential book, *A Sand Country Almanac*, in the capstone essay of that work titled simply enough, "The Land Ethic," sounds like this: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."[1] This oft-quoted statement deserves all the recognition it has received, for it is at once both succinct and fecund. Repeated again and again in the environmental ethics literature, this aphorism is presented *as if* it represents Leopold's entire philosophy. Personally, though, I find that the sentence expresses an ecological ethic rather inadequately. Though this one sentence does define well the ecologist's fundamental insight regarding the necessary interdependence of biotic (and abiotic) parts within a whole natural system, and though it identifies criteria necessary to the healthy functioning of such a system of interdependencies, the aphorism lacks something really quite fundamental to an ethic. Or so I believe, and if I am right Leopold, himself, would agree with me. Indeed, it surprises me to no end that this aphorism is presented *as if* it expresses the whole of Leopold's ethical theory, since it only implicitly refers to the ethical relation of the person to that which she values. "We can be ethical," Leopold says elsewhere in the essay, "only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in."[2]

[1] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949, 224-25.
[2] *Ibid*., 214.

It is true that the capstone essay plays an important role in the book as a whole, since it articulates – with a poignant precision – the scientific conception of an ecological norm and the obligation to maintain this. But there is precious little in that essay which speaks to me directly in terms of what I feel, love and, dare I say, have faith in. "The Land Ethic" essay addresses itself to my intellect but remains limited in that orientation. It does not speak to my whole person. Nor is it meant to, and I take some solace in that. For the whole disparate collection of reflections and essays that make up the book has this vital task. "The Land Ethic" essay is, itself, only part of a greater whole. Its primary function is to detail the evolution of our ethics to the possible but ecologically necessary inclusion of the broader biotic community within the boundary of our moral concern, a community in which the human is but a plain member and citizen. So to comprehend the fullness of Leopold's ethic, one must understand the capstone essay and its aphoristic expression of the land ethic in the context of the work as a whole. "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology," Leopold explains in the forward of his book. "But that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics."[3]

In this short presentation, I would like to address the range and extent of Leopold's land ethic. My question is whether or not there is a place for the intrinsic valuation of individuals in such an ethic. Particularly does the land ethic include within its boundary of concern such troublesome wild "predatory animals [as Leopold describes in his 1915 essay, "The Varmint Question," who are] continuing to eat the cream off the stock grower's profits"[4] Or is it the case, as Leopold himself suggests in the next breath, that it "hardly needs to be argued that,

[3] *Ibid*., vii.
[4] Aldo Leopold, "The Varmint Question." In *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*. Edited by Susan L. Flader and J. Baird Callicott. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 47.

with our game supply as low as it is, a reduction in the predatory population"[5] is not only permissible but, more so, prescribed. Stated simply, my question echoes a criticism advanced against an ecological ethics by Tom Regan in his book, *The Case for Animal* Rights. Is an ecological ethic fascistic?[6] Does such an ethic prescribe the extirpation, if not of an entire species, then of individuals and populations of individual animals for the benefit of a whole to which those individuals, populations or species belong as parts or members?

Now rather than consider animals in general, my focus today centers on the so-called varmints or vermin[7] as they were called by the game managers of Leopold's early years. In the trophic scale, varmints are either omnivores or pure carnivores. Specifically, varmints are those derogatory animals whose appetites include the desire for animals (or plant stocks) that are economically valuable to us. During the decade before and for decades after Leopold published "The Vamint Question" in 1915, this country oversaw a program of extermination of such "useless" creatures as the wolf, coyote, lion, bear, badger, bobcat, fox, skunk and other predator populations. These species experienced staggering loses; ironically ramping up during the period the Progressive Conservation Movement came to ascent and established into law some of our most important environmental utilization and protection legislation. In point of fact, the Federal Government tasked itself in an unprecedented move with the goal of reducing

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] "The implications of this view include the clear prospect that the individual may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good, in the name of 'the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.' It is difficult to see how the notion of the rights of the individual could find a home within a view that, emotive connotations to one side, might be fairly dubbed 'environmental fascism.'" Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, 361-362.

[7] "As with us, the shiftless sportsman on unmanaged range blames the game shortage on 'vermin,' which, we are soberly informed, hunt year-around." Aldo Leopold, "Farm Game Management in Silesia." In *For the Health of the Land. Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings.* Edited by J. Baird Callicott and Eric T. Freyfolgle. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999, 56.

or eliminating these varmint populations from the American landscape during these decades. "Instead of relying on the vamint-blasting frontiersman, the government itself undertook to eliminate the predator once and for all. The agency appointed to carry out this mission was the Bureau of the Biological Survey in the Department of Agriculture," first established in 1905.[8] Leopold's aim in writing the "The Varmint Question" in 1915 was to advocate for an alliance between stockmen and Federal game managers in their program of extermination. "Would not everybody, except the varmints, be benefitted from such a move?" he asks.[9]

Federal game managers at this time, Leopold himself among them, offered little argument to justify this policy of extermination. Their reasoning was simple. Reflecting on his own views while he worked for the Biological Survey, he captures the argument succinctly. "I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise."[10]

Concentrating on varmints allows me to achieve two goals at once. First, it allows me to trace the development of Leopold views on animals from his biological survey work in the Forest Service during the early years of the last century to his last years as Professor Emeritus in the Department of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison[11]. Thus I can show that the land ethic, which Leopold developed over the course of his life, does not

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[8] Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 262.
[9] Aldo Leopold, "The Varmint Question." In *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 48.
[10] Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain." In *A Sound County Almanac and Sketches Here and There.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1949, 130.
[11] "The Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology had its origin in 1933 when the University of Wisconsin-Madison created a Chair in Game Management for Professor Aldo Leopold. Six years later, Leopold formed the Department of Wildlife Management, the first academic department in the world dedicated to the emerging field of wildlife management." http://forestandwildlifeecology.wisc.edu/department-mission-and-history

condone the sort of practices he, himself, engaged in as a young forester and game manager. Second, the varmint question allows me to examine Regan's criticism directly, even if the policy of extermination is precluded under a land ethic. The question remains nevertheless whether or not individuals may be sacrificed, indeed whether or not we are obligated to sacrifice individuals, for the sake of the health of the community as a whole.

Given my limited time, I cannot detail all the contours of Leopold's transformation. So I will content myself merely to point out the fundamental shift in his thinking regarding wild animals. In "The Varmint Question" of 1915 Leopold thought of animal management primarily terms of recreational and agricultural development. Hence his concern centers on varmints. Consequent to his international travels, first to Germany in 1935 and then to Mexico in 1936, he developed a broader wildlife management philosophy that sought to understand and maintain "those species of wilderness game which do not adapt themselves to economic land-use, or of migratory birds which are owned in common, or of non-game forms classed as predators, or rare plant associations which must compete with economic plants and livestock, or in general of all wild native forms which fly at large or have only an esthetic and scientific value to man."[12] This transformation from a narrower game conception to a broader wildlife management philosophy determines his mature view of conservation as concerned both with land-health and resource-supply.[13] He came to understand the necessary integration of game, or I should say, wildlife management and silviculture, and this understanding underlies his idea

[12] Aldo Leopold, "Threatened Species." In *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 231.
[13] Aldo Leopold, "Conservation – In Whole or in Part." In *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 318.

of land health in terms of the "functional integrity" of the land organism. In his mature writings, resource husbandry thus takes a secondary role to more comprehensive ecosystem management practices undertaken by local peoples in consultation with trained ecologists.

While the land ethic precludes the extirpation of animals simply for economic reasons, it still prescribes the sacrifice of individuals for the sake of the community to which they belong. Furthermore, I agree with Regan that "environmental fascism and the rights view are like oil and water: they don't mix."[14] However, I disagree with his analysis that understands an ecological ethic to be a species of fascism. Admittedly, the paradigmatic rights holders in an ecological ethic are not restricted to individuals as is the case for Regan. Rights extend to populations and even to species, possibly. Furthermore, where Regan discounts plant life as inanimate and so not entitled to rights, an ecological ethic extends to boundary of moral concern to include these organisms.

Returning to the theme with which I began, it is inadequate to think an ecological ethic limits itself to the conception of the ecological norm defined by Leopold's aphorism, i.e., to the stability, integrity, and beauty of the biotic community. This can be seen in what is perhaps Leopold's most powerful essay of *A Sand County Almanac*, "Thinking Like a Mountain." Close analysis of this piece shows two distinct themes at work in his argument. The main theme concerns Leopold's case for the ecological understanding of the predator within the matrix of relations defining the land. However, a subordinate but just as powerful theme concerns the intrinsic valuation of the animal he encounters. In the piece, he recounts seeing a wolf pack while eating his lunch high on a rim rock. Bear in mind, this took place during his days working

[14] Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, 362.

with the Biological Survey. He and his buddy take aim and shoot to kill all the members of the pack. He reaches one of the surviving members to "watch a fierce green fire dying in her eye."[15] Reflecting on this event years later he notes that we all seek security, peace, and prosperity. "A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps a requisite to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run."[16]

Tom Regan decries an ecological ethic because it subordinates the rights of the individual to the functional integrity of the whole biotic community. But this analysis ignores the genuine ethical content of a land ethic, i.e., the loving and respectful relation to the land, to the individuals and populations that make up the community of life in which we flourish. As Leopold in his mature days advises the ecological farmer, "He should hate no native animal or plant, but only excess or extinction in any one of them."[17] The diminutive draba, which announces a new spring in the rhythm of life as it opens its pedals to the sun, remains outside both a utilitarian calculus and the deontology of animal rights theories. For the ecologically minded person, however, she extends her moral concern to even this lowly creature.

Theoretically, I understand the role this sort of creature plays in the system of living beings and the obligation this imposes upon me. This is the case the capstone essay makes. But while I as an ethical being stand before the individual, looking in her eyes or seeing her burst forth anew with the pregnant spring, I stand before her in awe of her individual beauty and with respect for her fragility. This is the same moral feeling Leopold experienced as he watched the fierce green fire dying in the eyes of the wolf. This feeling of awe, respect, and love, which

[15] Aldo Leopoold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," 130.
[16] *Ibid.*, 133.
[17] Aldo Leopold, "Conservation – In Whole or in Part." 318.

is fundamental to the intrinsic valuation of individuals, even of varmints, is absent in "The Land Ethic" essay. But it pervades the work as a whole.