Essay Draft 1

Emma Simmons February 24th 2014

Aldo Leopold was an American author, ecologist and environmentalist, who’s pioneering work in the field of ecology, was far ahead of its time. He his most famous work, a collection of essays titled, The Sand County Almanac, was published in 1949. In his essays he explores the natural history and beauty of North American ecosystem, the animals that live there and the destruction of these ecosystems at the beginning of the 20th century. One such essay, Marshland Elegy, is an example of the destruction of natural beauty in the name of human progress. In this particular essay, Leopold delivers a sobering message about human impact on nature. He also warns that when man attempts to change, tame or even preserve nature, it ends in destruction.

Leopold describes the early years of civilization on the marsh and how the ecosystem functioned before the march of progress destroyed it. “These haymeadow days were the Arcadian age for marsh dwellers. Man and beast, plant and soil lived on and with each other in mutual toleration, to the mutual benefit of all.” In instance, Leopold emphasizes the connection and symbiosis man once felt with both crane and marsh.

The marsh was an integral part of life and needed neither preservation nor modernization. The problem that Leopold describes came when society tried to change the marshes. “They did not include soil, plants, or birds in their ideas of mutuality. The dividends of such a balanced economy were too modest.” This kind of thinking lead to the destruction of the once cherished marshland and the people surrounding it, because attempting to tame and alter the wildness of the marshes leads to their destruction.

The engineers saw potential for greater returns from the marshes. They believed the changes would enhance the marsh and make it more fruitful “They envisaged farms not only around, but in the marsh. An epidemic of ditch-digging and land-booming set in.” Unfortunately this attempt at manipulating nature would not help people but hinder them.

Leopold describes this ultimate downfall of the people, marsh land and the cranes, when “the high priests of progress” forgot about nature and continued their projects. These projects resulted in the ruin of the prized land. “Great pockmarks were burned into field and meadow, the scars reaching down to the sands of the old lake, peat-covered these hundred centuries.” Leopold describes the land as if it were plagued with an illness, which it was in a sense, because it suffering modernization. By altering the marsh, man can only be destroyed the thing he prized.

When the problem of the vanishing marshes reached its height, the government stepped in. One would imagine that thinking designed to fix the marshlands would solve the issue and it did at first “A counter-epidemic of reflooding set in. Government bought land, resettled farmers, plugged ditches wholesale. Slowly the bogs are re-wetting.” The marshes where returning, however, so was the problematic idea that altering nature would be beneficial.

The government and the conservationists decided to building roads would benefit the marsh and its inhabitants, whether or not it was in the best interests of the marsh or the people. “A roadless marsh is seemingly as worthless to the alphabetical conservationist as an undrained one was to the empire-builders.” The conservationists had different goals then their predecessors, but the result was surprisingly similar. The marshes still required the intervention of man in their minds, and Leopold believes that this kind of thinking only leads to ruin.

Though the conservationists did some good, Leopold believes that the method of conservation is ultimately flawed. “All conservation of wildness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish.” In this instance, Leopold writes about the sad paradox of wanting and needing to “fondle” nature in order to understand it, when in reality this can often lead to its destruction. The attempts to preserve something that is wild hinges on taming it and implementing order. This kind of intervention destroys what is most beautiful about nature, its wildness. The idea of conservation is not bad at its core, but its implementation can sometimes have the same destructive effect as modernization and industry.

Leopold makes the sobering claim that when we try to change nature, we only destroy the wild beauty we attempted to preserve. The industrialists destroyed Leopold’s beloved marshes and the conservationists attempted to save it, but that had almost the same result. He describes the paradox of cherishing nature, and by cherishing it we destroy it. Man destroys nature by attempting to tame it, and ultimately we should just leave it alone.