“The Land Ethic” by Aldo Leopold

Honors Discussion “Flow”

1. **In the chatbox,** write down your question and your passage selection
2. **Students: Skim through this handout,** reading the summary, key terms and discussion questions.
3. **Summarization:** I’ll assign you each one section of the essay to summarize
4. **Discussion:** We’ll start with your questions and passages

Overall Summary of “The Land Ethic”

Leopold was a naturalist, not a philosopher. There is much scholarly debate about what exactly Leopold's land ethic asserts and how he argues for it. At its core, the land ethics claims (1) that humans should view themselves as plain members and citizens of biotic communities, not as "conquerors" of the land; (2) that we should extend ethical consideration to ecological wholes ("soils, waters, plants, and animals"), (3) that our primary ethical concern should not be with individual plants or animals, but with the healthy functioning of whole biotic communities, and (4) that the "summary moral maxim" of ecological ethics is that we should seek to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Beyond this, scholars disagree about the extent to which Leopold rejected traditional human-centered approaches to the environment and how literally he intended his basic moral maxim to be applied. They also debate whether Leopold based his land ethic primarily on human-centered interests, as many passages in *A Sand County Almanac* suggest, or whether he placed significant weight on the intrinsic value of nature. (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_ethic)

Key Vocabulary Terms

Ecology: (noun) The branch of biology that deals with the relations of biotic organisms to one another and to abiotic surroundings; The study of the interaction of people with their environment.

Biotic: (**adj)** meaning of or related to life, are living factors. Ex: Plants, animals, fungi, and bacteria.

Expedient: (adj) Convenient and practical, although possibly through improper or immoral means.

Chattel: (noun) A personal possession- usually used as a synonym for slave.

Inhered: (adj) Synonymous with inherent and innate. These three adjectives mean existing in a person or thing from birth or origin. Something that is *innate* or inhered seems essential to the nature, character, or constitution of a person or thing.

Despoliation: (noun) The act of despoiling or the condition of being despoiled or robbed/plundered.

Circumlocution: (noun) The use of many words where fewer would do, esp. in a deliberate attempt to be vague or evasive.

Fallacy: (noun) A mistaken belief, esp. one based on an unsound argument.

Alhambra: (noun) a palace and fortress complex located in Granada, Spain. It was originally constructed as a fortress in 889,[1] and was converted into a royal palace in 1333.

Ex Cathedra: (adj & adv) With the authority derived from one's office or position. It is Latin and literally means "from the chair". Example: the pope would speak ex cathedra from his "chair" or position of authority as head of the Catholic Church.

Extirpate (verb): root out and destroy completely

Mosaic Decalogue: The Ten Commandments in Christianity claimed to be passed down from God to Moses (a prophet)

Discussion Questions

1. Let's break down his basic outline for his essay. How does he ORGANIZE his argument/essay and what are the major arguments/pieces of evidence he uses throughout each section?
   - Introduction: Pages 201-202
   - "Ethical Sequence": Pages 202-203- Ainsley
   - "Community Concept": Pages 203-207- Ava K
   - Ecological Sequence: Pages 207-210- BB
   - Substitute for a Land Ethic: Pages 210-214- Finn and Rosie
   - Land Pyramid: 214-218- Sarah and Vinnie

2. What is the purpose of this essay? What is Leopold's goal? (p. 203)

3. Why does Leopold start off talking about slavery?

4. **"The Ethical Sequence":** On page 202, Leopold writes, "An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation". *What does this mean? How*

are ecological ethics and philosophical ethics similar? Then, how does he use this definition to defend his "land ethic"?

5. Consider Leopold's statement: "A land ethic changes the role of humans from conqueror of the land community to plain members and citizens of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such..."(204).

- *What are examples in history where you can see how the conqueror mentality led to the conqueror's ultimate destruction?*
- *Do you think that our mentality toward the Earth today is one of conquerors and will that lead to our civilizations' ultimate demise?*
- *Lastly, How would you apply his ethic as quoted above in practice? Think of a real life example that this ethic might apply and explain how you would use it in that context.*

6. Leopold wrote in the 1940's, "The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations." What does that mean? Do you think that is still how we as a society view land today?

7. Leopold says the land ethic is extending a community's sensibilities to all members of the community, nonhuman as well as human. What would that mean in your life or community? In other words, how would it change your perception and or interaction with the land, animals, etc…?

8. What does this quote/idea mean to you and do you agree?: "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." Is Aldo Leopold articulating Utilitarian views here? Would be be ok with sacrificing individual human lives/liberties in order to preserve the whole?

9. In the "Land Ethic," Leopold said, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relationship [with land] can exist without love, respect, admiration, and a high regard for its value." Does the beauty of a certain place/building/person/creature inspire you to protect it or do you think its economic value or utility to us matters more?

10. Overall, what are the STRENGTHS and LIMITATIONS of "The Land Ethic"? In other words, how do you see a land ethic working well and how do you see it not working well? (*Think about his discussion of the responsibility of private landowners and businesses to execute the land ethic in their use and ownership of land).*