

## BOOK REVIEW

# Roberta L. Millstein, *The Land Is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium*

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The terms *sustainability*, *biodiversity*, *deep ecology*, *climate change*, and *anthropocene* do not appear in Aldo Leopold's 'Land Ethic'. Leopold did not use these terms because they did not yet exist. Even the word *environment*, which Leopold uses once in 'The Land Ethic', referred only to surroundings in general; it would not mean what we think of as *the environment* until 1948, the year *A Sand County Almanac* went to press. Such is Leopold's remoteness from us in the third decade of the twenty-first century. In the nearly eighty years since its publication, *A Sand County Almanac* has become a literary classic and 'The Land Ethic' is 'the most widely cited source in the literature of environmental philosophy' (quoted on p. 6). Of what possible use, though, could an eighty-year-old book be to ecologists, philosophers, land managers and policymakers working in a world so radically changed from Leopold's?

Roberta L. Millstein contends that 'The Land Ethic' is 'the environmental ethic for our time' (p. 26). In Millstein's reckoning, Leopold's science and philosophy remain useful to environmental philosophers, ecologists and policymakers because the main concepts in 'The Land Ethic' – interdependence, land community and land health – remain philosophically well founded and scientifically supported. Millstein argues that philosophical and ecological critiques of Leopold have either oversimplified or misunderstood his famous claim – 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community' – and have turned it into an inaccurate 'summary maxim' of his entire argument (p. 11).

To explain Leopold's understanding of interdependence, Millstein points to a remarkable diagram that Leopold drew in 1942. It shows that he understood interdependence to be a complex food and energy 'tangle' or 'maze' rather than a simple food chain and that he includes human beings and abiotic elements in this tangle of relations. At the centre of the schematic is the farmer. Connections of predation, exploitation, services and parasitism radiate outward to connect horned owls, soil, rabbits, lawyers, ragweed, rock, a union secretary and the *Protocalliphora* fly to one another.

To understand these interactions in particular places, contemporary ecologists use either an 'ecosystem approach', which emphasizes matter and energy flows, or a 'community approach', which emphasizes interactions between species. Millstein shows that Leopold's concept of a 'land community' synthesizes these two contemporary frameworks. But such an expansive and ephemeral view of land community (attending to both energy flows and species interactions) creates a problem; the community under observation could easily spiral out to include the entire Earth in a web of connections. While some ecologists

have argued for regarding the whole planet as a kind of mega-organism, Millstein argues for a more bounded understanding of Leopoldian land community that recognizes ‘steep gradients in the flux and flow of matter and energy and/or ... discontinuities or steep gradients in interactions between populations of different species’ (p. 77). This issue of the boundaries of land communities is an ontological question with significant ethical consequences because Millstein accepts Kenneth Goodpaster’s premise that ‘an entity can only be said to be morally considerable – that is, deserving of moral respect, part of the moral sphere – if it has interests’ (pp. 104–5). A mere collection or assemblage does not, in this understanding, have interests that can be harmed, or moral rights that can be violated.

Just before turning her attention to the ways in which ‘The Land Ethic’ could lead policymakers out of difficult environmental management problems, Millstein poses a new summary statement to replace the summary maxim she debunks in the book’s first chapter. Instead of glossing ‘The Land Ethic’ as: ‘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’ (quoted on p. 11), Millstein summarizes:

In addition to the obligations that we already have toward other human individuals and to our human communities, act so as to protect and promote the capacity of land communities (soils, waters, plants, and animals, understood collectively) for self-renewal, that is, their health, implying respect for both community members and the community as a whole. (p. 114)

Millstein’s updated summary statement may well be more nuanced and more resistant to contemporary philosophical and ecological critiques than the summary maxim she rejects, but it is certainly more of a mouthful. Because it is less artfully phrased, I suspect it will be less likely to take hold in the imaginations of readers eager to love the land like Leopold did and like many contemporary environmental philosophers and ecologists seek to do. Herein lies my chief critique of the book. In creating a new (paraphrased) summary statement, Millstein fails to include the ‘beauty’ that was so central to Leopold’s original statement: ‘A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and *beauty* of the biotic community’ (emphasis added). But for one short paragraph where Millstein acknowledges beauty as one of ‘other arguments for the Land Ethic’ (pp. 119–20), *The Land Is Our Community* disconnects Leopold’s aesthetics from his ethics and his ecology. Would we care about defending ‘The Land Ethic’s’ philosophy or Leopold’s scientific honor if he had not written so beautifully about the land around his shack on the bank of the Wisconsin river? I think not. Leopold’s scientific insights and his philosophy are intimately connected to the beauty he saw and wrote about.

*The Land Is Our Community* is a trim volume that Millstein wrote for ecologists, philosophers and historians of science. I am a literary scholar, and I recognize that the book cannot be all things to all readers across academic disciplines. In the end, my complaint about aesthetics is not so much a critique as a suggestion for the scholarship that will inevitably follow *The Land Is Our Community*.