

LESSONS FROM LEOPOLD

A black and white photograph of Aldo Leopold, wearing a hat and a jacket, looking down at something in his hands. The photo is partially obscured by the text and graphics on the page.

WHAT IS LAND STEWARDSHIP?

BY STEVE NELLE

Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation (www.aldoleopold.org)

Individual ethics is the basis of land conservation. It is hard to make a man do a thing which does not spring naturally from his own personal sense of right and wrong.

A land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience.

Conservation can accomplish its objectives only when it springs from an impelling conviction on the part of private landowners.

The quotes above from Aldo Leopold form the basis for what we now call land stewardship.

The subject of land stewardship has gained a great deal of positive attention in the last decade, but although the term is commonly used, it has seldom been clearly defined.

When a phrase comes into such popular use, there is a danger of it becoming merely an overused buzzword, obscuring some of its true meaning. This lesson will offer a definition of land stewardship based on the ideas of Leopold and examples from Texas landowners.

First, we should mention what land stewardship is not. Land stewardship is not a list of practices, such as brush control, prescribed burning, rotational grazing or native grass planting. These may be components of good land management, but they are not synonymous with stewardship. Land stewardship is not about awards, gate signs, banquets and public recognition. Land stewardship is about a person's relationship to the land. Stewardship is about who you are on the inside.

Leopold stated that true conservation springs from inner convictions about the land. He proposed that these inner convictions originate from an ecological conscience that defines right and wrong. Leopold taught that stewardship is driven

by land ethics, and these in turn are what drive our decisions and activities on the land.

I have had the privilege of working with many Texas landowners over the last 40 years and have learned a lot from them. While not all landowners demonstrate responsible land ethics, those that do are living examples of what genuine land stewardship looks like. They have taught me that the land steward is primarily a caretaker of the land. They inwardly consider themselves to be the custodians of the land entrusted to them rather than owners of the land. I have observed a strong sense of humility, respect, admiration and love expressed toward the land by these stewards.

Based on my experiences with Texas land stewards and the ideas of Aldo Leopold, I offer the following as a definition of land stewardship: Land stewardship is a deeply held inner conviction that compels and inspires people to be responsible caretakers of the land entrusted to them. The motivation for this stewardship is based on three essential things: present benefits to the landowner; benefits to future generations; and the benefits that accrue to society outside the boundary of the land. Genuine land stewardship has a strong element of benevolence. The land steward realizes that what they do on the land benefits others in ways that may or

may not bring financial return.

In 1949, Leopold lamented that as far as he could tell, no ethical obligations toward the land were being taught by schools, agricultural colleges, land bureaus or extension services. This deficiency no doubt slowed the development of stewardship ethics in America. But fast forward 60 plus years, and that gap is now being filled; and in Texas, TWA has taken the primary leadership role. Our TWA leaders, staff and directors understand what genuine land stewardship is.

As we begin a new year, it is fitting that we remind ourselves that a strong emphasis on conservation and stewardship is one of TWA's cornerstones. If you have not done so recently, take a few minutes to explore the Conservation Legacy tab on the TWA website. Here you will find a summary of the many programs, events and initiatives designed by TWA to promote land stewardship to youth and adults.

Everyone— city folks, country folks, children, adults, hunters, birders, fishermen and anyone else who benefits from healthy land—needs to understand the importance of land stewardship. Pitch in and volunteer when the opportunity arises. There is no issue more important to the future of Texas than the conservation and stewardship of our lands, waters and wildlife. 🌿

WRITER'S NOTE: Aldo Leopold (1887—1948) is considered the father of modern wildlife management. More importantly, he developed and described many of the concepts of conservation, ecology and stewardship of natural resources. Leopold was an amazingly astute observer of the land and man's relationship to the land. His writings have endured the test of time and have proven to be remarkably prophetic and relevant to today's issues. This bimonthly column will feature thought-provoking philosophies of Aldo Leopold, as well as commentary.

