

Thinking Like a Mountain: Perspectives in Conservation

The year following his death in 1948 Aldo Leopold's seminal book *A Sound County Almanac* was published, a series of lyrical essays following the seasons of nature and a treatise on wildlife and landscape conservation. Dr. Leopold's perspectives were a natural evolution of thought from those of his predecessors Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and John Muir (1838-1914). Leopold (1887-1948) is considered the father of modern wildlife management and quotes from his works abound in modern conservation literature; such as "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering", one of the first calls for "keeping all the pieces" of our natural heritage, what we now call "biodiversity" conservation. One of my favorite short essays in his book is *Thinking Like A Mountain*, a story of Leopold as a young man in the desert southwest, shooting a mother wolf as was the common practice at that time, and upon reaching her crumpled body watching the "fierce green fire" dying in her eyes, and having an epiphany that something great had been lost at his hand. Up until that point, as an eager young hunter, he thought less wolves meant more deer for the harvest, but in ensuing years when state after state had exterminated their wolf populations, he observed the now wolf-less mountains over-run with deer and every edible bush and seedling browsed to death. The damage to the vegetation and soils from the deer then resulted in "...dustbowls and rivers washing the future into the sea". He further added, "I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer....Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men."

So what does this mean for us in the here and now? Leopold's message of maintaining a balance still resonates in the cause-effect calculus of the health of our natural landscapes and our attempts to wring from them every last "benefit" to mankind, whether that be for energy extraction (gas shales and coal mining in western MD, oil, uranium, wind power), building materials (timber harvesting, sand/gravel mining), drinking water, land for residential and commercial development, and/or recreation. The unintended consequences of our unsustainable actions result in depleted and at times, irreparably harmed natural resources and direct and indirect impacts to us whether in job loss (watermen in a depleted Chesapeake Bay), less tourism dollars, or increased mental and physical health issues and associated costs caused, in part, by air and water pollution. Many of these problems seem so huge and overwhelming that it is easy to fall into a state of "eco-depression". But there is always hope, and I think that perhaps this is where our collective Christian belief that there is more to life than us, that there is a supreme force for good in the world, comes into play.

As part of my job as a professional ecologist I recently attended two very different yet similar conferences. The first was a 3-day Recovery Meeting held in northeastern Pennsylvania for the state and federally threatened bog turtle (*Glyptemys muhlenbergii*), a species found in northeastern Maryland (and within the Diocese in Cecil County) and in 11 other eastern U.S. states. The meeting's purpose was to take the collective "pulse" of

the current status of this rare species, what had been accomplished to “recover” it from endangerment, and what we needed to do in the near and long-term for its conservation. So this was a meeting aimed at a single species. Conversely, I just returned from a 2-day meeting in southwestern Virginia for the Appalachian Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC), a federal initiative to “achieve sustainable landscape-level conservation through partnerships... as part of a national network” of LCCs. The Appalachian LCC is a diverse area encompassing >200,000 square miles, parts of 15 states (including western Maryland), with a human population of about 130 million, and it is also a global biodiversity “hotspot”, with more endemic and rare species than any other area in North America. So this was a big enchilada! But in conversations with peers at both conferences one thing really resonated with me: while we may plan at large scales, conservation seems to always come down to the fine scale of the individual land parcel, and more importantly, the individual landowner/manager. *Interpersonal human relationships* are the level where conservation happens.

This really gets at the core of the link between our spiritual life and the world around us and where we all are part of this greater picture. Those interpersonal relations result in success or failure of the conservation objectives largely on how well those objectives are presented and how they resonate with the values and perspectives of the individual landowner. And one of the things I believe we all share are those *special moments* where we have observed or experienced something in nature that touches our soul, our spirit, links us with God. It could be walking along a forest path and suddenly encountering a little glade filled with beautiful wildflowers, or perhaps a beautiful sunset on a day spent sailing the Bay with our spouse or friend, or that special hunting trip with a grandparent where we got the big buck...all of these are touchstones to our values of nature and they are intermingled with our relationships with each other. And they can make a difference over whether you decide to clear your forest behind your home and build a subdivision or put that same forest in a permanent conservation easement. But it can even be something as simple and easy as turning off lights when not in use or installing water-saving shower heads. We all collectively and individually CAN make a difference and we CAN build a future of hope for our natural world. Each one of us can be an ambassador for nature by sharing our *special moments* with each other, giving value to these experiences in the tapestries of our lives. I also believe in the power of prayer, and if ever there was a time for praying for our natural landscapes it is now, as we as a nation wrestle with our energy demands and how to meet them, short-term economic stimuli vs. long-term irreversible impacts, and the emerging threat of global climate change. So please make the environment part of your daily personal and collective prayer life. And think like a mountain!

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