

Research activities still neglect conservation needs

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Editorial

In 1972, Luna B. Leopold,¹ the son of Aldo Leopold, published a work of his father's writings--Essays from the Round River, in which the elder Leopold recounted his early days as a budding naturalist. As a young man, Aldo Leopold immersed himself in the natural world, exploring, hunting, trekking, and most importantly, learning firsthand how the natural world reflected the complex impacts caused by human kind. This essential period of growth instilled in him the foundation he used to build a career and a philosophy which understood, that if nature is to survive, it must not only be studied, but also actively protected from destructive human impacts.

Unfortunately, too many of us scientists have refused to embrace Dr. Leopold's perspective. As we conduct our research into wildlife, habitats, and ecological processes, too many of us remain illiterate, inexperienced, and unwilling when it comes to explaining to lay audiences that we need to protect what we are studying.

So often, biologists avoid any real advocacy for their subjects. As a result, habitats are lost, populations of threatened species are extirpated, and the sad march of civilization advances across the face of the planet. But why should we blame the biologists themselves for the loss of biological diversity when their intentions were so good?

Aldo Leopold managed to introduce the concept of ecosystem conservation to a wide audience, mainly through *A Sand County Almanac*,² but the philosophy he so eloquently espoused was not a part of isolated research. Leopold's 'land ethic' was its own entity. In fact, the land ethic countered modern approaches to biological investigation by promoting wildlife and habitat conservation as ethical reverence, a morality that demanded we yield a sizeable portion of earth's natural resources to natural ecological processes, thereby ensuring the continual production of its biotic elements and services.

According to the United Nations,³ at least 680 vertebrate species have been driven to extinction since the 16th century. 300-400 million metric tons of industrial toxic sludge are drained annually into our oceans. According to *The Guardian*,⁴ Earth has lost some 60% of its wildlife since 1970. Since 1950, Earth's human population has tripled from approximately 2.5 billion to 8 billion, the latter increase serving as the root cause of all this detriment. And yet how many of us, how many of you, act to address this massive overpopulation by *Homo sapiens*.

My thesis is this: love your work, invest in your research, present it in ways that expound the wonderful intricacies and minutiae of nature, but balance your work with activities that promote the conservation of the species, communities, and ecosystems you study and love. If 10,000 scientists spent ten or fifteen percent of their professional time on conservation efforts such as communication and advocacy with lay audiences, the results of our labors could effect change among the public such as we have never before seen. During our daily activities we should communicate directly with popular media so that lay audiences may appreciate your work. Journalists and columnists are hungry for new material and would love to hear from you. Even within your peer-reviewed publications, your discussion sections could wrap up by explaining how your work is related to conservation and the

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plight of wildlife, natural communities, and ecological services. For example, your study area is likely impacted by proximal threats such as forest loss, water pollution, nearby human activities, and by more distal impacts such as air quality and climate change. If so, you can ensure that your readers understand these relationships. Some people, particularly you or your employers, may consider this beyond the scope of your work. However, these changes must be facilitated and encouraged at the institutional level if real change is to be made. In this way, we can assimilate the Leopoldian land ethic into our professional responsibilities and make lasting positive impacts on society and the future of the earth.

Conclusion

«In the end we will conserve only what we love;
we will love only what we understand;
and we will understand only what we are taught» Baba Dioum.⁵

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Conflicts of interest

The author declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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