

Social Ecology and the Natural Family

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Alongside the word “rights,” a key word in the theme for this year’s forum, is the word “ecology.” And properly, most speakers have used or will use this term in the context of “social ecology”: specifically, the setting of the family within its human and physical environment. Yet I think it important that we also consider the word “ecology” in its more common contemporary usage: namely, as related to the natural world—to nature, to the environment, and to the new politics of the environment.

In this context, the family does not usually fare well today. Indeed, under the influence of ideas labelled “deep ecology,” the human family system commonly stands as the chief evil, in its propensity to produce new human life. As the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and the American George Sessions explain in their deep ecology platform, “The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.” Other architects of the deep ecology hypothesis have labelled humankind “the cancer of the planet,” with the source of its spread being the family itself.

Significantly, these images of human life as a cancer on the Earth underlie the antilife, antifamily rhetoric, and actions found at many recent international gatherings. The deep ecology hypothesis, its treatment of the Earth itself as a living thing, and its condemnation of “human interference with the nonhuman world,” have struck deep roots, particularly in Western Europe and North America. Human fertility—and implicitly human life—are cast as problems to be overcome: the solution is “population control.”

Historians and analysts agree that a key inspiration for the contemporary deep ecology idea was the work of American ecologist Aldo Leopold. Leopold summarized his famous “land ethic” in one sentence: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” As part of his argument, he concluded that the world of the 1940s was already overpopulated; there were too many humans. As he wrote then:

There is striking parallelism between the present worldwide strife, and the social status of an overpopulated muskrat marsh just prior to catastrophe. In any event, it is unthinkable that we shall stabilize our land without a corresponding stabilization of our density. It is notorious that many of the “underdeveloped” regions are already overpopulated.

This reasoning points directly toward mechanisms of “population control,” with the “underdeveloped” lands clearly cast as the chief targets. It is on this ethical ground that the Population Council, the Population Crisis Committee, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities build their work.

I actually have a personal fondness for Aldo Leopold. He and I were both born in the American state of Iowa to parents of Lutheran Christian background. He spent his most productive years in southern Wisconsin, a short distance north of my current home in Rockford. His most influential book, *Sand County Almanac*, builds on his observations of animals and plants along the Wisconsin River, a wide body of water featuring a white sand bottom, constantly shifting sandbars, and a gentle flow. I, too, have canoed, camped along, fished, and observed this beautiful river. And so, I wonder, why did Aldo Leopold reach the terrible conclusion that human life, nurtured in the natural family, was the central problem facing the Earth?

The mystery is compounded by the fact that his early writings reveal a remarkably family-centered man. Leopold and his New Mexican-born wife Estella had five children: Starker, Luna, Nina, Carl, and little Estella. Holiday expeditions along the Colorado River, in the New Mexico mountains, and in the Minnesota-Canada canoe country were glorious family events, recorded in Aldo Leopold’s journals. Here is one excerpt about a fishing journey with his sons and brothers to Ontario’s Quetico Provincial Park, through lakes and rivers that I, too, have paddled on with joy. Leopold writes:

June 12—About 10 A.M. reached the Basswood River and soon got to [the] first falls, portaging around them and finding our outfit good to carry but not quite to the point where we could make it in one trip. Had some lunch, and Carl and Fritz caught two fine walleyed pike. . . . Several red-breasted mergansers passed over. Then we portaged the lower falls, at the foot of which Fritz added another wall-eye and Starker caught a pickerel. About 3 P.M. we camped on the portage of still another very pretty waterfall. . . . There is considerable style to this camp, which is on a grassy knoll overlooking the falls with an International Boundary Monument for a tent peg.

Boiled wall-eyed pike with mustard sauce for supper. After supper we fed an Indian who chanced along in a birchbark canoe, and then went fishing. Carl flirted with

a huge pike at the foot of the falls but couldn't hook him. Fritz caught another wall-eye but put him back. After threatening rain it cleared up with a beautiful sunset . . .

The number of adventures awaiting us in this blessed country seems without end. Watching the gray twilight settling upon our lake we could truly say that "all our ways are pleasantness and all our paths are peace."

As I read these words, I can almost smell the smoke of the campfire, taste the walleye, and rejoice in the precious company of brothers and children.

In 1935, the Leopold family purchased an abandoned, worn out farm along the Wisconsin River, soon called the "shack." For a dozen years, the family worked to restore this land as a natural wildlife habitat. Leopold's observations of this small acreage would crystallize into his great book, *Sand County Almanac*.

So here we see a good father introducing his five children to the delights of and obligations toward the natural world. And he taught them many principles with which I firmly agree:

- That our responsibility as stewards of the land includes obligations toward "soils, waters, plants and animals"
- That the owners of property should be ecologically minded, "proud to be" custodians of land that adds "diversity and beauty" to farms and communities
- That "our [American] educational and economic system" of the mid-twentieth century was "headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land"
- And that "our present problem is one of attitudes and implements. We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use."

Aldo Leopold's children also paid their father a great tribute: each of them followed in his footsteps, becoming naturalists, ecologists, scientists, and writers. So what led Aldo Leopold, at the end of his life, to indict human population and implicitly the human family as a curse rather than a blessing?

A share of the answer, I think, lies in the spiritual realm. While Aldo Leopold's parents had been baptized as Lutheran Christians, they themselves were not churchgoers. As a boy, then, he had no "specific spiritual upbringing." Leopold's wife, Estella, was a Roman Catholic, but he, in the words of one biographer, "eschewed the Church and disliked taking a vow not to interfere" with his children's religious training. Regarding his father's beliefs, son Luna reported, "I think he, like many of the rest of us, was kind of pantheistic. The organization of the universe was enough to take the place of God, if you like. He certainly didn't believe in a personal God." Estella once directly asked her husband if he believed in God, "He replied that he believed there was a mystical

supreme power that guided the universe, but to him this power was not a personalized God. It was more akin to the laws of nature . . . his religion came from nature."

These views led Aldo Leopold, in turn, to rebuke sharply the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. "We abuse land," he said, "because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us." And he continued, "[The Patriarch] Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to dip milk and honey into Abraham's mouth."

Other architects of the deep ecology hypothesis have been more blunt. According to a widely-quoted passage from Lynn White, Jr., Christians, Jews, and Muslims all insist "that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends;" that these faiths believe that humans "are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim." Far better, White says, were the pagans of yore.

My time does not allow for a full answer to these charges. I will say only this: while Christians and other children of Abraham have surely done many foolish things, including the desecration of land, the reckless uprooting of plants, and the mindless slaughter of wild animals, such acts have rarely—if ever—enjoyed religious blessing. Rather, they normally proceed when the perpetrators ignore scripture. Relative to land, the real story of the Old and New Testaments is one of stewardship and respect. It is revealing, I think, that the characterizations of Christianity offered by Leopold, White, Naes, and others are not referenced or footnoted; specific examples are not cited; real evidence is ignored.

If the deep ecologists misread religion, they may also misread true science. Leopold's land ethic—"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community"—is actually not holding up very well as we learn more about the real interaction of species in a biotic community. For example, Leopold's reverence for "stability" increasingly runs into trouble. Even in largely untouched ecosystems, and within the scale of a human life, there seems to be no sublime balance and order. Nature is always in flux, some species spreading, others in retreat. One ecologist labels a true ecosystem "rather sloppy . . . the members of a biotic community have no shared needs; there is only shoving. Or there is indifference and haphazard juxtaposition." Other recent ecologists have emphasized the "principle of plenitude, . . . a richness, an expansiveness, a tendency to multiply." In this view, nature is the place of robust fecundity—of many offspring, the very opposite of "population control."

In the end, it appears that Aldo Leopold's most basic arguments—and the premises of deep ecology in turn—are not about a better way to understand and live in nature; rather, his arguments are about a different kind of religious faith—one that finds human life and the human family to be dangers to the Earth.

Still, I wish it were possible to reach out to Aldo Leopold, above all to try to show him that the birth of children is not the real problem. Perhaps if I could have sat with him in the years just prior to his death in 1948, I might also have been able to summon his brothers and all five of his children before him. I would then have asked Aldo Leopold three questions:

First, "Which of these five children of yours turned out to be a negative influence or burden on the natural world?"

Second, "Which four of them would you wish away, to achieve the 'deep ecology' goal of sharply declining human numbers?"

And third, "Would you wish away your own brothers as well, and all future brothers and sisters in pursuit of the same negative population growth goal?"

Aldo Leopold's journals show that he was a decent man, a good brother, a loving father. I believe that he would not have labeled any of his children as a negative burden; nor would he have chosen any of his children for a painless elimination; nor would he have wished away his brothers. Instead, with the question posed this way, I think he might have recognized that the real global problem is not excessive human numbers; rather, the actual troubles facing our world are ignorance, poverty, despair, corruption, and—in the twenty-first century—depopulation. These troubles can only be countered by good children raised in good and fruitful families.