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Crossfile

SEVEN THOUSAND YEARS OF LAND CONQUEST AND THE LAND ETHIC

Typically, “Information Crossfile” articles summarize new research, technology, or other information reported in journals that is deemed useful to resource managers. In contrast to this norm, however, two rather old publications are mentioned here and are worth a fresh look. The first one (published posthumously in 1949) is *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. The second, published in 1953 about work conducted in 1938 and 1939, is more obscure (but still available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service): *Conquest of the Land through 7,000 Years* by Walter C. Lowdermilk. Leopold worked for the USDA Forest Service, Lowdermilk for the then Soil Conservation Service, so their experiences as government employees may be familiar to NPS resource managers; however, their perspectives are extraordinary, particularly in light of their pertinence to present-day land management.

Today, the Institute for Scientific Information estimates the duration of a publication’s usefulness by the frequency of citations in published literature. A usual decay curve of citation frequency shows a half-life of approximately six years; that is, after publication, citations build for five or six years then taper off. For *A Sand County Almanac*, however, a contrasting curve appears: almost no citations occurred for more than a decade, then citations have been rising consistently for the subsequent 50 years (Leopold 2004). It is evident, then, that Aldo Leopold’s book is having an impact over a long period of time.

Now consider a passage from Lowdermilk (1953):

A just relation of peoples to the earth rests not on exploitation, but rather on conservation—not on the

dissipation of resources, but rather on restoration of the productive powers of the land and on access to food and raw materials. If civilization is to avoid a long decline ... society must be born again out of an economy of exploitation into an economy of conservation.

Using examples from lands of ancient civilizations and our own civilization, the report calls into question the meaning of progress and development. But it also is a realization that peoples of the past were not somehow better caretakers of Earth's resources. For example, the first records of salinization caused by irrigation are about 5,000 years old and come from present-day Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia), the crib of all civilization. The present applicability of this 65-year-old soil survey is astounding.

Therefore, the assumption that we humans have lost our intuition about how to care for the land and that primitive peoples were more adept is probably false. We are undoubtedly still learning, and the lessons in Lowdermilk (1953) and the land ethic in Leopold (1949) continue to provide guidance. —*K. KellerLynn*

References

- Leopold, A. 1949 (reprint, 1966). *A Sand County almanac with essays on conservation from Round River*. Oxford University Press and Ballantine Books, New York.
- Leopold, A. C. 2004. Living with the land ethic. *BioScience* 54(2):149–154.
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