

**Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic:
Is it Only Half a Loaf Unless a Consumption Ethic Accompanies It?¹**
or
**Is the Shift to “Ecological Sustainability” on U.S. Public Lands
Merely a Sophisticated “NIMBYism” Masquerading as a “Paradigm Shift”?**

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Over the last two decades there has been a substantial shift in the management emphasis of public lands, particularly federal lands, in the United States. That shift has been to a substantially increased emphasis on managing these lands for biodiversity protection and amenity values, with a corresponding reduction in commodity outputs. Over the last decade, timber harvest on National Forest lands has dropped by 70 percent, oil and gas leasing by about 40 percent, and livestock grazing by at least 10 percent.

Terms like “ecosystem management,” an “ecological approach to management,” and, more recently, “ecological sustainability” have been used to describe this change in the management emphasis of public lands. Many have referred to it as a significant “paradigm shift.” Just recently, a Committee of Scientists issued a report proposing that the National Forests be managed for “ecological sustainability,” where primary management emphasis is to be placed on “what is left” out on the land, rather than “what is removed.” Commodity outputs, if they are produced, would become a derivative or consequence of managing National forests for primarily a biodiversity protection objective. Significantly, some Committee members bottomed this recommendation in part on “ethical and moral” grounds.

Many have attributed the move to ecosystem management or ecological sustainability to a belated recognition and adoption of Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic”—the idea that management of land has, or should have, an ethical content. This year, celebrations are planned commemorating the 50th anniversary of the publishing of Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he spoke eloquently about the need for an ethical obligation toward land use and management. One sign that Leopold’s ideas have finally struck a chord with the larger society is that conservation issues are increasingly being taken up as causes of American churches.

While a mission shift on U.S. public lands is occurring in response to changing public preferences, that same public is making no corresponding shift in its commodity consumption habits. The “dirty little secret” about the shift to ecological sustainability on U.S. public lands is that, in the face of stable or increasing per capita consumption in the U.S., the effect has been to shift the burden and impacts of that consumption to ecosystems somewhere else. For example, to private lands in the U.S. or to lands of other countries.

Between 1987 and 1997, federal timber harvest dropped 70 percent, from about 13 to 4 billion board feet annually. (Note: This 9 billion board foot reduction is “log scale,” which translates into about a 15 billion board foot reduction in lumber that could have been processed from it – or about one-third of U.S. annual softwood lumber production.) A significant effect of this reduction, in the face of continuing high levels of per capita wood consumption, has been to transfer harvest to private forest ecosystems in the U.S. and to forest ecosystems in Canada.

For example:

- Since 1990, U.S. softwood lumber imports from Canada rose from 12 to 18 billion board feet, increasing from 27 to 36 percent of U.S. softwood lumber consumption. Much of the increase in Canadian lumber imports has come from the native old-growth boreal forests. In Quebec alone, the export of lumber to the U.S. has tripled since 1990. The increased harvesting of the boreal forests in Quebec has become a public issue there.
- Harvesting on private lands in the southern United States also increased after the reduction of federal timber in the West. Today, the harvest of softwood timber in the southeastern U.S. exceeds the rate of growth for the first time in at least 50 years. Increased harvesting of fiber by chip mills in the southeastern U.S. has become a public issue regionally.

Today the U.S. public consumes more resources than at any time in its history, and it also consumes more per capita than almost any other nation. Since the first Earth Day in 1970, the average family size in the United States has dropped by 16 percent, while the size of the average single family house being built has increased by 48 percent.

The U.S. conservation community and the media have given scant attention to the “ecological transfer effects” of the mission shift on U.S. public lands. Any ethical or moral foundation for ecological sustainability is weak indeed unless there is a corresponding focus on the consumption side of the natural resource equation. Without such a connection, ecological sustainability on public lands is subject to challenge as just a sophisticated form of NIMBYism (“not in my back yard”), rather than a true paradigm shift.

A cynic might assert that one of the reasons for the belated adoption of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is that it has become relatively easy and painless for most of us to do so. When Leopold was a young man forming his ideas, more than 40 percent of the U.S. population lived on farms. An additional 20 percent lived in rural areas and were closely associated with the management of land. Today less than two percent of us are farmers and most of us, even those living in rural areas, are disconnected from any direct role in the management of land. Adopting a land ethic is easy for most of us today, because it imposes the primary burden “to act” on someone else.

While few of us are resource producers any more, we all remain resource consumers. This is one area we all can act upon that could have a positive effect on resource use, demand and management. Yet few of us connect our resource consumption to what must be done to the land to make it possible. At the same time many of us espouse the land ethic, our operating motto in the marketplace seems to be “shop ‘till you drop” or “whoever dies with the most toys wins.”

The disjunct between people as consumers and the land is reflected in rising discord and alienation between producers and consumers. Loggers, ranchers, fishermen, miners, and other resource producers have all at times felt themselves subject to scorn and ridicule by the very society that benefits from the products they produce. What is absent from much environmental discourse in the U.S. today is a recognition that urbanized society is no less dependent upon the products of forest and field than were the subsistence farmers of America’s past. This is clearly reflected in the language used in such discourse. Rural communities traditionally engaged in producing timber and other natural resources for urban consumers are commonly referred to as natural resource “dependent” communities. Seldom are the truly resource dependent communities like Boulder, Denver, Detroit, or Boston ever referred to as such.

One of the relatively little known aspects of Aldo Leopold's career is the years he spent at the Forest Service's Forest Products Lab at Madison, Wisconsin. While there, he spoke of the need for responsible consumption. In 1928 Leopold wrote:

The American public for many years has been abusing the wasteful lumberman. A public which lives in wooden houses should be careful about throwing stones at lumbermen, even wasteful ones, until it has learned how its own arbitrary demands as to kinds and qualities of lumber, help cause the waste which it decries....

The long and the short of the matter is that forest conservation depends in part on intelligent consumption, as well as intelligent production of lumber.

If management of land has an ethical content, why does not consumption have a corresponding one, as well? Is there a need for a "personal consumption ethic" to go along with Leopold's land ethic? In his wonderful land ethic chapter in [A Sand County Almanac](#), Leopold wrote that evidence that no land ethic existed at the time was that a "farmer who clears his woods off a 75 percent slope, turns his cows into the clearing, and dumps its rainfall, rocks, and soil into the community creek, is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society."

To take off on that theme and make it more contemporary, the evidence that no personal consumption ethic exists today is that a "suburban dweller with a small family who lives in a 4000 square-foot home, owns three or four cars, commutes to work alone in a gas guzzling sport utility vehicle (even though public transportation is available), and otherwise leads a highly resource consumptive lifestyle is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society. Indeed, her/his social status in the community may even be enhanced by virtue of that consumption."

Ecosystem management or ecological sustainability on public lands will have weak or non-existent ethical credentials and certainly will never be a truly holistic approach to resource management until the consumption side of the equation becomes an integral part of the solution, rather than an afterthought, as it is today. Belated adoption of Leopold's land ethic was relatively easy. The true test as to whether a paradigm shift has really occurred in the U.S. will be whether society begins to see personal consumption choices as having an ethical and environmental content as well – and then acts upon them as such.



*In the United States, smaller family size has **not** translated to smaller new houses. We are a very consuming society.*

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