

UNST 124g fall 2011

a land ethic

1 introduction

Ethics, succinctly defined, is the philosophy of morality. Morality, in turn, is the judgement of intention, action, and outcome as *good* (or right) or *bad* (or wrong). The notion of morality implies that there should be some code of conduct, a *moral code* to which individuals should aspire and against which they should be judged. In the last chapter of *A Sand County Almanac: Sketches Here and There*, Aldo Leopold (1949) offered definition of *good* in the context of ecosystems, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

Aldo Leopold (1887 - 1948), a forester and ecologist, was an influential thinker and writer on the subject of environmental ethics. He began his career as a forest assistant for the U.S. Forest Service in Arizona. While working for the USFS, Leopold developed management plans for federal lands. He transferred to a post in Madison Wisconsin and eventually joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold chronicles a year in the life of the Wisconsin prairie while in the second part of the book, *Sketches Here and There*, he casts his view more broadly, arriving at what he called *The Land Ethic*. The ethic is built from his life’s work as a forester, ecologist, and professor of agricultural economics and management.

2 effective reading

Reading in an academic context is not about completeness, it is about understanding. That is, simply reading all the words, from beginning to end, is not sufficient. Reading in an academic context is about *analysis*. Your goals should be to

- identify the writer’s goals and point of view,
- understand the writer’s reasoning,
- identify the writer’s method of argumentation,
- link the ideas in the text to other ideas and texts,
- form your own conclusions about the text, and
- remember the main points and conclusion of what you read at a later time.

When you are learning to be a critical reader, it can be helpful to follow a method, for example the “SQ3R” method created by Francis Pleasant Robinson. This approach follows a pattern

- **S** Survey the material to gain an overview of its contents before you start to read.
- **Q** Develop a set of questions about the material

- Review any reading questions that have been provided.
- Identify any questions that the section headings bring to mind.
- Refer to the list of reading goals above.
- **R1** Read the material (probably more than once)
 - Identify the thesis.
 - Identify supporting arguments.
 - Identify methods used in the text.
 - Question the author’s reasoning. Are key points well supported?
 - Take notes on the text, perhaps as an outline, paragraph by paragraph. Underline important points.
- **R2** Recall what you just read.
 - Without looking at the text, write down what you remember as the main points of the text.
 - Compare those points with your outline and the text. Is anything missing?
- **R3** Review: take a break after the reading and when you come back, review your notes.
 - Do your notes provide enough information for you to answer the reading questions (and others you may have)?
 - Can you answer the questions from memory, without referring to the text or your notes?

3 assignment

You are asked to read the last chapter of *A Sand County Almanac*, titled *The Land Ethic* but the entire book is worth reading and the chapter *Thinking Like a Mountain* is particularly relevant to Leopold’s land ethic. The chapter is available in our class electronic reserve at Millar Library. Please don’t lose this once you download it, we will refer to this reading again.

1. How does Aldo Leopold define *land*?
2. Leopold presents his land ethic as a “product of social evolution,” not a prescription. Why does he take this approach?
3. What elements, or ideas, does Leopold think should be included in a land ethic?

4 References

Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.