

The importance of environmental conservation

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In an excellent webinar for Friends of White's Woods (September 28), Dr. Curt Meine, Senior Fellow at the Aldo Leopold institute, discussed Leopold's "Land Ethic."

The famed conservationist, Leopold, came of age at a time when nearly all of this country's Northeast and Midwest forests were clear-cut, the huge bison herds were decimated, and unchecked hunting led to the extinction of the Passenger Pidgeon, once the most prevalent bird in the world.

Leopold struggled to understand why people so often, so thoroughly devastate the land and what we need to do to preserve it. "We abuse land," said Leopold, "because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. [But] when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Leopold, who helped found wildlife ecology, argued that no animal, not even human beings, can be regarded as independent of his/her environment. He defined conservation as a state of harmony between people and land. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and benefit of our land community. We need to start thinking in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient."

Unfortunately, "our tools are better than we are," said Leopold, "and grow better, faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides, but they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history, to live on a piece of land without spoiling it."

In a modern world of environmental destabilization, including climate change, mass loss of species, topsoil erosion, forest felling, and dramatic acidification of our oceans, we face the questions of how and whether societies can make the wise political choices that will avoid disaster in the future.



Leopold's arguments remain crucial for today: We desperately need to acknowledge that we are part of an interdependent community. A sound land ethic, therefore, "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively the land."

This webinar can be viewed at friends of whiteswoods.org.

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