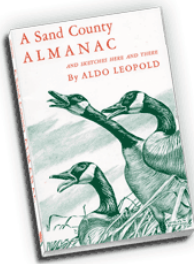
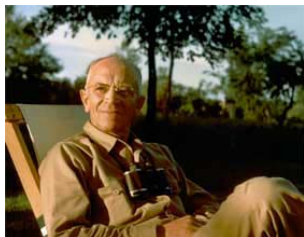


A Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold



Aldo Leopold suggests that the best definitions of a conservationist are written not with a pen, but with an axe: “A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land” (68). After this Leopold speculates on why, when he comes upon the choice of the white pine or the red birch, he will always cut the birch, concluding that “I love all trees, but I am in love with pines” (70). While it would not be especially fair to say that if you like this sort of sentiment, then *A Sand County Almanac* is for you, it would not be altogether wrong. As he notes in his forward, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.” This concoction of rambling meditations on the natural world were first published a year after Leopold’s death, and they range from the personal observations keyed to the months of the year to the philosophical, or some would say political, in the last quarter of the book, when he addresses such issues as the esthetics of conservation, wilderness, and “the land ethic.” Consider the following ethical advice Leopold offers near the end of his book: “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” (224–5). Or maybe this sort of passage appeals to you more: “Pines, like people, are choosy about their associates” (86). Or consider this almost casual observation in the small essay entitled “Thinking Like a Mountain,” when Leopold reflects on killing a wolf: “I was young then, and full of trigger-itch” (130). Whatever your preference, this important book deserves to be read closely and carefully.

Author Information



As Robert Finch observes in his introduction to the 1987 edition of *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold was both “a trained scientist” and “a schooled humanist,” and he possessed a “strong poetic sensibility.” Born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1887, Leopold received his master’s degree in forestry from Yale University in 1909 and joined the U.S. Forest Service. First posted to the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico in 1911, he devised a handbook for forest service officers and became active in promoting enforcement of game laws and development of game refuges. He became Associate Director of the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1924, but in 1928 he left the Forest Service to work independently, and in 1933 was appointed to the chair in Game Management at the University of Wisconsin, a position he held for the rest of his life. In 1935 he purchased 120 acres of an abandoned farm on the Wisconsin River which was to become his retreat and personal nature preserve. While he lived with his wife and two sons in Madison, he restored the land and worked out of an old chicken coop he called “the Shack.” Leopold authored a classic text, *Game Management* (1933), which

remains in print, and more than 350 scientific and policy-related articles. He died of a heart attack in 1948 while fighting a grass fire that threatened his Sand County Farm. Leopold is widely recognized as the “Father of Wildlife Conservation.”

Discussion Questions

1. As Leopold explains in his foreword, the three sections of *A Sand County Almanac* vary considerably in nature, from the seasonally arranged “shack sketches” of the first part, to the “episodes” drawn from his own life over forty years in various parts of the country, to the more “philosophical questions” of Part III. Which of these sections appeals most to you, and why, or in what ways?

2. At this writing Leopold’s book is nearly sixty years old. Does it seem dated to you, or are the issues and his perspective on them still relevant? Do you think he would agree with the slogan coined some years ago, “Wilderness: Land of Many Uses”? Or does that suggest a system of conservation based mainly on “economic motives” (including recreation)?

3. As we see in Part I, Aldo Leopold enjoyed fishing and hunting, and he celebrates the idea of raising one’s own food by gardening and of cutting one’s own wood for warmth. But are these realistic goals? Conservationists are sometimes seen as idealists promoting the life of the pastoral idyll. Does Leopold seem to qualify?

4. Can you identify two or three passages that strike you as particularly “poetic”? What features might be said to typify such moments in this book? Do they read especially well out loud? Do you tend to value such moments, or to slip past them and head for something that has more story elements or material of more political punch or philosophical weight?

5. “Wilderness,” Leopold writes, “is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization” (188). Some would maintain that taming the wilderness and making use of it reflects the height of human achievement. Doubtless Leopold would disagree, and in fact he warns that “Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow” (199). What are the uses of wilderness? You might want to consult some details of the Wilderness Act, which was signed into law in the fall of 1964. Does it seem to you that wilderness is sufficiently protected, at least in the U.S., or should more be done?

6. Obviously Leopold hoped to further the ideas of an “ecological conscience” and of a community-based “land ethic.” Does it seem to you that the United States, and perhaps even the world, is moving in that direction? What evidence do you see to support that view? What hurdles apparently still remain? Does Leopold appear to offer any practical ways of achieving his goals?