

# Lorne Fitch, Aldo Leopold, and Living a Land Ethic:

## The Fifth Annual Martha Kostuch Lecture

BY IAN URQUHART, EDITOR

I have many long lists. Chores undone, books unread, and important talks missed. Reading the transcript of Lorne Fitch's 2012 Martha Kostuch Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture I realize I have another important talk to add to that list. I wouldn't say I know Lorne well. But what I do know of Lorne makes me want to know him better and to count him as a close friend. Those appealing qualities – his passion for the natural world, his knowledge and ecological sensitivities, and his wit – animated his talk to the friends of Alberta's natural spaces who packed the Hillhurst Cottage School last November. His topic was Aldo Leopold, an icon of conservation. Lorne offered Leopold's famous statement of ecological sensibility, *A Sand County Almanac*, as a key to our ability to meet the challenge "to live the good life on Earth without abusing the generosity of our hostess." I hope I can do justice to Lorne's remarks in what follows.

### On Leopold

Lorne described his copy of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* as "well-thumbed, dog-eared, taped together." It's as familiar to Lorne's senses as its message should be to society today. In *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold preaches a gospel of environmental sensibility. Ecology, like religion, offers a vital moral foundation for the good society.

Lorne suggested that Leopold's understanding of conservation hinged on two ideas. The first pertained to citizens and their place in communities; everyone had an obligation to think about managing the land, not just for herself, but for the interests of the broader community. The second pertained to the ethical treatment of the land. Leopold wrote succinctly, cogently, and powerfully about the extension and

evolution of ethics. It was time, and don't forget that he was writing in the late 1940s, for a "land ethic," for an ecological ethic that would restrain our freedom to do whatever we pleased to the land, animals, and plants. Leopold wrote that, without such an ethic, these objects of our attention would remain no more than property to be disposed of as "a matter of expediency."

Embracing a land ethic demanded then, and demands now, accepting that

**"We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow 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."**

- Aldo Leopold, 1938.

economy and ecology must be seen as two sides of the same coin. Good economic health, as measured by economic growth, didn't mean that the larger society was healthy. "Economic self-interest," Leopold said, "assumes falsely...that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts." As Lorne said, that conclusion applies very well to today's Alberta.

I think the way in which Leopold delivered his message impresses Lorne as much as its substance. Leopold had what I would call an "everyman" quality. He related very well to all people, not just to his fellow scientists and professors. Lorne

puts it this way: "...his explanations of the natural world – its intricacies and how we fit – have a conversational feel, a way of discussing complex subjects in ways that most could grasp."

Lorne also attributes Leopold's success in writing clearly and directly about conservation in ways that all could grasp to "The Shack," the old, weatherworn chicken coop the Leopold family converted into the cabin that became their rural retreat from life at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. On those 80 acres the Leopold family rejuvenated an abused landscape. They took the first steps to restore ecological health to a farm whose forests had been mined by a bootlegger. The compelling character of Leopold's work is attributed to the fact that Leopold was a part of the landscape he wrote about. His conservation message was "nourished by a personal contact with the soil, the landscape and wild creatures."

Lorne's description of his own pilgrimage to "The Shack" is a testament to how receptive he has been to Leopold's style and substance. In simple, straightforward, yet evocative, words Lorne takes you there and lets the imagery of falling snow on the weathered homestead and the songs of sparrows and juncos in a reclaimed landscape testify to the value of the land ethic.

### On Alberta

In his Kostuch lecture Lorne used Leopold's views on conservation as a lens to offer a mixed assessment of circumstances in Alberta. Few in the room seemed surprised when Lorne observed that economic self-interest dominates too much of what passes for thinking about conservation in the halls of power. It is our monoculture. Here Lorne was skeptical of how far and quickly corporations, given their single-minded pursuit of profit, would



**Lorne Fitch (left) and Chas Cartwright, Superintendent of Glacier National Park, at the end of a day on the trail during the annual Waterton-Glacier Superintendents' hike.**

PHOTO: © I. URQUHART

move towards privileging other values in thinking about our place on the landscape. Here we are left to hope that market-based initiatives and campaigns such as environmental certification and boycotts may prove effective at linking heightened environmental awareness to corporate profitability.

Logging Hidden Creek, what Lorne calls “the epicentre of bull trout spawning in for the Oldman watershed,” typifies this blinkered approach (see Sean Nichols article on page of this issue of the *WLA*). Decisions that don’t touch the self-interest of corporations – prohibiting anglers from catching and keeping bull trout – were made nearly twenty years ago. Decisions that would tarnish the corporate bottom line – prohibiting logging in this vital spawning area – are regarded as a heresy. They cannot be taken.

Lorne was more optimistic with respect to the likelihood of individuals and communities warming to Leopold’s land ethic. He’s also optimistic that if conservationists emulate Leopold’s interest in talking to people about conservation issues people will change their attitudes towards the land.

Alberta’s *Cows and Fish* program stands as a good example of the positive results for our landscapes that this sort of approach may deliver. The program started by surveying Albertans to see what they knew about Alberta’s fish and fish habitat. Fewer than half the

respondents could identify native and non-native fishes; 60 percent believed sediment either was good for fish or didn’t know what its impact was; of most concern, virtually none of those surveyed felt they had personally had any impact at all on fish or fish habitat.

By sharing knowledge with landowners, by working at the community level, and by encouraging stewardship *Cows and Fish* stands out as an important conservation success in Alberta. Lorne said it best: “It starts, as it did with Leopold, with a conversation, builds into a relationship, and inevitably facilitates attitudinal shifts that are accompanied by behavioural changes, often in management of landscapes. So landowners, when suitably equipped and motivated, can write their own versions of goodness in the land.”

### On the Future

We have choices. I believe this is how Lorne views our future. We’ve behaved badly in the past and Leopold, were he alive today, would chide us for the wounds we’ve inflicted on the land. But he might also look favourably at some of the analytical tools we have at our disposal now, such as cumulative effects modeling, and see real possibilities to make the ethical shift he called for. But such progress will require sharing knowledge with the public, skilled advocacy and, most important of all, the courage to act. ▲



**Spiral (2005)**  
51"x60"

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