

The Land Ethic

The concept of the Land Ethic was developed by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*. In this book, Aldo Leopold reflected upon his interaction with the land and how it had enriched him, but also how our society tends to trivialize or dismiss the role of the land. The following quotations provide a brief introduction to the Land Ethic concept as envisioned by Leopold:

"An ethic [that] presupposes the mental image of the land as a biotic mechanism. We can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in." ... [Think of the land as an energy circuit, with energy flowing from the soils to the plants to animals and back.] This thumbnail sketch of the land as an energy circuit conveys three basic ideas:

- 1 That land is not merely soil;
- 2 That the native plants and animals kept the energy circuit open; others may or may not;
- 3 That man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than intended or foreseen. These ideas, collectively, raise two issues: Can the land adjust itself to the new order? Can the desired alterations be accomplished with less violence?

Leopold's "violence" is what we now term "impact" or the "trace" addressed by Leave No Trace. Leopold sums up his thought with the following observation:

"A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity."

The Land Ethic teaches us that we should consider our actions in light of their impact on the living, breathing community that is the land, and that we should select the alternative available that does the least violence, or impact, to that community. The Land Ethic grows strongest when we have experienced the Land, grown to love and respect it, and have labored to enhance or restore it or, as Leopold would have put it, when we have practiced "conservation" defined as restoring the capacity of the Land for self-renewal. We understand the Land Ethic and when we think of right in relation to the Land as follows:

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.

Are you ready to face the challenge of looking at the Land in this fashion? If so, then you understand the Land Ethic.

----- The BSA Outdoor Code -----

**As an American, I will do my best to -
Be clean in my outdoor manners.
Be careful with fire.
Be considerate in the outdoors.
Be conservation minded.**