

# An Ecological Study on *A Sand County Almanac*

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**Abstract**—Aldo Leopold is an American author, scientist, ecologist, conservationist, environmentalist, whose most outstanding and representative work *A Sand County Almanac* is filled with abundant and deep ecological thoughts. This paper intends to explore Leopold's ecological thoughts in this book. First, Leopold redefines the relationship between nature and human beings. He states that human beings are part of nature and should show love and respect for it; second, Leopold proposes the famous and significant land ethic theory, which establishes a basis for new ecological ethics. He enlarges the ethic range to land and to the whole nature, sets the criteria of land ethic, and describes the importance of ecological conscience which is fundamentally helpful to solve ecological crisis and protect the ecosystem; third, Leopold elaborates on the values of wilderness, such as the recreational value, the ecological value, the aesthetic value, the scientific value, the ecological value and the cultural value. Nowadays, all these ecological thoughts are still meaningful for people to know and love the nature, to protect the land and the wilderness.

**Index Terms**—*A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold, land ethic, wilderness

## I. INTRODUCTION

Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), the author of *A Sand County Almanac*, is an American scientist, ecologist, forester, environmentalist, philosopher and educator. Besides, he is the creator of American new environment theory, and also considered as father of ecological ethics. His ethics of nature and wildlife preservation have a profound impact on the environmental movement, along with his eco-centric or holistic ethics regarding land.

Aldo Leopold was born in Burlington, Iowa on January 11, 1887. Living near the Mississippi river, Leopold lived a life close to various wildlife and full of various outdoor activities in his early years. Owing to these outdoor activities in his early life, Aldo Leopold excelled in appreciating nature and exploring nature. In 1892, Aldo Leopold entered Prospect Hill School where he began to learn about nature, which stimulated his interest in nature. At the age of 13, he got Frank M. Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* which laid a foundation on studying birds for him. In 1904, Aldo Leopold went to study in Lawrenceville School where he was interested in forestry, botany and meteorology and obtained some knowledge of different species. In 1905, he attended Yale Forest School where he gained a fundamental knowledge of natural science. In 1906, he began his further study as a postgraduate in Yale Forest School. The study in Yale pushed Aldo Leopold to doubt pragmatism prevailing at that time and to explore the relationship between man and nature. In his lifetime, Aldo Leopold has published about 500 literary works, including essays, articles, reports and books. There is no doubt that he is a great prolific writer.

Leopold is best known for his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). In this book, Leopold imputed great enthusiasm to the poetical expression of his land ethic. At the same time, he scientifically criticized the ways man treated nature. This book is such a melting-pot of philosophy, ethics and ecology that it acts as both a guider in environmental science and a carrier in literature research. The book mainly describes the relationship between land and human beings. It consists of four sections. The first section of the book is entitled "Sand County Almanac". This section is divided into twelve segments from January to December. All the description of this section follows the changes of the author's farm. Leopold wrote lots of anecdotes and observations about the reactions of planets and animals. The second and third sections entitled "The Quality of Landscape", "A Taste for Country" respectively narrate the scenery of different times and the events around the farms and wilderness in Canada and the United States. Some of essays in this section are autobiographical, such as "Red Legs Kicking", "Thinking Like a Mountain". In "Red Legs Kicking", Leopold writes some boyhood hunting experience in Iowa. "Thinking Like a Mountain" also writes some hunting experience later in his life and these experience lead to the formation of his views. "The Upshot" is the end section of the whole book. It is a section of philosophical essays grouped together. Leopold explores ironies of conservation and puts forward the famous land ethic in this section. In the concluding essay "A Land Ethic", Leopold holds the opinion that more conservation education is needed. He also believes that man is just a part of nature and man should respect and love nature. What's more, man and nature influence each other. People have the responsibilities to protect and respect the land.

*A Sand County Almanac* known as the representation of Leopold's land ethic has been the focus of scholars. When researchers abroad carry out study on this book, they mainly focus on the author's perspectives on nature, land and

environment. Callicott, J. believes that *A Sand County Almanac* aims to make the readers quest personal and permanent experience in nature (Baird, 2005). Susan L. Flader, the pioneer and authority in American environmental study, made a specific and systematic research into Leopold's theory and his ecological thoughts in her book *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude toward Deep, Wolves and Forests* (Flader, 1974). Curt D. Meine's book *Aldo Leopold—His Life and Work* introduces his biography and records his experiences in forestry management and conservation of wildlife (Meine, 2010). In addition, some other scholars made comments on phases of ecology advocated by Leopold. Scott Monma, Clicott, Nash, Donald Worst studied and commented respectively on sense of morality, evolution, environmental protection and Economy, etc.

Since the Chinese version of *A Sand County Almanac* by Hou Wenhui came into being in 1997, Chinese scholars began to get in touch with Aldo Leopold's ecological thoughts formally. Hou Wenhui demonstrated the impact Aldo Leopold had on the change of American sense of environment in his paper "Elegy of Conquer: Change in American Sense of Environment." In his paper "Ideological Commentary on Aldo Leopold's Man-Land Ethic", Bao Shuangye investigates comprehensively the formation background of Aldo Leopold's land ethic, contents of his ideological system, its ecological value and limitations. Yang Yongjin thinks that Aldo Leopold's land ethic experiences three stages alongside responses to all kinds of theoretical challenges before it gradually develops to its perfection. Some domestic scholars even study reflection of the relationship between nature and human beings. For example, Chinese researchers Bao Qingde and Xia Chengbo discuss the thoughts of Aldo Leopold and comment his perspectives on environmental ethics from the aspect of ecological holism in the article "Land Ethics: First Signs of Ecological Holism". Guo Maoquan analyzes the relationship between nature and human beings from the aspect of land ethics in the paper "Poetic Interpretation of Land Ethics and Land Aesthetics". Ma Yuanyuan analyzes the book from the aspect of ecological criticism in order to help people become aware of how to deal with the relationship between human beings and nature in the paper "Thinking like A Mountain—Ecological Study on *A Sand County Almanac*". In short, although many articles have explored this book from various perspectives, few of them explore Leopold's ecological thoughts in a systematic way. These researches on Leopold's ecological thoughts mainly focus on the introduction to his land ethic and available study, but seldom have they studied *A Sand County Almanac* as ecological literature.

With the increasingly serious crisis of the global environment, ecologism attracts more and more attention. As one of the most significant and respected environmental books in the 20th century, *A Sand County Almanac* expresses many important ecological thoughts of Aldo Leopold. This paper will give a detailed analysis of the ecological thoughts in the book. By probing ecological ideas in this book, this paper aims to reconsider the relationship between human and nature, recognize the plural nature, and build up a mold of multi-ethics to evoke people's concern about ecological crisis.

## II. THE ECOLOGICAL THOUGHTS IN *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC*

This paper mainly analyzes Leopold's ecological ideology in *A Sand County Almanac* from three aspects: The relationship between man and nature, land ethics and the values of wilderness.

### A. *Relationship between Man and Nature*

As for relationship between man and nature, there are two viewpoints at the present: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism believes that human beings are the center of the universe and nature is a servant and source for men. On the contrary, ecocentrism claims that nature is the center and that the benefits from the whole ecosystem are more than those from men. It calls for harmonious coexistence between man and nature. As far as Aldo Leopold's concerned, man, as a part of nature, should respect and love nature. What's more, man and nature can have mutual influence on each other.

#### 1. Man as a Part of Nature

Leopold believes that man is just a part of nature instead of the master of nature. "In short, a land ethic changes the role of homo species from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (Leopold, 2010, p. 312). Leopold regards all creatures such as skunk, mouse, goose, oak and dog in the sand county as neighbors and friends. "...leave the rest of us in peace. By 'us' I mean the birds, the stream, the dog, and myself. The stream is a lazy one; he winds through the alders as if he would rather stay here than reach the river" (Leopold, 2010, p. 88). Here, "us" implies that Leopold think other species are his partners and friends. Belonging to the same community, they have thoughts and characters just like him. "Every farm is a textbook on animal ecology; woodsman ship is the translation of the book" (Leopold, 2010, p. 116). "Woodsman" here means all kinds of animals such as chickadee, rabbit, grouse and deer living in the farm with human beings. Leopold believes that animals and human beings should have equal status. That is to say, man is a member of nature just like those animals. "This time I get the lunch all the way out and sit down to eat. A chickadee watches me, and grows confidential about his lunch" (Leopold, 2010, p. 84). When the author sits down and enjoys his meal, a chickadee tries to hide his own lunch. In Leopold's eye, the chickadee is like a naughty boy. He and the chickadee have lunch together in the open air as friends do. What's more, Leopold takes his own dog as his professor since the dog can help him learn the way to find birds. And he views the pine as his child for he plants it by himself.

From the above, It can be easily known that Leopold doesn't think man is the master of nature, but the part of land community and the part of nature. Leopold considers other species as neighbors and friends living in the same

community. Nowadays, why do we people face problems, such as air pollution, globe warming? Undoubtedly, people do not realize the truth that man is just a part of nature. Man destroys the nature, the nature would ruin man in return. "On the shoulders of a giant we may see farther than a giant" (Knight, 2002,P.6). Leopold is a giant, and his attitude towards nature and creatures is worth learning.

## 2. Love and Respect for Nature

In the book *A Sand County Almanac*, every creature in nature is characterized by vitality, intelligence and mystery. In Leopold's opinion, they symbolize the richness and fineness of nature. And he shows deep love and respect for nature through his poetic description of nature. Although this book does not directly urge readers to show their respect for other species or nature, it arouses a feeling of respect from the bottom of your heart after reading.

In "February", Leopold gives a specific description of the whole life of an eighty-year-old oak which eventually dies of a bolt of lightning. When the oak is alive, it experiences all kinds of disasters such as rain and blizzard, drought and conflagration, insect pests and plant diseases, human damage and so on, and it is so strong that it can overcome all the hardship. During the whole life of the oak, it brings a lot of benefits to other species by offering shelter, food and fresh air. After its death, it can also contribute to the world by serving as red coals to warm people and serving as nourishment for other plants.

Besides the vitality of nature, Leopold also shows respect for the insistence on the old habits and promise of animals. "A chipmunk, emerging for a sunbath but finding a blizzard, has only to go back to bed. But a migrating goose, staking two hundred miles of black night on the chance of finding a hole in the lake, has no easy chance for retreat. His arrival carries the conviction of a prophet who has burned his bridges" (Leopold, 2010,p. 24). The migration of geese is always a journey full of difficulties and dangers. During that time, they are likely to suffer hunger, terrible weather or even getting shot by man. In spite of all of these hardships, the geese never stop their journey between south and north, which seems to be an eternal promise for themselves.

In *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold believes that all the creatures in nature are equal. As human beings, we'd better love and respect all the natural existences, the wilderness, animals and plants. The natural existences are all full of purity and mystery. In Leopold's eyes, all the creatures in nature are equal. We can notice Leopold's deep love and respect for nature from his poetic description of nature in *A Sand County Almanac*. No word writes about how the author love and respect nature, but readers can feel that from his description of nature. Many people don't like skunk, but in *A Sand County Almanac* it is even described as a cute, smart and romantic animal. As we all know, the skunk has the ability to predict the arrival of thaw and the arrival of spring. So Leopold says he is so intelligent. One day, Leopold follows the trace of the skunk and finds the skunk might fall in love with "a girl". Leopold uses personification to show us vividly how lovely the skunk is. He also uses "he" instead of "it", which shows his respect and love for animal. It is so easy for readers to find such example in *A Sand County Almanac*. Generally, Leopold just wants to show us something interesting happening in nature and at the same time, he also wants to call for love and respect for nature.

## 3. Mutual Influence of Nature and Human Beings

As for relationship between nature and human beings, Leopold also claims that nature and human beings can influence each other. It is certain that human activities may cause good or bad effects on nature and in reverse nature can pay back or revenge human beings.

In this book, Leopold gives some description of bad situation. In order to protect his cattle and goats, the cowman kills the wolves. As his herds increase to a large scale, the grassland cannot provide enough grass for them. In consequence, the grassland is gradually degrading, which causes the loss of soil and water and hence the sand storm. At last, the disasters will undoubtedly bring lots of sufferings to human beings. In a word, the improper activity of the cowman causes certain damage on nature and in reverse it leads to nature's revenge on man.

In ancient times, people got along well with the whole nature. There is no pollution at that time. The sky was blue and the mountain covered by thick wood. However, our life has been totally changed since the mid-19th century. The industrial revolution changed the way people utilize the nature. People took food and cut timber indiscriminately. However, we'd better know that humans are just part of nature. The survival of species depends on the healthy ecosystems, and the same as human beings. Nature provides us the most basic needs like clean water, food, medicines and so on. Apart from meeting some of our most basic needs, nature also can let us feel relaxed and refreshes us. Leopold believes that human beings take many kinds of social action for developing. What we should do is to live harmoniously with nature to reap maximum benefit.

## B. Land Ethics

Leopold's greatest legacy in environmental ethics is the seminal essay in *A Sand County Almanac*, "The Land Ethics." In this essay, Leopold describes the land as a circuitous system. In the system, energy is ceaseless recycle and people is not the master. All the living creatures exist as equal citizens. Because of such relation to the land, Leopold posits that ethical treatment ought to be expanded to include the ecological whole. In short, Leopold is trying to improve the land ethics from the following three aspects.

### 1. Extension of Ethics

Anthropocentrism argues that people have the rights to control the whole world, and nature differs from human beings. Anthropocentrism believes that the nature is just resource for people. It is their obligation to satisfy people's needs. In their eyes, people can pollute the air and water at random, people can dump rubbish anywhere. The world is

facing serious environmental crisis. Anthropocentrism has no respect for nature. Under such circumstances, Leopold reinvestigates the relationship between man and nature to improve or change such disharmony relationship. Through his unremitting efforts, Leopold puts forward land ethics. "An ecologically ethic is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct" (Leopold, 2010,p.308). The land ethic seems to be a kind of limitation and differentiation. Leopold wants to enlarge the range of ethic to restrict people's action, which is important to change the relationship between man and nature. Leopold puts forward three steps of the extension of the ethics range. The first step is to handle the relationship between human beings. The second step is to handle the relationship between individual and society. The third step is to enlarge the ethic range to land. In other words, Leopold's land ethic is about how to do with the relationship between person, land and nature. Nowadays, the three steps are still very important, and provide a new way and new perspective to solve the increasingly serious ecological crisis.

## 2. Land Community

Apart from the enlarged ethical range, land ethic also expands the land range. Leopold believes that the land not only means the soil but also contains other things such as plants, water, animals, and so on. In his opinion, the whole nature is a community. With its own inner value and the right to survive, nature should not be controlled by man. "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for)" (Leopold, 2010,P.311-312). According to Leopold, ethic can set limitations on all the members in the community. All the members in the community should be respected and given equal rights. The theory totally changes the man-nature relationship. All the existences have rights to survive. Creatures also have feelings, thoughts like human beings, so we'd better respect them when we utilize them. What's more, man and nature should cooperate with each other and never damage the balance of ecological system. In order to realize the harmonious coexisting, Leopold even provides some rules for people to follow.

## 3. Criteria of Land Ethics

Since land is taken into a moral consideration by Leopold, men are supposed to love, respect and protect land. But what are the criteria of land ethics? How do people judge their activities on land are proper or improper? In *A Sand County Almanac*, the criteria of land ethic is proposed by Leopold to judge people's action: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to otherwise" (Leopold, 2010,p.344). Leopold states that stability, integrity, and beauty are all indispensable in the biotic community. This new standard attaches great importance to the equality between man and nature, and seeks for a diverse, stable and rich ecosystem as well as a land community with integrity, stability and beauty. Under the premise of not damaging the balance of ecosystem, man can catch and hunt animals properly. Nowadays, due to people's unlimited action, many species are in danger. Some of them even disappeared. Not only human beings but also other species need an integrity, stability and beautiful environment. People wish for the world peace, other species wish to live in harmony with human beings. So we are supposed to live by the new criteria proposed by Aldo Leopold from now on.

## C. The Value of Wilderness

In the last part of *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold discusses the values of wilderness, which include the recreational value, the aesthetic value, the cultural value, the scientific value and the ecological value,

### 1. The Recreational Value of Wilderness

Recreational value is undoubtedly the most visible values of wilderness, since wilderness is a vital place for a lot of outdoor activities including hunting, packing, picnicking, canoeing, fishing and so on. "The value of recreation is not a matter of ciphers. Recreation is valuable in proportion to the intensity of its experiences, and to the degree to which it differs from and contrasts with workaday life. By these criteria, mechanized outings are at best a milk-and-water affair" (Leopold, 2010,p.356). Leopold implies that ecological education can alter people's feelings towards the environment. If the wilderness is beautiful, visitors will come and enjoy it. In contrast, if the wilderness is dirty and barren, people will destroy it. Leopold means that wilderness is a kind of land with balanced healthy, ecologically model. The primitive recreation in wilderness can provide a person quite different experience and joy, thus wilderness is of great recreational value,

Nowadays, most people tend to enjoy the mechanized outings rather than get the primitive recreation in wilderness. They like to use the modern mechanized vehicles, such as car, motorboat and so on. Leopold hopes that people can leave some place for the wilderness for the primitive recreation in wilderness.

### 2. The Aesthetic Value of Wilderness

The wilderness is also characteristic of its aesthetic value. Other than the economic value and practical value, aesthetic value sometimes may not be understood by the vulgar people or the people forced by livelihood because some phenomenon arousing hikers aesthetic feeling may lead to sufferings from hunger, coldness or even death. As for a man, he or she can be sensible about the aesthetic value of the wildness only if he or she has made some aesthetic accomplishment. "The swoop of a hawk, for example, is perceived by one as the drama of evolution" (Leopold, 2010,p.382). For those who bear certain aesthetic skill or imagination, this kind of aesthetic view can actually enriches human sense on beauty. However, in today's society, lots of people merely seek for the aesthetic excitement and take no care of the wilderness.

Just as the old saying goes: “The world is not lack of beauty, but lack of aesthetic vision” (Nash, 2002,p.138). Not only the harmony but also the disharmony of wilderness have their own beauty. Due to the aesthetic value, wilderness is always the source of inspiration for people. The transformative account of aesthetic appreciation of nature may provide us with a way of seeing value in both individuals and ecosystems. It may provide a way to combine the holistic view with individualistic considerations. If one realizes this, one will learn to appreciate the regional and global beauty of the wilderness for the reason that they are also the part of our aesthetic experience of the wilderness. Leopold claims that people should improve their aesthetic abilities towards wilderness.

### 3. The Cultural Value of Wilderness

In addition, Leopold mentions cultural value, and he believes wilderness has relationship with American culture. Leopold describes: “Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization. Wilderness was never a homogeneous raw material. It was very diverse, and the resulting artifacts are very diverse. These differences in the end-product are known as cultures. The rich diversity of the world’s cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth” (Leopold, 2010,p.348). Leopold believes that human civilization originates from wilderness whose diversity leads to the diversity of world’s culture. It is of great value for human culture. According to Leopold, the value of it can be divided into three kinds. First is the value that helps people keep in mind their national origins and evolution. In other words, wilderness can stimulate the awareness of human historical conscience. The second is the value which helps people to realize their dependency on the food chain of ecosystem, and the importance of the fundamental organization in the biota. The third is the value which exercises those ethical restraints collectively called “sportsmanship”.

### 4. The Scientific Value of Wilderness

Another important value of wilderness is scientific value. As Leopold states: “In general, the trend of the evidence indicates that in land, just as in the human body, the symptom may lie in one organ and the cause in another. The practices we now call conservation are, to a large extent, local alleviations of biotic pain. They are necessary, but they must not be confused with cures. The art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor, but the science of land health is yet to be born” (Leopold, 2010,p.360). Leopold means that wilderness is a kind of land with balanced healthy, ecologically model. At a time, when so much of the environment is disturbed by human beings, wilderness is the criterion to measure the impact of civilization. Without it, we have no way to know how the land mechanism functions under normal conditions. Land is an organic system just as human body. The problem of one part may lie in other parts. Superficial treatments can only ease the biotic pain rather than cure it. Leopold declares that there should appear the science of land health so as to fulfill the task of curing the sick land. And he thinks that “a science of land health needs, first of all, a base datum of normality, a picture of how healthy land maintains itself as an organism” (Leopold, 2010,p. 360).

What’s more, Leopold says that “One cannot study the physiology of Montana in the Amazon; each biotic province needs its own wilderness for comparative studies of used and unused land” (Leopold, 2010, p.362). Wilderness in each biotic province is very important and valuable for the scientific study of land health in this area. The study data in this area may not be useful for another area and thus cannot provide the corresponding resolution. Therefore, it is quite significant and urgent to protect the remnant wilderness in every biotic province. According to Leopold, “in short all available wild areas, large or small, are likely to have value as norms for land science” (Leopold, 2010, p.364). Whether the wilderness is large or small, it is useful for land science. This is the scientific value of wilderness.

### 5. The Ecological Value of Wilderness

Ecology is a scientific study of organisms and their environment. Since the land ethic lays a foundation for ecological finding, our perceptions and values may change as our ecological understanding increases. According to Leopold, wilderness is of ecological value. Wilderness plays a basic part in keeping the ecosystem a whole, and creates all variety of species and breeds them. Besides, it is essential to maintain the biodiversity, stability of biosphere. During primitive times, people live in the wilderness which provides people everything they need. It can be called the cradle of human beings. In wilderness, all kinds of living creatures including men and other lives live together in a cooperative and competitive way, creating a harmonious and ordered environment. Thus, wilderness can be viewed as a healthy organic whole.

All in all, the wilderness not only has such five values, but it can provide us more than these values. Considering these aspects, we are supposed to respect the wilderness.

## III. CONCLUSION

As one of the masterpieces of Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* is a book which gives a description of the place where Leopold lived. It is a combination of natural history, scene painting and his philosophy. This paper mainly analyzes ecological themes in the book.

First, Leopold gives a new angle of man-nature relationship. He believes man as a part of nature should respect and love nature rather than overexploit or even damage nature. In addition, he thinks there are mutual influence between man and nature. Besides, Leopold expresses his criticism on wrong thoughts and behaviors of human beings that can probably cause terrible consequences to nature as well as man. He presents his criticism on the deep-rooted anthropocentrism and the abuse of science and technology.

Second, Leopold puts forward a significant theory “land ethic” which lays a foundation on new ecological ethics. He enlarges the ethic range to land and to the whole nature and sets the criteria of land ethic: stability, integrity and beauty of the biosphere. Furthermore, he describes the importance of ecological conscience which is fundamentally helpful to solve ecological crisis and protect the ecosystem.

At the end, Leopold provides a detailed description of the values of wilderness which consist of the recreational value, the aesthetic value, the cultural value, the scientific value and the ecological value.

On the whole, *A Sand County Almanac* is a great work filled with many valuable ecological thoughts. It offers people a better understanding of nature and the man-nature relationship, and also it can give some useful and valuable ideas for people to deal with the increasingly serious environmental crisis.

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