

A City Ethic for 'Plain Members and Citizens'

by Dave Cieslewicz

Over half a century ago, Aldo Leopold recognized that one of the greatest threats to the natural environment was society's very fascination with – and attraction to – that environment.

"Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness," he writes in his essay *The Green Lagoons*. But while Leopold's concerns in the 1940s focused on the hunters, birdwatchers, and other enthusiasts which America's fledgling car culture allowed to visit the countryside frequently and en masse, today our natural resources face the greatest threat not from those who visit the rural landscape, but from those who increasingly choose to inhabit it.

After more than a decade of work on land use issues, I have come to the conclusion that sprawl is the primary remaining environmental problem in America – underlying most of the others – and that we will not solve it until we convince people that city life is the best way to live as "plain members and citizens of a biotic community." To me, this "City Ethic" is a natural extension of Leopold's work.

In his book, *The Wealth of Cities*, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist lists the environmental benefits of urban living. "Cities," he writes, "are, on balance, good for the environment. (City dwellers) pollute far less, on average, than their suburban neighbors.

"More gasoline is needed to support the auto-dependent lifestyle," Norquist continues. "More electricity must be generated to heat and cool the large homes; more resources must be used to provide roads, pipes, and utility lines to the scattered sites; more energy must be consumed to supply water and return sewage from homes farther and farther away from municipal plants; more trucks must use more gas to move products farther and farther; more chemicals are applied to control the weeds on larger and larger lawns and more water is needed to keep those lawns green; and, most important, more land must be cleared and leveled to accommodate the same amount of living."

Despite the advantages of city living for the environment we all share, many of us feel that country – or at least large-lot suburban – life is best for our *personal* environment. In a poll conducted last year by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, a plurality of Wisconsinites said that most development should take place in cities, but only 6% wanted to live there themselves. Only 15% thought more development should take place in rural areas, but 44% wanted to live in the country. We seem to understand the problem of sprawl while we are reluctant to accept its cure in choosing city life for ourselves.

The irony is that so many people move to the country because they profess a love for nature. The ethic we need to

"Page Two" essays in *The Outlook* endeavor to stimulate thought-provoking discussion on the contemporary impact of Aldo Leopold's philosophy and work.

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develop is just the opposite – if you love nature, make your home in the city. If we don't like sprawl, we shouldn't live sprawl.

So, how would a city ethic change our views of what it means to live as citizens of a biotic community? In the most fundamental way we would begin to take as much care with cities as we do with nature. We would take a greater interest in the magnificent subtleties of urban design that spell the difference between a place that works and a place that doesn't. We would begin to understand that it is as important to be a good urbanist as it is to be a good naturalist.

Too often, when environmentalists think about cities at all, we think about importing nature back into them. Urban parks are a great thing, but in Wisconsin – as in most places in America – the problem is not that we don't have enough urban open space. The problem is that we don't have enough *urban*. A good, dense urban neighborhood with sidewalks and porches and corner stores and good schools and a strong neighborhood association is not only a good place to live; it makes fewer demands per unit of housing on land, air, and water than sprawling (and superficially green) large-lot subdivisions or country estates.

We can help build this ethic by following Leopold's tutelage: "The mechanism of operation is the same for any ethic: social approbation for right actions; social disapproval for wrong actions."

Just as we made it unacceptable to litter or to throw away recyclable materials or to smoke in airplanes, we need to raise the ethical stakes about the choice to live in the country. Where we choose to live is perhaps the most important personal environmental decision we will make. But the idea that the simple act of making your home in the city is good for the environment has not yet caught on. It is not at all unusual for people to live inside a massively overbuilt house in a drive-everywhere subdivision or alone on a hilltop and to consider themselves good environmentalists because there is a bag of recyclables in the back of the SUV. We cannot afford to be fastidious about the trivial and careless in the profound.

By and large – unless you are working to restore the land or a farmer growing food for the rest of us – the decision to live in the country is a bad one and we should say so. The decision to make your home in a city is a good one – and we should say that as well.

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Aldo Leopold's boyhood home of Burlington, Iowa stretches toward the Mississippi River in this turn-of-the-century photo.

Des Moines County Hist. Soc., Burlington, IA

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This will not be easy. Our choices about where to live are highly personal. They are markers for social status. They reflect – sometimes not too endearingly – our notions of who we like and who we don't. It is no small matter to raise questions about those personal decisions, but it is important to keep in mind that they are not *just* personal decisions. Where and how we choose to live has an impact on the air we all breathe, the water we all drink, the wildlife we all hope to enjoy – and it has an impact on the land.

Leopold also wrote, "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, afflictions, and conviction. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial."

The city ethic is not an easy thing because it lets no one off the hook. We cannot pass along all of the blame to developers or the government. We cannot preach living in greater density for someone else. But, someday, if we get it right, we might live in a world that is better balanced between that part of nature that we leave alone and the places we build for ourselves.

Henry David Thoreau, a key figure in Leopold's own intellectual development, was right when he wrote, "In wildness is the salvation of the world." I like to think that had he lived to see the problems of sprawl that were just emerging when he died, Leopold might have concluded that in cities is the salvation of wildness.