

Discussion Questions for “A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There” by Aldo Leopold

March 27, 2020

1. Leopold writes in the foreword “the opportunity to see geese (outside the windows of the Fremont Library OR in the wilderness) is more important than television”. Thoughts?
2. This book, especially THE LAND ETHIC, pointed people’s thinking and public policy towards an awareness that people are dependent on Nature in many known and still unknown ways. Is it still transformative?

If we have absorbed the message, have we become too complacent about its urgency? There is a multiple prizewinning novel THE OVERSTORY by Richard Powers. It is about a small group of people who have learned to see the natural world as alive, but in great danger.

3. Having found “a law of diminishing returns in progress,” Leopold says about the seasons sections of the book (January to December) that they describe his “week-end refuge from too much modernity”.

How would you describe what we have lost “from too much modernity”?

4. This sentence is one of my favorites- Leopold writes about March that “it is at this moment each year (when the geese are home again) that I wish I were a muskrat, eye-deep in the marsh”.

Q. Why is that? Two questions really. The first is about the geese returning; answer below. The second is what is so special about being “a muskrat eye-deep in the marsh”?

A. Because “We measure the amplitude of our spring by ... the number of geese that stop”. Back to question 1.

5. In July, he writes “during every week from April to September there are, on the average, ten wild plants coming into first bloom.”

Which plants’ birthdays have you noticed in past years?

6. Leopold continues “tell me of what plant-birthdays a man takes notice, and I shall tell you a great deal about his vocation, his hobbies, his hay fever, and his ecological education”.

What is your answer? Can we guess your vocation, etc., based on your answer to question 5.

7. What is the definition of “ecology”?

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8. In many places throughout the year Leopold refers to plants and animals as having human feelings.

Is that good science or romantic fantasizing? (Remember that science has recently discovered The Hidden Life of Trees. There is a book with that title, full of wonders, by Peter Wohlleben)

9. Perhaps most challengingly, Leopold argued for a “Land Ethic”. He wrote that all ethics involve the rules governing the competition between members of a community. “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land”. He continues “ in short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it”.

Are all its citizens (humans, animals, plants, etc.) equal? If so, equal, in what ways?

10. Leopold rejects the metaphor of the “balance of nature” and adopts as a truer image “the biotic pyramid”.

What does he intend by switching metaphors?

11. Phrased another way, people have begun to use the term “anthropocene” to describe these times as a new geologic age (meaning that humans are the primary change makers of Nature these days).

If that is correct, how does it change our ethical obligations: to the Land; to each other?

12. Oops. Almost forgot to ask based on the Almanac which month is your favorite?