

LAR 322 Environmental Issues & Ethics (Spring UGE course) – Lee R. Skabelund (4/9/09)
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From the Syllabus (builds upon work by Dr. Tim Keane, who taught LAR 322 for many years):

1) “The key-log which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. 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.” 2) “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.” Aldo Leopold – *A Sand County Almanac*

COURSE OVERVIEW

The two quotes above serve as a touchstone for this course. The course will be guided by what we refer to as Leopold’s ethical progression. This progression begins with ecological literacy – a basic understanding of ecology and the structure and functioning of ecosystems. The second phase of the progression can be called land aesthetics. Here an increasing ecological literacy allows an increased aesthetic harvest to be gleaned from our environment. Finally, as we come to “understand” our environment and to “see” it, we become prepared to think and act ethically towards it. Thus, the final phase of the progression is our own environmental ethic. This progression is never-ending and cyclic in nature. It relies first and foremost on reestablishing our connection with our surroundings. As such, the over-arching goal of this course is to begin a process of re-connection between ourselves and the land which sustains us, a process that Wes Jackson (1996) has referred to as “becoming native to this place.”

COURSE OBJECTIVES – At the completion of this course each student should:

- Possess a basic understanding of **ecological factors and processes**; a basic ecological literacy;
- Appreciate the value of **clear, accurate, precise, relevant, broad, in-depth, and logical reasoning** as well as **sound science** as a basis for understanding environmental problems;
- Possess a familiarity with the concepts of land or environmental **aesthetics**;
- Possess a basic understanding of environmental **ethics** and be able to employ this understanding in the formation of a personal set of land/environmental ethics (which may also be labeled a strong sense of stewardship for the bio-region, landscape, community, and place we live);
- Be familiar with the concepts of **sustainability** and **conservation of resources and ecosystem services** and be able to judge if various forms of resource use are sustainable;
- Possess increased abilities in **critical thinking** and a **systems approach** to thinking (as opposed to simplistic linear thought) in order to balance discussions of environmental considerations;
- Possess increased confidence in written **communication** skills; and
- Realize that each individual can conserve resources – and within their communities work towards a more sustainable lifestyle (thus practicing an ethic of environmental **stewardship** day to day).

NOTABLE QUOTES

“Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors; we borrow it from our Children.” Chief Seattle

“The outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, [or the computer], but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little is known about it. The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: ‘What good is it?’ If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useful parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.” Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1966 (*The Round River*).

“Sustainable ecosystems are entire natural systems that persist over time by recycling nutrients and maintaining a diversity of species in balance [better termed *relative equilibrium*] and by using the Sun as a source of sustainable energy... Applying the concept of sustainability to human systems, we say that a sustainable society is a society in balance with the natural world, continuing generation after generation, neither depleting its resources base by exceeding sustainable yields nor producing pollutants in excess of nature’s capacity to absorb them... On the basis of expectations of continued economic growth and progress, the crux of the problem is seen to be modern civilization’s inexperience with sustainability. No modern civilization on Earth has ever done it. How do we resolve this dilemma?”

Richard T. Wright, *Environmental Science: Toward a Sustainable Future*, 2005 (page 9).

Keystones: Commitment and Stewardship; Application of Sound Science; Conserving Ecosystem Capital

In this course I formally discuss ethics during several class periods (and more informally during many others, when I ask: what ought we to do in this situation?).

More formal in-class discussions include:

- Week 1 – Reading Leopold (here I discuss how science, aesthetics, and ethics inform Leopold)*
- Week 2 - Ecosystems & Ethics (here I discuss how science, aesthetics, and ethics should inform us)*
- Week 2 - Sound Science/Critical Thinking*
- Week 6 - Ecological Foundations: Wildlife (and Human Interactions)*
- Week 6 - Ethical Foundations (here I provide examples of ethical thinking)*
- Week 7 - Landscape Ecology: Making Connections*
- Week 8 - Human Population: Issues*
- Week 8 - Agriculture, Food & Farmland*
- Week 9 - Whacker & Sprayer Madness? The Environmental Impacts of Lawn/Turf*
- Week 13 - Environmental Pollution & Hazards; Links to Human Health, Economics & Politics*
- Week 14 - Striving for a No-Waste Society (Waste=Food/Energy)*
- Week 16 - Leopold's Land Ethic: Upshot for Our Personal & Professional Lives*

I ask students to consider ethical issues in their “research project” (where they explore an environmental issue of their choosing, usually with a partner, and then present their research to a group of 6-10 peers) – and in their second paper on Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, which could focus more explicitly on ethics. The paper assignment is currently framed and evaluated in the following manner:

In this paper, the second of two required for the course, you will critically review Parts 3 and 4 of *A Sand County Almanac: With essays on conservation from Round River*, by Aldo Leopold, published in 1966. Part 3 is titled “A Taste for Country” and Part 4 is titled “The Upshot.” After reading all essays in Parts 3 and 4, select one of the essays in Part 4, “The Land Ethic,” “Wilderness,” or “Conservation Esthetic,” and structure your paper based upon the following: Briefly explain why you selected this essay, and your specific interests in relation to the material presented within the essay. Review the selected essay critically, describing its main themes or messages, your agreement or disagreement, and reasons why. Relate the themes or messages presented in your selected essay to those presented in Part 3 (required) and Parts 1 and 2 (optional). Conclude your paper with your general impressions or observations of the entire book. How has the book influenced you? How do the ideas discussed by Leopold relate to your text – *Environmental science: Towards a sustainable future* (Wright 2008, Tenth Edition)? Briefly discuss two examples to highlight this relationship.

Grading Rubric: Content (120 points); Coherence & Clarity - Structure/Grammer/Spelling (30 points)

- Explanation of selected essay is clear, interesting, and illustrates a personal connection;
- Discussion of selected essay clearly identifies the major themes or messages;
- Size of explanation of selected essay is in proportion to other required sections;
- Comparison/contrast of selected essay themes with other essays is clear and precise;
- Comparison of selected essay themes with content in Wright is clear and precise;
- Conclusions about the book are clearly identified and meaningfully discussed.

I frequently feed students with information that relates directly to ethics (links to websites such as the *Architecture 2030 Challenge* (www.architecture2030.org), professional ethics, Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics” (www.constitution.org/ari/ethic_00.htm), the ISEE environmental ethics bibliography (www.cep.unt.edu/bib/index.htm), John Cairns’s 37 papers on *Eco-Ethics & Sustainability Ethics* (www.int-res.com/book-series/esep-books/esep-book-2/), at least ten videos that present eco-ethical dilemmas (which they must respond to in class), and via essay exam questions (example: *Define and then explain the differences between the moral theories called “deontology” and that of “teleology”. Explain how a landowner in Kansas who plans to keep their prairie pasture-land in good health in perpetuity may be driven by a different ethic than an out-of-state landowner who reports to shareholders every three months. Is a holistic nonanthropocentric ethic possible for either type of owner?*). Finally, I credit others, state my biases, cite my sources, and ask my students to be rigorous in doing the same.