

# Discussion Guide for

# A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC

## by Aldo Leopold

1968 Oxford University Press, paperback

In 1935, pioneering wildlife manager Aldo Leopold purchased a worn-out farm on the Wisconsin River outside of Baraboo, Wisconsin. The farm and its renovated chicken coop served him and his family as a refuge from “too much modernity” as well as a laboratory for some of the earliest efforts at land restoration.

The Leopold family spent numerous weekends at “the Shack,” hunting, planting pines, and exploring the land.

Leopold came to Wisconsin after years with the Forest Service in the Southwest, where he began as a forester and later advocated for wildlife management and wilderness designation. The nation’s first designated wilderness, the Gila, was a result of his efforts.

After his time with the Forest Service, he published the first textbook in wildlife management, and became chair of game management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – the first for the institution and the nation.

*A Sand County Almanac* was his signature work: Leopold weaved together many observations and insights gathered during a life lived close to the land. He learned it would be published just a week before his death from a heart attack in 1948.

Since its publication in 1949, *A Sand County Almanac* has sold over two million copies and has been translated into nine different languages.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation has permission to distribute this discussion guide, which was developed by the [Northwest Earth Institute](#) in Portland, Oregon.

**Purpose of discussion guide:** Discussions allow participants to explore ways in which humans relate to their natural surroundings.

**Session 1** (40 pages)

**Readings:** Forward pp. vii-ix  
“January” - “June” pp. 3-40

**Opening:** The facilitator should ask participants to introduce themselves by sharing their experience or feelings about a natural place which is, or has been, a community to them.

1. Leopold describes vividly his experiences with nature. Can you recall natural places that made a strong impression on you?
2. Of his sketches January through June, which is the most meaningful to you? Why?
3. What values do you find in observing nature?

4. Leopold often reflects on humanity in the context of nature (e.g., his comparison of men and fish in “June,” pp. 38-39). Were there any reflections that you particularly appreciated?
5. What insights did you gain from “Good Oak” (“February,” pp. 6-18)?
6. Is it important to you to know where your food and heat come from? (“February,” p. 6) Why?
7. Did you have any reflections about the role of fire after reading “Bur Oak”? (“April,” pp. 26-30)
8. Observing the woodcock dance caused the naturalist to alter his behavior. (“April,” pp. 30-34) Have you had any experiences with nature that have spoken to you about a need for change?

**Session 2** (46 pages)

**Readings:** “July” - “December” pp. 41-92

1. The author presents many striking images in short phrases. For instance, he characterizes a partridge-hunting dog as “the prospector of the air, perpetually searching its strata for olfactory gold.” (“October,” p. 63) Share any descriptions that struck you and why they did.
2. Do these sketches raise any ecological or conservation issues? What general principles emerge about attitudes you might take toward the land?
3. In your opinion, what are humans’ great possessions? (“July,” pp. 41-44)
4. How do you respond to the question Leopold raises: “Can we have both progress and plants?” (“July,” pp. 44-50)
5. What do you think of Leopold’s definition of a conservationist? (“November,” pp. 67-68)
6. Have you ever experienced a preference or resentment toward a particular plant or animal? Explain. (“November,” pp. 69-73)
7. Leopold learns from and is influenced by pine trees. (“December,” pp. 81-87) If you had to choose a plant you identify with or learn from, what would it be?
8. Did “A Mighty Fortress” challenge or change your view of disease? (“November,” pp. 73-77) Does this sketch have any implications for our tendency to want to clean up?

**Session 3** (38 pages)

**Readings:** “Wisconsin” pp. 95-116  
 “Illinois and Iowa” pp. 117-122  
 “Arizona and New Mexico” pp. 122-133

1. Leopold says that humans are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution; yet he also says we are the only species that can mourn the death of another species. ("Wisconsin," p. 110) What are your thoughts about the "specialness" of humans in relation to other creatures?
2. Does your desire to understand the world rationally set you apart from nature? Or can you know "to what end?" as the crane does? ("Wisconsin," p. 96)
3. Leopold's appreciation of the quality of the marsh is enhanced by his knowledge of its evolutionary history. Describe a place you appreciate, not because of its beauty, but because of your knowledge of its ecology or its history.
4. What is the value to you of wildness? ("Wisconsin," p. 101) In your view, should land be left alone merely for the sake of wildness? Should humans be excluded?
5. What do you think of Leopold's statement that all conservation of wildness is self-defeating because to cherish it we must see and fondle it? ("Wisconsin," p. 101)
6. What does the "Odyssey" narrative mean to you? ("Wisconsin," pp. 104-108)
7. In "Thinking Like a Mountain" how does the naturalist decipher the hidden meaning of the wolf's call? What does the mountain represent? What is the consequence of not thinking like a mountain? ("Arizona and New Mexico," pp. 129-133)
8. How do you respond to Leopold's statement, "Too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run"? Can you give a personal example? ("Arizona and New Mexico," p. 133)

#### **Session 4** (33 pages)

**Readings:** "Oregon and Utah" pp. 154-158  
 "Manitoba" pp. 158-162  
 "The Land Ethic" pp. 201-226

1. Leopold wrote in the 1940's, "The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations." ("The Land Ethic," p. 203) What would you say is our land-relation today?
2. Do you agree that man's role as conqueror of nature is eventually self-defeating? ("The Land Ethic," p. 204) Why or why not?
3. Leopold says the land ethic is extending a community's sensibilities to all members of the community, nonhuman as well as human. What would that mean in your life or community?
4. How did our society's disapproval of slavery come about? Is that relevant to our view of the land?

5. Do new discoveries in science contribute to your sense of kinship with fellow creatures of the earth? (e.g., space pictures of earth, embryonic development, genetic linkages)
6. In thinking about your "land ethic," does it emanate primarily from self interest, or from a true interest in non-human elements?
7. Consider this statement: "A land ethic changes the role of humans from conqueror of the land community to plain members and citizens of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." ("The Land Ethic," p. 204) How would you apply this ethic in practice?
8. ". . .the trend of evolution is to elaborate and diversify." ("The Land Ethic," p. 216) Does this statement cause you to feel any particular responsibility?
9. Do you agree with this passage: "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." ("The Land Ethic," pp. 224-225) Was Leopold suggesting that the integrity of the biotic community supersedes the concerns for its individual members? What are the implications of this concept for you?
10. What is the interplay between the land ethic and human-centered cultural values? (e.g., human rights vs. population control) Does democracy affect our view of the earth?

**Session 6** (20 pages)

**Readings:** "Guacamaja" pp. 137-141  
 "Song of the Gavilan" pp. 149-154  
 "Wilderness" pp. 188-199

1. Can you recall a vivid experience in the wilderness? Does that wilderness still exist? Has it been altered?
2. In your view, what are the values of wilderness?
3. Leopold writes about the aesthetics of the land. In your personal experience can one appreciate land by understanding its evolution and ecology without direct experience? Can the appreciation be developed in one's own backyard?
4. In "The Land Ethic," Leopold said, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relationship [with land] can exist without love, respect, admiration, and a high regard for its value." ("The Land Ethic," p. 223) Which is more motivating for you: beauty (aesthetics) or duty (ethics)?
5. Does your experience support or discount the author's statement: "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"? ("Wilderness," p. 194)
6. According to Leopold, what should conservation mean compared to what it means in practice? ("Wilderness," pp. 195-196, "The Land Ethic," pp. 207-210)

7. Leopold wrote, "The art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor, but the science of land health is yet to be born." ("Wilderness," p. 196) Can you think of examples of doctoring? How would fostering land health be different?
8. What does the author mean by this statement: "Recreational development is a job, not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlively human mind"? ("Wildlife in American Culture," p. 176)
9. What is the most valuable insight or feeling you gained from this book?