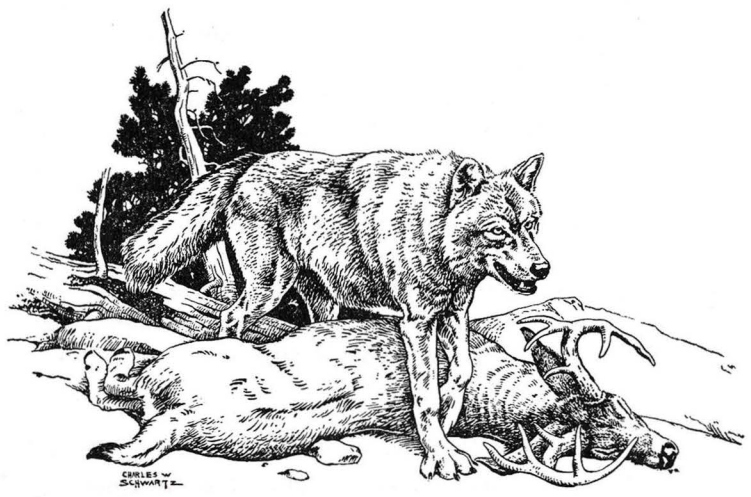
Learning how to think like a mountain

By Holmes Rolston III
For the Coloradoan



"Shoot! They're wolves, not deer! See her shake that big tail coming out of the river."

Rifles emptied, the mother wolf was down. One yearling pup was dragging a leg past some willows into bushy rocks. The others had vanished.

I was standing on a rimrock bluff high over the Black River in the Apache National Forest of Arizona, about where Aldo Leopold shot those wolves a little more than a hundred years ago on Sept. 18, 1909. This was to become the most iconic wolf kill in conservation history.

"We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error. Grown pups joined her. In a second, we were pumping lead into the pack."

I saw no wolves. However, I did see a mule deer doe crossing that same river below and thought that maybe I could hit her with a telescopic sight but not with the iron sights Leopold had.

We might still see a wolf. This is the recovery zone for the Mexican wolf.

I recalled the excitement Leopold still recalled when three decades later he penned his "Thinking Like a Mountain." It is one of the most influential essays in conservation literature.

Leopold scampered from bluff down to river to encounter green fire in the wolf's dying eyes. I looked for a route by which he might have gone down. Not there, too steep. Maybe there, that does come out where there are willows and slide rocks.

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes — something known only to her and the mountain."

What happened in minutes in this then-remote wilderness in Apache National Forest was a shot heard round the world. Leopold's "Sand County Almanac," with this powerful essay, has sold 2 million copies and has been translated into 12 languages.

As Leopold reached the dying wolf, holding his rifle between himself and the wolf, "the wolf gnashed out and grabbed the rifle butt in its teeth," according to memory that comes through his son Luna, who still had the scarred gun.

Leopold's rifle was a Winchester .30.30 model 1894, a short carbine. It looks like this might have been a shot of 125 to 150 yards. Leopold and another ranger named Wheatley emptied their guns and hit only two wolves.

My granddaddy also had a '94 Winchester saddle rifle. I had that gun on my mantel for a half century. As Leopold said, it's hard to shoot downhill. I couldn't have hit anything with it at this distance.

"I've known this country for most of my life," said our guide Don Hoffman. "I first read Leopold when I was a ranger firefighter on the porch of that cabin you are staying in. Read the green fire essay so many times I could recite it from memory. I've read the reports Leopold filed and right here is as likely a spot as any on the river."

Hoffman was guiding myself, Phil Cafaro, a colleague who teaches environmental ethics, and biologist Dean Biggins, who oversees recovery efforts for the black-footed ferret.

"Thinking Like a Mountain," was not penned until 35 years later. There was no evidence of a kill in the otherwise extensive reports filed at the time, required by Leopold's duties. Skeptical critics wondered if the account were not poetic license, a fictional literary device.

But no more. In 2009, a letter surfaced (thanks to the research of Susan Flader) probing into letters in the bank box of a relative.

Toward the end of a nine-page letter to his mother Leopold wrote, "Wheatley and I have killed two Timber Wolves and two Turkeys and a lot of grouse, but no deer."

He laments their bad luck with deer, the loss of his pipe, and also that it is getting cold. There is no epiphany here, but this leaves no doubt that this kill actually took place. He later recalls it seared into his memory.

Leopold had graduated from Yale University earlier that year and moved from the Ivy League to the boondocks. The 22-year-old was only a couple of weeks on the job "young and full of trigger-itch. Many a hunter, growing older, has less trigger-itch and kills with a pang of sorrow," he wrote.

In the dateline of his letter, Sept. 22, 1909, Leopold locates his camp at Slaughter's Ranch, setting camp there on Sept. 10. The wolf kill was on Sept. 18, his day off, when he was turkey hunting. The rim rock situation he describes best fits the place where I was standing, maybe two miles from his camp. If not here then somewhere close by.

We spent a day exploring the rim for other possible sites: rimrock to rimrock, river below, talus-slide slopes and willows on this side of the river. The terrain made a lucky shot possible with a feasible route down often steep canyon walls by which Leopold could have hurried down to the river. An overlook spot appeared to be a place he might have chosen for lunch with a view. There was a decent turkey habitat on the rimrock above.

It took time for the green fire to burn deeper. A few years later, Leopold was still (officially, on the job, at least) advocating exterminating not only the wolves, which were already few, but also the (mountain) lions, plentiful enough to kill thousands of deer. Thinking like a mountain, he saw wolves regulated the deer population and contributed to good hunting.

Yet he was uneasy and came later to regret "my sin against the wolves." Leopold's experience here, he later said reflecting on its impact across his life, "constitutes one of the milestones in moral evolution."

Nevertheless, he spent the rest of his life hunting and, as game manager, trying to produce more game to kill.

I spooked a deer here today, close enough to see her eyes as she looked up just before she ran off.

Leopold seems never to have seen fire in any deer's eye. He shot ducks and late in life recalls his youthful joy without remorse as one fell and landed belly up "red legs kicking."

The mother wolf that Leopold shot here cared for her pups but also cared only to put out any fire in the eyes of a deer. Both she and Leopold could only see meat to eat in a deer.

Leopold, and maybe even the wolf, enjoyed the killing. Maybe the dying green fire in the eyes sees in the hunter and hunted something of the tragedy of life. Killing and eating is the law of life in zoology.

Thanks to what happened here — Leopold's misgivings when he saw the fire in the dying wolf's eyes — I have seen far more wolves than Leopold ever did. The restoration of wolves to Yellowstone, over a decade and a half ago, was one result of Leopold's starting to think like a mountain. I have seen perhaps a hundred wolves alive and alert, mostly in Yellowstone, some in Minnesota. Leopold never records seeing another wolf alive.

Leopold came to focus on ecosystems, which he epitomized as "thinking like a mountain." What moved him on this spot though, was green fire in the eyes of the wolf he had just shot. Maybe we need them both: the self-transforming encounter with a particular wild other that triggers the thinking big about the big outdoors.

I have found walking in Leopold's steps, that reflection about who I am, where I am and what I ought to do happens in wildness as much as in town.

Leopold found himself on a moral frontier on the western frontier. He urged "a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise."

Here I am in the same place, overlooking the gorge a century later, trying to think like a mountain, still on the hunt for the ethic he launched.

Holmes Rolston III is a Fort Collins resident and university distinguished professor emeritus of philosophy at Colorado State University.

Holmes Rolston III is pictured standing on the spot in the Apache National Forest of Arizona where Aldo Leopold might have shot the wolf with the green fire in its eyes. COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON III

Aldo Leopold COURTESY PHOTO *Arizona, about 1909. University of Wisconsin archives*

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