**Aldo Leopold, Native Americans, and the Land Ethic**

Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief.

—Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (1949)

We Americans must come again to a moral comprehension of the earth and air. We must live according to the principle of a land ethic. The alternative is that we shall not live at all.

—N. Scott Momaday, “An American Land Ethic”

**Description:** During his nearly fifteen years in the American southwest, Aldo Leopold came into contact with diverse Native individuals, cultures, and land-use issues. Though Leopold makes no explicit reference to how these contacts may have shaped his development as a conservationist and ethicist, contemporary scholars have begun to examine the relationship between Leopold’s culminating vision of a land ethic and the comparable visions traditionally expressed by indigenous peoples. This narrow focus on the origins of the land ethic, however, diverts attention from the far more complex issue of how Leopold’s thought and writings fit into, as well as comment upon, the history of Native American/Euro-American encounter on the land. This course, accordingly, takes a broad view of Leopold’s relationship to Native Americans, using his life and writings as a lens through which to examine the concept of the land ethic, its possible cross-cultural roots, and the ongoing history of intercultural encounter on the land.

**Objectives:** Upon successful completion of the course, students will demonstrate:

1. Understanding of Aldo Leopold’s life in relation to American land history and Native/Euro-American interaction on the land;

2. Appreciation of the land ethic and its possible cross-cultural roots; and

3. Knowledge of traditional and emergent Native attitudes toward land and land-use issues.
Texts (required):


Online course reader containing additional primary sources and critical essays.

Additional readings and resources (on reserve; recommended):

*In the Light of Reverence* (film)
Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain*
Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*
Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*

Assignments: Students will complete three papers during the course of the term. The first will concern the nature of the land ethic as expressed by Leopold and by indigenous peoples (Units 1-2 below); the second will concern the history of Native/Euro-American interaction on the land (Units 3-5 below); and the third, a research paper, will concern contemporary indigenous land-use values and issues (Unit 6 below). If possible, firsthand contacts with representatives of contemporary indigenous peoples, whether in the classroom or within the context of field experiences, will supplement students’ understanding of these issues. Additionally, the final paper will be coupled with a presentation to be addressed to the campus community.

Schedule:

I. Leopold’s Land Ethic (Weeks 1-3): An introduction to the principles, intellectual background, and composition history of Leopold’s land ethic.
   - Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (in *Sand County Almanac*)
   - Nash, “Aldo Leopold’s Intellectual Heritage” (in *Companion to SCA*)
   - Meine, “Building ‘The Land Ethic’” (in *Companion to SCA*)
II. Native Land Ethics (Weeks 4-6): An investigation of the diversity of Native beliefs and practices concerning the land, drawing on both contemporary and ethnographic sources.

- Leopold, “‘Piute Forestry’”; “‘ Conservationist in Mexico’” (in River of the Mother of God)
- Callicott, “Traditional American Indian and Western Attitudes toward Nature”;
  “American Indian Land Wisdom” (in In Defense of the Land Ethic)
- Momaday, “An American Land Ethic” (in online reader)
- Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative” (in online reader)
- Deloria, from God is Red (in online reader)
- Ethnographic sources (in online reader)
- Vecsey, “American Indian Environmental Religions” (in online reader)
- Krech, from The Ecological Indian (in online reader)


- Leopold, “The River of the Mother of God” (in River of the Mother of God)
- Mourt’s Relation (in online reader)
- Spanish colonization narratives (in online reader)
- Cheyfitz, from The Poetics of Imperialism (in online reader)
- Cronon, from Changes in the Land (in online reader)

IV. Frontiers (Weeks 9-10): A survey of policies and practices of Indian dispossession from the origins of the United States through the so-called “closing of the frontier” in 1890.

- Leopold, “Wilderness as a Form of Land-Use” (in River of the Mother of God)
- Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (in online reader)
- Jefferson and Jackson, inaugural addresses (in online reader)
- Cherokee memorials (in online reader)
- Robertson, from Conquest by Law (in online reader)
- Mooney, from The Ghost-Dance Religion (in online reader)
- Lopez, “The American Geographies” (in online reader)

V. Parks and Reservations (Weeks 11-12): A case study of the ways in which the National Parks movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century participated in the dispossession of indigenous peoples.

- Leopold, “Wilderness” (in Sand County Almanac)
- Cole, “Essay on American Scenery” (in online reader)
- Catlin, from Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the American Indians (in online reader)
- Thoreau, “Chesuncook” (in online reader)
- Muir, from Our National Parks (in online reader)
- Spence, from Dispossessing the Wilderness (in online reader)
- Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” (in online reader)
VI. Indian Land-Use Today (Weeks 13-15): A summary of contemporary Indian land-use issues, and an opportunity for students to engage in independent research concerning these issues and to present their findings in a public forum.

- Jaimes, ed., from *The State of Native America* (in online reader)
- Tsosie, “Tribal Environmental Policy in an Era of Self-Determination” (in online reader)