Learning how to think like a mountain

By Holmes Rolston III

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

 Rifles emptied, the moth- er wolf was down. One year- ling pup was dragging a leg past willows into heap- ing bushy rocks. The others had vanished.

 I was standing on a rim- rock bluff high over the Black River in the Apache National Forest of Arizona, where Aldo Leopold shot his first wolf ever, a little more than a hundred years ago. A major event like this, Leopold wrote, was one of the most im- portant events in a man's life.

 he account were not poetic license, a fictional literary device.

 But more to the point, in 2009, a graduate student from the research of Inala Flad- ing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I lost the bright blue eyes of a relative. He discovered that a nine- page letter to his mother, Leopold wrote. "I have killed two ten- mer wolves and two Turkeys and a lot of grouse, but no wolves..."

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

 Leopold had graduated from Yale University earli- er that year and moved from the Ivy League to the backcountry. The 23-year-old was only a couple of weeks on the job "young and full of fire to burn deeper. A few days later, Leopold was still pro- ducing more game."

 Nevertheless, he spent a day exploring the rim for other possible sites: rimrock to rimrock, and down the bank to the river below, talus-slide rock above.

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

 It took time for the green fire to burn deeper. A few years later, Leopold used to officially, on the job, at least admit exterminat- ing 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 avowed wolves regulated the deer pop- ulation 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, "consti- tutes one of the mile- stones in moral evolution."

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

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 He spooked a deer here and there, too steep. Maybe there, there that does come out where there are willows and slide rocks.

 As Leopold reached the dying wolf, holding his rifle between himself and the wolf, "the wolf snorted and grabbed the rifle butt in its teeth," according to Leopold, ndeu to the right side of the river. The terrain made a lucky shot possible with a feasible route deep, often steep canyon walls by which Leopold could have hurtled down to the river. An overlook spot appeared to be a place he might have chosen for lunch with a view. There was decent turkey habitat on the rim rock above.

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