

"Re-examining the Darwinian Basis for Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic."

Abstract:

Aldo Leopold has been referred to as a "prophet" within the field of conservation biology and his land ethic has become the basis for a prominent environmental ethic known as "ecocentrism." Many philosophers have become familiar with Leopold's work through the writings of J. Baird Callicott, who has sought to explicate, defend, and extend Leopold's land ethic. According to Callicott, Leopold bases his land ethic on a "protosociobiological" argument that Charles Darwin gives in the *Descent of Man*, drawing on the ethical views of David Hume and Adam Smith. On this view, which has become the canonical interpretation, Leopold's land ethic is based on extending our moral sentiments to ecosystems, feelings that are "automatically triggered" once we understand that we (humans) are members of a biotic community with other animals as well as plants, soils, and waters. I argue that the evidence weighs in favor of an alternative interpretation of Leopold; his reference to Darwin does not refer to the *Descent of Man*, but rather to the *Origin of Species*, where Darwin discusses the interdependencies between organisms in the struggle for existence. Not only does this reinterpretation avoid the difficulties with the Humean/Smithian basis for the land ethic, but it also opens up important discussions about communities as morally considerable, about the importance of interdependence, and about the nature of ecosystem stability.