

## Forest Stewards Guild 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Essay by Al Sample

In his seminal essay on *The Land Ethic*, Aldo Leopold noted that in the field of conservation there is “a single plane of cleavage. . . . one group (A) regards the land as soil, and its function as commodity-production; another group (B) regards the land as biota, and its function as something broader.” As relates specifically to forestry,

“group A is quite content to grow trees like cabbages, with cellulose as the basic forest commodity . . . its ideology is agronomic. Group B, on the other hand, sees forestry as fundamentally different from agronomy because it employs natural species, and manages a natural environment rather than creating an artificial one. Group B prefers natural reproduction on principle. It worries on biotic as well as economic grounds about the loss of species . . . It worries about a whole series of secondary forest functions: wildlife, recreation, watersheds, wilderness areas. To my mind, Group B feels the stirrings of an ecological conscience.”

Many of us remember when, at some moment early or late in our forestry careers, we first picked up a copy of *A Sand County Almanac* and read this passage. For some of us it was like a bolt out of the blue. Here in just a few words, Leopold had articulated a concept that had long been coursing through our minds, inchoate and unformed, yet powerful and persistent.

But for a practicing forester, what did this really mean? Heading out to the woods the following Monday morning, how would we internalize this concept? How would we reconceive our role and purpose in the forested landscape, and how would it influence our plans, our decisions, our choices? How would we see the forest differently from the way we had looked at it the previous week, and how would this new outlook manifest itself on the face of the land through our actions?

Given that most of us were managing forests that we did not own ourselves, how would we reconcile this changed outlook with the expectations of the real owners, whether private or public? Was this a view widely shared, or just the musings of a single forester-philosopher writing near the end of his life in 1948?

Three decades ago, there were a few foresters who discovered that each of them knew this essay, and that each had found it profoundly meaningful. Each had paused and stepped back for a moment, to re-examine not only *what* they were doing as foresters, but *how* and *why*. There were no easy answers to these questions, but there was value in struggling with them—and sharing that struggle with one another—coming away from these discussions with new insights, new ideas, and new hope.

The few foresters in those discussions became a few more, and then many. It turned out there were scores of foresters who had felt “the stirrings of an ecological conscience,” and who were eager to explore what they could learn from one another. These conversations became the wellspring from which the Forest Stewards Guild emerged 25 years ago.

Since then, those conversations have grown into a nationwide dialogue that has helped redefine the practice of forestry. An ecological conscience has become central to “sustainable forest management”. There is a deeper understanding of “forest stewardship” and the responsibilities that come with caring for the health and well-being of forest ecosystems that sustain a complex web of lives in addition to our own. Almost counterintuitively, this humility has inspired a stronger, clearer sense of purpose, and a renewed commitment to ecologically-sound forestry that future generations will recognize as such on the face of the land.

Scientists tell us that we have entered the Anthropocene, a new epoch of unprecedented uncertainty. This extends to forest ecosystems, which will profoundly affect, and be affected by, global environmental changes. In this “no analog future”, the Forest Stewards Guild will play a critically important role as a leader, and as a forum for the free exchange of new ideas and approaches—with humility, inspiration, commitment, and a now well-developed ecological conscience.