

Collaborative Conservation: Leopold's Land Citizenship in Coal Creek

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On Saturday 14 July 2007, roughly 20 residents of Briceville, TN (formerly known as Coal Creek), along with volunteers from nearby Knoxville gathered for the 2007 Annual Coal Creek Summer Bug Hunt. Those from Knoxville were members of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU) and the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation (CCWF). By counting fish, invertebrates, and assessing water quality, they were gauging the success of their

efforts to restore a degraded stream and improve the health of the entire watershed. For seven years, their work in the Coal Creek watershed had ranged from stream clean-ups to stream bank stabilization, and native species restoration to community education and advocacy.

Over the course of my participatory fieldwork, I came to understand the work of the CCWF in the Coal Creek Watershed of Tennessee as a successful embodiment of what some have labeled “collaborative conservation”¹. Despite contemporary popularity of the concept, Aldo Leopold was an early visionary of collaborative, community-based conservation, as is evident in his vast writings on forestry, community, land health, and his famous “land ethic,” and through his work as a forester in New Mexico or professor in Wisconsin, and his involvement in the Coon Valley Conservation initiative.²

As an example of collaborative conservation, the work of the CCWF is unintentionally carrying on the legacy of Aldo Leopold. As Leopold argued in other contexts, and I will show here, the CCWF is successful because it is truly participatory, taking into consideration the needs and values of the local ecosystem and human communities. Leopold believed collaborative forms of conservation are most successful when they foster values and affections

of devotion to the common good of the community. Successful conservation efforts must operate beyond science and economics, but must also foster values and tethered to both civic and ecosystem goals.³

Thus, in this article, I evaluate the work of the CCWF by drawing on insights from Leopold, as well as contemporary approaches to environmental ethics and collaborative conservation. In so doing, it will become evident that the legacy of Leopold continues to thrive as communities, such as those in the Coal Creek watershed, attempt to address both land and community health. Moreover, a review of a contemporary case-study reveals that Leopold remains the standard through which we should evaluate the success of adventures in collaborative conservation.

Early adventures in collaborative conservation

Donald Snow, a professor of environmental studies at Whitman College, explained that the concept of collaborative conservation represented a “new face of American conservation as we enter the twenty-first century.” While there is no single defining strategy, the concept, in theory and practice

emphasizes the importance of local participation,

sustainable natural and human communities, inclusion of disempowered voices, and voluntary consent and compliance rather than enforcement by legal and regulatory coercion. In short, collaborative conservation reaches across the great divide connecting preservation advocates and developers, commodity producers and conservation biologists, local residents and national interest groups to find working solutions to intractable problems that will surely languish unresolved for decades in the existing policy system.⁴

While Snow noted that the concept represents the vanguard of twenty-first century conservation, collaborative attempts at conservation certainly pre-date the twenty-first century.

Environmental conflict often emerges as “false dilemmas,” which occur when groups assume that moral or value decisions have only two possible outcomes, with an either/or set of options.

Aldo Leopold’s odyssey as a forester in Arizona and New Mexico, professor in Wisconsin, and civil servant throughout his career is a long and inspiring one which commenced as an outdoor enthusiast, hunter, birdwatcher, and angler, and culminated in his famous articulation of the “land ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).⁵ As Leopold biographer Curt Meine explained, “the range of Leopold’s experience was immense,” and this is true of his legacy as well.⁶

By 1933, Leopold had left his forestry career in the American southwest and was fully enmeshed in his work as professor at the University of Wisconsin. However, despite the move, his work in New Mexico, including his time working for the Albuquerque chamber of commerce, impacted his thinking. He was impressed by the civic spirit of the community.⁷ In Wisconsin, he worked through the University’s agricultural extension service, which “conceived the university not as an insular community of scholars, but as an institution whose walls extended to the borders of the state.”⁸ Networking with Wisconsin farming communities he sought to address issues ranging from wildlife on farms, managing cropland, or restoring and controlling erosion prone areas.

In the Coon Valley of southwestern Wisconsin, Leopold encountered a “maze of picturesque valleys and ridges,” that were “highly susceptible to soil erosion.”⁹ Here was farmland that had, over the course of its use for farming, ranching, and timber harvest, lost its fertile

soil and structure, resulting in erosion, flooding, and crop declines.

In the wake of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives created the Soil Erosion Service (SES) within the Department of Interior.¹⁰ According to Meine, “the goal of the SES was not just to save soil, but to reverse the tradition of disintegrative land use that wasted it in the first place.”¹¹ This demanded coordination at federal, regional, and local levels with federal agents, university experts, and local farmers. The Coon Valley of southwestern Wisconsin became the first soil conservation area and project of the SES.¹² Leopold was engaged from the beginning.

Through collaborative efforts (federal support, education, and local initiative), the project in Coon Valley

sought to return the local landscape into a collectively balanced system of land use on both public and private land. Farmers voluntarily worked together to improve the health of their watershed through new farming approaches ranging from contour plowing to strip cropping and livestock management, as well as restoration of gullies and riparian areas.¹³

Leopold deemed the initiative successful because it “seemed closer to [his] ideal of land health, than he had seen throughout his career.”¹⁴ Leopold suspected “that the Soil Erosion Service, perhaps unwittingly, has recreated a *spiritual entity* which many older conservationists have thought long sense dead.”¹⁵ Leopold had in mind a particular working of society toward a greater good—one that incorporated both civic concern and ecological awareness. By keeping that same vision of society in mind, we too can judge the success of other adventures in collaborative conservation, particularly as they seek to change cultural mentalities that led to traditions of disintegrative land use in the first place.

Coal Creek: from prosperity to poverty

The community of Briceville, formerly known as Coal Creek, sits in the middle of the Coal Creek watershed in Anderson County of northeastern Tennessee, roughly 40 miles from Knoxville. Despite its impoverished nature today, it is an area rich in history of Welsh immigrants, coal

mining, and battles for social justice.¹⁶ After the Civil War, coal powered the industrial revolution as America worked toward post-war rebuilding. According to historian Karen Shapiro, “the physical accessibility of southern coal attracted numerous investors” and burgeoning coal companies. The state of Tennessee, and Anderson County in particular, “beckoned along with the rest of the previously unexploited Appalachian coalfields.”¹⁷ Amidst this development, Anderson County prospered significantly in the early post-bellum years. Local progress and success also led to the growth of community institutions that served to “cement a camaraderie and civic consciousness” that would emerge again and again over time.¹⁸

However, as industry shifted elsewhere and mining without proper mitigation took its toll on the landscape, the region saw significant declines in both land and community health. By 2000, Briceville suffered from struggling community infrastructure, health care, and jobs. The community has had a mentality that youth were more likely to go to jail than graduate from high school. Barry Thacker and Carol Moore of the CCWF, explained that in 1990 roughly 66% of adults in Tennessee had graduated from high school, compared to 17% of adults in Briceville. Moreover, merely 0.5% of students from Briceville would go on to graduate from college (Moore, interview: 16 July 2007; Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). Amidst these social problems, the area’s mining history culminated in considerable ecological neglect.

Coal Creek forms the largest tributary to the Norris tail-water of the Clinch River, and therefore influence water quality for the entire watershed. Situated in the middle of Tennessee coal regions, Coal Creek has a history where “copious coal laden silt washed down, resulting from more than a century’s mining upstream and sewage runoff and excess sedimentation,” and impacted the water of the entire watershed.¹⁹

Beyond water quality, stream bank erosion, illegal waste and junk dumping, and regional pollution also caused considerable flooding in the watershed. Flooding had become so prevalent that community members “used to sit up every time it rained, hoping the creek would not rise into their homes” (Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). Those who lived near Coal Creek feared for their lives and homes. This, then, was the state of the Coal Creek watershed in 2000, when the idea for a collaborative conservation project emerged in the minds of concerned trout anglers.

Where the trout spawn: the birth of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation

According to Barry Thacker, the story of the CCWF began 5 February 2000, as group of fly fishers associated with Trout Unlimited (TU)²⁰ discussed potential trout restoration projects in the area. They were primarily concerned with restoring degraded spawning grounds for rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). Thacker directed their attention to Coal Creek, a stream he grew up fishing and had witnessed decline in quality over the years (Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). And although Coal Creek supports trout in its lower, colder reaches, upstream water quality had limited the range of trout higher-up in the watershed.

Therefore, Thacker and other TU volunteers established the Coal Creek Clean Stream Initiative (CCCSI), with the goal of improving watershed water quality. Although the original goals were tied up in trout, they would soon shift as volunteers began to understand how the health of a fishery was inextricably connected to the health of the entire watershed, human community included. They would learn, as Leopold taught, that land health and human good were inseparable.²¹ After all, Leopold wrote in “Planning for Wildlife,” that “stable land is essential to human welfare.”²² However, learning this lesson was not easy, as their plans for river restoration caused local controversy.

Addressing local values: moving from conflict to collaboration

Throughout his career, Leopold recognized the difficult, yet essential nature, of collaboration for successful conservation. As he stated in the context of Coon Valley, “land is better off when all cooperate than when all compete with each other.”²³ Problems arise when each party desired different goals, ends, and aims. The goal, then, was to demonstrate the inseparability of personal interest, land health, and the common good. On Coal Creek, self-interest threatened to roadblock the project before it gained traction.

Environmental conflict often emerges as “false dilemmas,” which occur when groups assume that moral or value decisions have only two possible outcomes, with an either/or set of options.²⁴ On Coal Creek, the false dilemma took the form of “people versus fish.” Individuals were “set,” failing to see beyond their own, needs, habits, or values. When attempting to creatively “break set,” one must understand that while disputes may have simple beginnings, they have a tendency to explode into serious environmental conflict.²⁵ The CCCSI Master Plan states:

In the initial proposals of the CCCSI, the original

goal was simply to make Coal Creek and its tributaries suitable trout habitat for spawning trout. CCCSI was established to perform the work required to apply for a grant from the Office of Surface Mining to ameliorate mine runoff into Coal Creek and reclaim abandoned coal mine lands in the Coal Creek watershed.²⁶

Despite efforts to include other local interests, the CCCSI met a “false dilemma” largely because their mission statement addressed fish habitat first.

Early in the project, locals greeted the CCCSI with picket signs and angry protests (Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). As Thacker recounted, “Folks told me in no uncertain terms that they had far bigger problems than trout.”²⁷ Although the community wanted a clean creek, they did not see how cleaning a stream for fish could help them.

Various values, interests, and concerns can drive a practiced conservation ethic. The goal, then, is to understand how values can evolve from narrow to broad; from self to watershed.

For example, a local leader, the late Reverend Roy Daugherty, advocated clean-up, but did not want funds to go to the CCCSI. “I am opposed to trout fishing taking precedence over the safety of citizens,” he explained. “I don’t think one penny should be given to anybody else until we have the safety we deserve. We are in an emergency situation up there. We need relief yesterday.”²⁸ Despite criticism, Thacker sought to “break set” and began by sitting down with Daugherty and the other community members to assess their concerns.

In response, Thacker listened to local concerns and created a context for the creation of collaborative community values. “By building partnerships and involving community residents the organization has instilled a sense of activism and stewardship in the watershed that will provide the fuel and human capital.”²⁹ In this process, Thacker learned he needed local buy-in. As he said, “you gotta do what people care about” (Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). Listening to the needs of the community—from adequate dental care, educational aid, as well as the conditions of the creek—gave Thacker a new set of goals,

and more importantly, “a groundswell of support” (ibid). With growing community involvement, Thacker dropped the name CCCSI to re-form the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation (CCWF).

The name shift demonstrated that “What started as an attempt to make the creek suitable as a trout-spawning waterway had evolved from water quality issues to improving the quality of life in the Coal Creek Watershed.”³⁰ With a new vision, Thacker set out to acquire the funds for local, collaborative watershed conservation.

The value of game: from economics to inspiration

Over time, Aldo Leopold eschewed economic arguments in favor of preserving wildness and ensuring land health. However, at times he recognized the practicality of tethering arguments for preservation of native species to utilitarian concerns, such as economic perspectives. After all, in his *Game and Fish Handbook* (1915), he noted “The [economic] value of game lie in its variety as well as its abundance.” When it came to game management, Leopold believed that scientific arguments should win the day, as economic arguments were usually inadequate and shortsighted. However, he also noted that “it of course goes without saying that economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done for the land.”³¹ His point here is not that economic arguments should trump, but conservation or land management depends upon adequate funding and social backing.

Similarly, even if the ultimate goal of the CCWF was not economically motivated, they realized their work needed sufficient economic support. In order to secure these funds, Thacker turned to the Federal Abandoned Mine Land Trust, which set aside funds to restore and clean up land and waters near abandoned mines. However, he also knew that simple economic arguments would not necessarily guarantee funding. Coal Creek needed a unique story to stand out and improve the odds of funding.

He believed that trout provided the perfect angle. Recognizing that the Coal Creek watershed covers an area of 39 square miles and holds more than 30 miles of potential trout spawning area, Thacker told an audience of county commissioners, “I am a trout fisherman, I fish the Clinch River, but the Clinch River is limited and Coal Creek has the potential to fish like other streams in the Smoky Mountains.”³²

In his office he explained that trout are special, exist in unique places, and therefore can provide gateway foci for larger watershed projects. Because trout require cold, clean stream habitats, many fisheries biologists including famed researcher Robert Behnke, have argued that trout

are an indicator species akin to a “canary in the coal mine: [they are] the first species to succumb to environmental degradation.”³³ Thacker built on this argument. Moreover, with fly fishers and trout enthusiasts donating well over 618,000 volunteer hours annually for groups such as TU, Thacker recognized the volunteer potential for on-the-ground conservation work in his watershed (Thacker interview: 16 July 2007).³⁴

From river health to human welfare

Just as Leopold recognized the connections between land health and human good when he noted that “Stable (i.e. healthy) land is essential to human welfare,” so too did Thacker.³⁵ In interviews, Thacker repeated that “what is good for trout, is in turn good for the community: a healthy watershed” (Thacker, interview: 16 July 2007). If trout were the way into this project, the future of a healthy watershed also depended upon a healthy community. Building on these ideas, and funded through successful grants, the work could now begin.

Drawing more than 130 volunteers, the CCWF’s first major event, “Deadwood Removal Day” held on 24 June 2000, was bigger than anyone imagined, as they set out to address the community’s number one concern: flooding. By clearing trash, debris, and dead wood from the pilings of thirteen old railroad bridges, the CCWF hoped their efforts would allow the creek to more effectively absorb the heavy rains the community feared so much. The CCWF also engineered several bank stabilization projects which not only repaired stream bank structure and prevented flooding, but have provided great trout habitat.

With the new and improved river structure, it was not long before the area faced what locals described as a “100 year storm.” Just as hoped, the water remained within the stream banks for the first time in recent memory, leading one thankful resident to proclaim, “Look Up! O Briceville, Fraterville, and Beech Grove. See how faith and fellowship can move mountains or even change a creek.”³⁶ What Leopold called a “spiritual entity,” local residents in Coal Creek categorized as “faith and fellowship.”

The CCWF was off to an auspicious start. Local journalist Bob Fowler reflected, “Thacker has managed to help unite two apparently disparate groups into the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation through a coordinated attempt to address and ultimately resolve several thorny quality of life issues involving Coal Creek.” The project was gaining traction. After starting with stream health, they turned their attention to human health.

Briceville and the Coal Creek watershed lacked basic medical and dental infrastructure. Therefore, Coal Creek

Health Day was the second major event. On 26 October 2001, the CCWF converted the gymnasium of the Briceville School into an impromptu dentist office. Coal Creek Health Day provided the perfect inaugural moment for reopening the Briceville People’s Health Clinic. Building on early successes, the first annual Coal Creek Health Day raised and delivered more than \$17,000 in health services donated to the community, as TU members who were physicians volunteered a good portion of the medical services (Moore, interview: 16 July 2007).

The way Dr. Hirosho Toyahara, a retired heart surgeon, fly fisher, and TU volunteer, recalled, Thacker urged the volunteers, “Boys, you can’t fish everyday!” However, Thacker admitted the group hardly needed prodding. As he elucidated

For many children, it was the first time they had seen a doctor or dentist. It was very rewarding to be able to help them . . . and to begin teaching them basic things they could do to improve their health.³⁷

These basic points on community health, however, extend well beyond the healthy teeth, eyes, and hearts. They include the ecosystem also.

Ecosystem health and civic engagement

Today, there is no shortage of literature noting the increasing disconnection between humans and the natural world. Among recent scholarship exploring a “deficit” of nature, Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) lamented the “rapidly advancing technologies” that are creating a cultural milieu where “students spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings” causing their “senses to narrow, physiologically and psychologically,” which then “reduces the richness of human experience.” Alienation from nature, it seems, might not only be detrimental to the human psyche, but also to society and, therefore, to nature.

Environmental philosopher David Orr lamented that education increasingly disengages students from nature rather than bridge the gap. Teaching styles and approaches need to foster “ecological literacy,” by creating opportunities to connect students to nature and encourage a “sense of place” where students “can see, touch, and experience nature in a variety of ways.”³⁸ In “The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education,” Leopold preceded these arguments by insisting that culture and community depend upon “our understanding of the land and its life.” Education should guide one “to see the land” and the human place within

it.³⁹ For Leopold, integrating ecological knowledge into the classroom of the arts, economics, or sciences, presented an opportunity to link civic and land health in education.

Back at the Coal Creek Health Day, as volunteers performed medical check-ups, Charlie Saylor and John Thurman, ecologists for the Tennessee Valley Authority, gave Coal Creek a medical examination of its own kind. While assessing the “health” of Coal Creek, they simultaneously taught local students about the importance of connecting water health to public health. This exercise enacted Leopold’s belief that “Conservation is a state of health in the land-organism. Health expresses the cooperation of the interdependent parts: soil, water, plants, animals, and people. It implies collective self-renewal and collective maintenance.”⁴⁰

Leopold had in mind a particular working of society toward a greater good—one that incorporated both civic concern and ecological awareness. By keeping that same vision of society in mind, we too can judge the success of other adventures in collaborative conservation.

The children were learning basics of ecological literacy. “Seeing the local youth embrace their stream as an indicator of health,” Thurman explained “is gratifying in so many ways” (Thurman, interview: 15 July 2007). Participating in several of the CCWF events, including the 2007 Health Day, I witnessed this enthusiasm first hand. Children crowded around tables with water tanks, pointing out different bugs such as mayflies, stoneflies, and caddis larvae, or admiring the various fish like shiners, darters, chubs, and even a few bass.

Teachers lauded these events because they connected classroom discussions with tangible issues. Moreover, they praised the CCWF for inspiring and motivating the students. While watching students chase bugs and point out fish, teachers explained how students always looked forward to Health Day or other CCWF events. Through these programs, the CCWF used experiential, hands-on education to teach students the “value of participation in and service to the life of the community.”⁴¹ Seeing the carryover, the CCWF decided to reward community youth who embodied civic and environmental engagement.

In 2001, the CCWF initiated the Coal Creek Scholars Program to increase the number of Briceville students attending college. Between 2002 and 2009 the CCWF has awarded 22 separate college scholarship funds of up to \$10,000. Through these donations, the CCWF is investing in the long-term viability of the watershed. As of the

writing of this article, Amy Duggar, one of the first Coal Creek Scholars, recently graduated from the University of Tennessee with a Masters in Social Work.

Being a Coal Creek Scholar means demonstrating citizenship and leadership in the community. Recipients of the scholarships enacted civic and environmental concerns by leading trash pick-ups, organizing community safety watch programs, or initiating recycling in the area. Through this work, the Coal Creek Scholars, through the CCWF, are unwittingly upholding the legacy of Leopold.

Leopold worked with an eye for the public interest and “appealed to a larger sense of community and a widely shared set of public values.”⁴² The educational mission of the CCWF encapsulates this attention to civic detail. However, the work of civic engagement in Coal Creek, as

Leopold had taught in other contexts, is always tethered to land health. Therefore, the work of the CCWF has fostered environmental and community values that are complimentary; where collective interests in a healthy landscape secured more than trout habitat or college scholarships. Here was the creation of a long lasting civic obligation.

On Scholars Day, scholarship recipient Amy Duggar addressed this civic obligation by reminding students to be proud of their home and heritage. If civic engagement is crucial for developing a sense of place, the CCWF and the Coal Creek Scholars all maintained that understanding community history is equally crucial, particularly in a region rich in Welsh culture, not to mention coal mining accompanied by wars and disasters.

The unraveling of history

History teaches many lessons of human successes and human failings; each worthy of serious attention. Throughout his career, Leopold articulated the importance of understanding both ecological and human history as essential for working toward land health and community welfare. He is most noted for his musings on ecological history and evolution. For example, in “A Marshland Elegy” Leopold paid homage to the history and journey of the sand hill crane.

The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history. . . . Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. . . . This much, though, can be said: Our appreciation of the crane grows *with the slow unraveling of earthly history*. . . . When we hear this we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the *daily affairs of birds and men*.⁴³

He believed the unfolding events of history revealed the relationship between nature and humans. Humans, too, were “fellow voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution” This knowledge, Leopold believed, should give us “as 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.” In each project the CCWF has sought to connect to the many streams of history.

The history of the Coal Creek watershed is a rich one. The mountains of Appalachia tell their own story of deep, unfolding time as well as the human relationship to them as humans struggled to make a living off of the land, build community, and recognize the potentially negative impacts this relationship might have. As environmental historian Elizabeth Marshall noted, where natural resources provided the source of progress for those in this region after the Civil War, progress also “left mountains gouged, forests denuded, and land and water polluted and brought little economic benefit to the localities affected.”⁴⁴ The Coal Creek watershed is just such an area where progress took its toll. However, through the work of activities like restoration ecology, humans can, as restoration ecologist William Jordan III has written, reclaim their relationship with the land, heal the wounds caused by progress, and rebuild community relations.⁴⁵ In their work of watershed restoration, the CCWF has turned to a treasure trove of inspiring history that includes both social and ecological degradation and renewal. Most inspiring for the CCWF is a series of events known as the Coal Creek Convict Wars of 1891 – 1892, which historian Karen A Shapiro called “a new south rebellion.”

According to Shapiro, the Coal Creek Convict Wars constitute one of the “one of the great labor battles between the Civil War and the turn of the century.”⁴⁶ These wars, or skirmishes, responded to lost jobs and lower wages that resulted from a convict-lease system, which allowed state governments to lease prisoners to private mine companies

as cheap and abundant labor. The state put prisoners to work building railroads, mining coal, constructing dams, logging timber, and growing tobacco, corn, or cotton. This cheap, convict labor meant that free miners often lost their jobs. In 1890, responding to lost jobs and deteriorating labor conditions, regional miners took matters into their own hands to “protect their families from economic depravation and regain what they considered their most fundamental rights—as coal miners, Tennesseans, and Americans.” By 14 July 1891 their resistance efforts culminated when free miners marched on the mines to free the convicts and reclaim their jobs.

I will not dwell on the details and instead direct the reader to a thorough treatment of the Coal Creek Wars in Shapiro’s book. What is important, however, is the power of this history for the current work of the CCWF and the people of Briceville. On the Coal Creek Wars Shapiro reflected that

This episode exposes both a profound sense of new possibilities in the American South and the often cruel legacies of that region’s embittered past. It also demonstrates that in the post-bellum South, as in so many other historical contexts, the actions of men and women could unleash a very different future from the one they expected or for which they hoped.

Shapiro’s point captures the work of the CCWF where they have worked to “unleash a very different future from the one they expected or for which they hoped for.” Such a comparison has not gone unnoticed. Thacker ruminated that “like their ancestors, the current residents of Coal Creek are banding together. This time however, their mission is to improve the health of the Coal Creek Watershed.” (Thacker Interview. 16 July 2007. Knoxville, TN) And, as Allen Comp observes:

The organization [the CCWF] has adopted the same spirit of the miners who banded together and drafted a plan for the abolishment of convict mine labor practices. They are forming a restoration plan and have begun the important work of restoring Coal Creek themselves.⁴⁷

The work of the CCWF has encouraged this collective sense of possibility and belonging. Tom Braden, the principal of Briceville Elementary School, praised the CCWF by highlighting the importance of celebrating these historical moments because they teach “the kids about the past and point them toward the future.”⁴⁸ While the

younger members of the community are the focus of these initiatives, young and old have been inspired to participate in clean-ups, health days, bug hunts, the creation of a new park, the restoration of 120 year old church, or restoration of native fish. Reflecting on this work, the late Revered Daugherty noted

What happened here was wonderful and uplifting. We stepped back in time in order to help a community move ahead. We used a practice of our forefathers, neighbor helping neighbor to help themselves . . . building something more precious than a historical trail. *We built fellowship and a belief in ourselves and others.*⁴⁹

Many involved in the CCWF agree that “fellowship” is crucial for the future success and sustainability of their work. I agree, and it is the same “spiritual entity” that Leopold mentioned regarding the adventure in cooperative conservation in Coon Valley. Now some might disagree with my placement of Leopold’s legacy within a context and cultural movement that includes coal mining. However, the lesson here has little to do with the mining and everything to do with the work of collaborative community restoration, which would be crucial in the context of Coal Creek, for a later evolving conservation ethic.

From “love of sport” to a “conservation ethic”

At the end of *Game Management*, Leopold mused that a “conservation ethic” is a “motivation” that emerges from “love of sport” and is capable of expanding into a broad range of action.⁵⁰ Leopold saw throughout his life how nature-based experiences potentially expand one’s ecological awareness and ethical concern for the natural world. Love of sport was the source of Leopold’s “land ethic.”

The move from “love of sport” to “land health” captures the unfolding story of the CCWF. In interviews and conversations, Thacker has admitted that he initiated this project out of his “love of sport” for fly fishing and trout. “I started working in Coal Creek for purely selfish reasons,” he noted, “I wanted wild trout...” (Thacker, interview: 16 June 2007).

For some, Thacker’s approach might be problematic. First, his concerns for wild trout were, in part, tethered to an anthropocentric desire to catch them. However, this initial interest, broadened into a larger conservation ethic, or concern for land and watershed health.

Environmental ethicists often debate the sources of our

ethics. However, as scholars engage the practiced dimension of environmental ethics, the life’s work of Leopold or stories of groups like the CCWF provide important lessons to ponder. Here we see that various values, interests, and concerns can drive a practiced conservation ethic. The goal, then, is to understand how values can evolve from narrow to broad; from self to watershed. Values can, in many cases, emerge from our experiences with nature; “they are the products of transactions between humans and nature in particular social situations and ecophysical contexts,” such as fly fishing or ecological restoration.⁵¹ In these cases, what is important is the process by which these values might find action in the forms of participatory, community-based conservation.

What is good for trout, is in turn good for the community: a healthy watershed.

Like Leopold moved in his life from “love of sport” to the “land ethic,” the CCWF went from trout to the entire watershed. By thinking like a watershed, they addressed conflict while fostering complimentary environmental and community values; where collective interests in a healthy landscape secured more than trout habitat or college scholarships, but the very type of “spiritual entity” Leopold believed was imperative for sustaining both human and watershed health.

Finally, just as over-use and unsustainable farming techniques degraded Coon Valley; similar neglect, over-use, and improperly managed mining degraded Coal Creek. However, both saw recovery thanks to an inspired, collective, and collaborative spiritual entity. In both, river banks again held water and maintained structure, the community rebuilt and prospered in new ways, and in both Coon Creek and Coal Creek, community members could once again fish for trout.⁵²

It is safe to say that if Leopold physically worked in Coon Valley, his legacy worked through Coal Creek and the CCWF. And more importantly, the long and varied legacy of Leopold serves as an important benchmark against which we might evaluate the successes and failures of contemporary adventures in collaborative conservation such as those unfolding in the Coal Creek watershed or elsewhere around the country.



Notes

1. Aldo Leopold, "Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation." [1935]. In Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 218-233.
2. Susan Flader, "Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of An Ecological Attitude toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests." Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1974; Susan Flader, "Building Conservation on the Land: Aldo Leopold and the Tensions of Professionalism and Citizenship," in Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, eds., *Reconstructing Conservation: Finding Common Ground*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003, pp. 115–132; . 2003; Curt Meine, Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988; Julianne Lutz Newton,. *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey: Rediscovering the Author of A Sand County Almanac*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006.
3. Leopold, Coon Valley," and *A Sand County Almanac And Sketches from Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1987 [1949].
4. Donald Snow, "Introduction." In Brick, Philip, Donald Snow, and Sarah Van De Wetering, eds. *Across the Great Divide: Explorations in Collaborative Conservation and the American West*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000.
5. While many highlight the importance of Leopold's land ethic as stating that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity and beauty of the biotic system; it is wrong when it tends otherwise," it is important also to recall that he wrote that the land ethic was a "product of social evolution because something so important as an ethic is never 'written'" *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 224 - 225.
6. Meine,. *Aldo Leopold*, p. xi; See also Susan Flader, "Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of An Ecological Attitude toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests." Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974.; Julianne Lutz Newton,. *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey: Rediscovering the Author of A Sand County Almanac*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006; and Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.
7. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p 166.
8. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p 309.
9. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p 313.
10. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*; Newton, *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey*.
11. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p 313.
12. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p. 313; Newton, *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey*, p. 155.
13. Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p. 314.
14. Newton, *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey*, p. 155.
15. Aldo Leopold, [1942]. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." in Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p. 223; emphasis added.
16. I recognize that this is a region that is fraught with a long history of struggles over racial and cultural justice and continues to wrestle with that history today. However, there are many small moments of social justice which bear recognition and celebration, as well as careful scrutiny. This story contains some of those small moments.
17. Karin A. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871 – 1896*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p. 16.
18. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*. P. 30.
19. Francis Hamilton Oates,. "Getting Their Feet Wet." *Clinton Courier News*, 18 July. 2007.
20. Trout Unlimited is a nationally recognized organization dedicated to coldwater conservation, with more than 150,000 volunteers organized into about 400 chapters from Maine to Montana to Alaska (<http://www.tu.org/about-us>. Accessed 19 August 2009).
21. Ben A. Minteer, *The Landscape of Reform: Civic Pragmatism and Environmental Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2006, p. 139.
22. Aldo Leopold, [1941] "Planning for Wildlife," in Callicott and Freyfogle, *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999, p. 194.
23. Aldo Leopold, [1942]. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." in Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p. 219.
24. Anthony Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 179 – 181.
25. See James E Crowfoot and Julia M. Wonolleck, *Environmental Disputes: Community Involvement in Conflict Resolution*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1990, pp. 13-15.
26. Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. 2000. "Master Plan." http://www.coalcreekaml.com/master_plan.htm, Accessed 1 July 2007.
27. Tim Zink, "Success on the Stream: Reviving Coal Creek Tennessee." *Trout*. Winter 2004, 44.
28. Bob Fowler, "Coal Creek Floods County with Problem" *Knoxville News Sentinell/Anderson County Insert*. 23 April 2000. AC 1-2.
29. Allen Comp, *Hope and Hard Work: Making A Difference in the Eastern Coal Region*. Davis, WV: Canaan Valley Institute, 2001, p. 7.
30. Bob Fowler, "Coal Creek Watershed Day 2000 to Sreamline Efforts to Clean Up the Area" *Knoxville News Sentinel*, 23 April 2000.
31. Leopold, [1949] *A Sand County Almanac And Sketches from Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 225.
32. Zink, "Success on the Stream: Reviving Coal Creek Tennessee." *Trout*. Winter 2004: 44.
33. Robert Behnke, "Forward." *Cutthroat: Native Trout of the*

- West. Patrick Trotter. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1987.
34. Trout Unlimited, "Protect, Reconnect, Restore, Sustain: Trout Unlimited Annual Report." [2007]. http://www.tu.org/atf/cf/%7BED0023C4-EA23-4396-9371-8509DC5B4953%7D/TU_2007AnnualReport.pdf. Accessed 09 September 2009.
35. Leopold, [1942]. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education," in Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, p. 300.
36. Roy Daugherty, "More Precious than any Historical Trail," *The Clinton Courier*, May 5, 2001.
37. Zink, "Success on the Stream: Reviving Coal Creek Tennessee." *Trout*. Winter 2004: 45-46.
38. David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 89.
39. Leopold, [1942]. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." in Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, p. 301-02.
40. Leopold, [1942]. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." in Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott. *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, p. 300.
41. Minter, *The Landscape of Reform*, p. 31.
42. Minter, *The Landscape of Reform*, p. 146.
43. Leopold, [1949] *A Sand County Almanac And Sketches from Here and There*, p. 96.
44. Elizabeth Marshall, *Lord, We're Just Trying to Save Your Water: Environmental Activism and Dissent in the Appalachian South*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002, p. xi.
45. William A. Jordan, III, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion With Nature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
46. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*, p. 10.
47. Comp, *Hope and Hard Work*, p. 16.
48. Zink, "Success on the Stream: Reviving Coal Creek Tennessee." *Trout*. Winter 2004: 60.
49. Roy Daugherty, "More Precious than any Historical Trail," *The Clinton Courier*, May 5, 2001; emphasis added.
50. Aldo Leopold, *Game Management*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1933, pp. 420 - 423.
51. Ben A. Minter, *The Landscape of Reform*, p. 7.
52. Newton, *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey*, p. 156.

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Telling the Story of South Carolina's ACE Basin Conservation: CHN presents a new documentary in 2010

One criticism of the conservation and environmental movements is that they do not provide positive visions for the future. An extremely large expanse of land has been protected in South Carolina's ACE Basin (the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto Rivers) and this decades long effort provides a vision for the future by inspiring similar conservation efforts locally and in other states and regions. Led by staff members Bruce Coull and William Bailey, the Center for Humans and Nature is nearing completion of a new documentary video entitled *Common Ground: The Legacy of the ACE Basin*, which tells the story of this successful conservation effort and of the community leaders and far-sighted land owners who made it happen. *Common Ground* includes interviews with key participants and also captures the area's natural beauty. The film was produced in cooperation with the University of South Carolina's Media Services Department.

Common Ground is expected to be ready for screening in early 2010. The Center for Humans and Nature will exhibit this film both within South Carolina and nationally, so that a broad audience can hear the messages that emerge from this conservation story. The documentary will also be available on the CHN website.