The American conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) gave much thought to the relationship between humans and nature and how human society can operate in a manner attuned to the principles of ecology. Having worked in different positions on the frontline of conservation, he was alarmed at the thoughtless destruction of the biophysical landscape and the mental dissociation from the natural environment that were brought about by changes in both rural and urban life and by modern developments in economics and technology. Seeking to counter these tendencies—which are not unlike those of our present circumstances—and recognizing that evolving technologies, policies, and economics are inadequate or may even hinder conservation efforts, Leopold turned his mind toward understanding human behavior and the relationship between humans and nature.

Leopold’s intellectual enterprise culminated in a capstone concept called the land ethic, articulated in an essay of the same name in *A Sand County Almanac.* He proposed that the domain of ethical consideration be extended to include “the community,” what he used to mean “the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people.” The land ethic, he wrote, transforms the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror to “plain member and citizen of the land-community.” The aim of conservation, it followed, was to create new means for *Homo sapiens* to live within the capacity of the biosphere.

Leopold’s view that human society needs to engage in conservation practices in order to “put human ecology on a permanent footing” is *prima facie* simple and easy to understand. However, conservation is a difficult concept to grasp in terms of the specific objectives and actions that are needed. The issue of conservation not only forces us to rethink the different aspects of modern living; it also reflects the complex and unfathomable quality of nature and the universe and raises the metaphysical question of the purpose of human existence. Leopold may not have been a philosopher in the formal academic sense, but his reflections on the interactions between humans and the land forced him into the philosophical realm.

In his writings Leopold often touched on topics like history and wilderness that he felt had the potential to affect human character. History represents the experience of previous generations from which one can draw lessons. Wilderness, on the other hand, represents unexplored terrain in our physical landscape; wilderness areas have provided “wealth to the human spirit.”

In this article, I discuss Leopold’s historical sense of being by highlighting history in his writing. I show that Leopold’s extensive use of history in his writing helps ground his sense of being. Before discussing this in Leopold’s writing, I briefly describe Martin Heidegger’s concept of historical being. It provides a
framework for thinking about how an awareness of history can elucidate the nature of one’s being that I then use to think about Leopold’s use of history. The article concludes with a brief reflection of Leopold as a historical figure.

HEIDEGGER’S HISTORICAL BEING

The central concern of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is the question of the meaning of being — what does “to exist” mean? A crucial difference is made between being and beings (entities). Accordingly, Heidegger’s question is concerned with the concept of being, “which make[s] beings intelligible as beings.”

In his 1953 book Introduction to Metaphysics, Heidegger wrote that the contemplation of human existence is ineluctably linked to considerations of history. According to Heidegger, history is not synonymous with the past. Instead, history is viewed more broadly as happening or as the occurrence of events, “an acting and being acted upon which pass through the present, which are determined from out of the future, and which take over the past.”

The essential question Heidegger is posing can be translated as “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” (“Essents” refer to existents, or existent things or beings; in a later translation the word “being” is used instead.) Heidegger views this question as a historical question in the sense that this questioning marks the dawn of history. This assertion arises from Parmenides’ image of man as “historical being (as the historical custodian of being),” which Heidegger hails as a crucial definition of being-human for the West.

The key step is apprehension, Vernehmung, which is thought of slightly differently here: it is not a function that man has as an attribute, but rather a happening that has man. Heidegger notes that being-human differs from being in general in that both being and apprehension reside in humans. Apprehension is the process in which man first enters into history as a being.

“...conservation not only forces us to re-think the different aspects of modern living; it also reflects the complex and unfathomable quality of nature and the universe and raises the metaphysical question of the purpose of human existence.

“...only a first step. “Only where being discloses itself in questioning does history happen and with it the being of man.”

But how is the essence of being-human distinguished from the essence of being in general? How do the two relate to each other? Apprehension brings together being-human and being in that it enables humans to contemplate the essence of being, which includes being-human; however, apprehension also differentiates the former from the latter since it is only in man that apprehension resides. Heidegger writes: “The separation between being and being-human comes to light in their togetherness.”

A connection between self and others is established through the apprehension of oneself in the context of history. “Man’s selfhood means this: he must transform the being that discloses itself to him into history and bring himself to stand in it. Selfhood does not mean that he is primarily an ‘ego’ and an individual. This he is no more than he is a we, a community.”

Heidegger’s focus on the historical nature of being-human does not mean that one is restricted to following the actions of one’s cultural ancestors. Instead, one authentically engages with one’s cultural heritage as a guiding resource from which one can draw in one’s own life. One is genuinely free when one recognizes that one is a finite being with a heritage and when one achieves an authentic relationship with this heritage through the creative appropriation of it.

According to Heidegger’s concept of humans as historical beings, history plays a central role in being-human. With this in mind I now discuss how Leopold uses history in his writing.

HISTORY IN THE WRITING OF ALDO LEOPOLD

Leopold frequently evoked history in his writings to provide a rich context for his readers and to connect seemingly disparate events. Leopold displayed an aptitude for history in his high school in Burlington, Iowa: in history class his notes and essays ranged...
over topics from the Greeks to the Romans to the heroes of American independence, and the essays were accompanied by carefully prepared maps.\textsuperscript{15} This fascination with history continued into his adult life: in his later writing his references range from the history of hunting in feudal Europe, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Mongolian dynasty in East Asia (in an essay on protecting wilderness) to the various historical vignettes of Wisconsin and the American midwest (recounted during the sawing of an oak tree).\textsuperscript{16}

In his professional life Leopold grappled with complicated issues at the interface of humans and the environment. He habitually drew upon history as he tried to understand the characteristics of the land and the roots of human behavior.\textsuperscript{17} He not only displayed a solid grasp of human and natural history but could weave them together to form a coherent narrative of the interaction between humans and the land. This is shown, for example, in his 1933 essay “The Conservation Ethic,” which was widely read and frequently cited. In the essay he notes that a “harmonious relation to land is more intricate, and of more consequence to civilization, than the historian of its progress seem to realize.”\textsuperscript{18} The essay was a significant milepost in Leopold’s intellectual development and was incorporated fifteen years later into the capstone essay “The Land Ethic” in \textit{A Sand County Almanac}.\textsuperscript{19}

Leopold’s use of history can be interpreted as seeking to achieve three interrelated goals: (1) to underscore the place of humans in history; (2) to illustrate how historical events have been to some extent influenced by humans’ interaction with the land; and (3) to raise ecological and historical awareness and spur action toward careful intervention in the environment. Each of these will now be explored in turn.

\textbf{THE PLACE OF HUMANS IN HISTORY}

The historical events cited in Leopold’s writing have the effect of forcing the reader to consider the biophysical basis of their lives. He mentions events in natural history that occur on geological, evolutionary, and ecological time-scales, thus providing a counter-perspective to the short-sighted human time-scale that most people are accustomed to. We are reminded that “we harness cars to the solar energy impounded in carboniferous forests,” and that the land of Wisconsin had remained largely stable from the end of the glacial period twenty thousand years ago until 1840.\textsuperscript{20} History is also embodied in species that have endured through the ages, such as the sandhill cranes that Leopold describes in the essay “Marshland Elegy”:

\begin{quote}
[O]ur appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unravelling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call 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.

And so they live and have their being—these cranes—not in the constricted present, but in the wider reaches of evolutionary time. Their annual return is the ticking of the geologic clock. Upon the place of their return they confer a peculiar distinction. Amid the endless mediocrity of the commonplace, a crane marsh holds a paleontological patent of nobility, won in the march of aeons, and revocable only by shot gun. The sadness discernible in some marsh arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes. Now they stand humbled, adrift in history.\textsuperscript{21}

Cranes may not possess a sense of time but their species and life-cycle, as Leopold describes them, unfold to the cadence of geological time, extending from the Eocene some 50 million years ago to the present. In comparison, \textit{Homo sapiens} is a youthful species that emerged from present-day Ethiopia about 195,000 years ago.\textsuperscript{22} From this perspective the tendency of modern humans to focus on the short term comes across as callous, however insuperable it may be. More forethought and reflection are needed.
in the relationship of humans to the land and to the animals and plants that grow upon it.

Leopold refers to significant historical events in the human realm as well. In “The Land Ethic,” for example, Leopold alludes to the Mosaic Decalogue, created to govern relationships between individuals, and to the episode in which “God-like Odysseus” hanged the slave-girls who had been unfaithful to his household during his absence. Leopold used these historical examples to show how ethical criteria have evolved and expanded over time into new spheres (e.g., treating human-chattels as property was appropriate in ancient Greece but unacceptable now). This had the effect of locating the ethical system during his time in the scale of ethical evolution, marking preceding changes and hinting at impending changes. Leopold felt that the time had come to extend ethical criteria to include the broader biotic community. Leopold’s conviction was that humans would hopefully reconsider themselves and the biotic community in a different way when confronted with the realities of natural history.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT ON HUMAN HISTORY

Leopold held that a durable civilization must be based on harmonious relations to land. He notes that “[u]nforeseen ecological reactions not only make or break history in a few exception enterprises— they condition, circumscribe, delimit, and warp all enterprises, both economic and cultural, that pertain to land.” An “ecological interpretation of history” would reveal that historical events were actually “biotic interactions between people and land.” As an example, Leopold cites the effect of plant succession in Kentucky on the history of the Mississippi Valley in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

It is time now to ponder the fact that the cane-lands [of Kentucky], when subjected to the particular mixture of forces represented by the cow, plow, fire, and axe of the pioneer, became bluegrass. What if the plant succession inherent in this dark and bloody ground had, under the impact of these forces, given us some worthless sedge, shrub, or weed? Would Boone and Kenton have held out? Would there have been any overflow into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri? Any Louisiana Purchase? Any transcontinental union of new states? Any Civil War?...The subsequent drama of American history, here and elsewhere, hung in large degree on the reaction of particular soils to the impact of particular forces exerted by a particular kind and degree of human occupation.

Leopold contended that the critical events in American history “hung on a ‘fortuitous concourse of elements,’ the interplay of which we now dimly decipher by hindsight only.” In a 1941 essay, “Planning for Wildlife,” he proffered a reason for why Nazi Germany coveted Ukraine: the latter’s “prairie soils favor an annual grass, wheat, as the first stage in its plant succession.” If the drama of human history is in part an expression of the human appetite for natural resources, then the environmental and ecological context of history needs to be appreciated.

HISTORY AS A GUIDE FOR FUTURE ACTION

For some readers Leopold may come across as misanthropic, but his aim was to reveal the extent to which modern civilization is at odds with the biophysical realities of the land. He was trying to clarifying the goals and concept of “conservation”: the ways in which our modern civilization could become self-perpetuating instead of self-destructive (or, in Leopold’s words, how human ecology could be set “on a permanent footing”).

Leopold realized that this work is immensely difficult and unprecedented. The human ingenuity reflected in engineering achievements pales in comparison to “our utter ineptitude in keeping land fit to live upon.” His grasp of history helped him understand the nature of the problem: “[a]ll history shows this: that civilization is . . . the successive dominance of a series of ideas... Engineering is clearly the dominant idea of the industrial age. What I have here called ecology is perhaps one of the contenders for a new order.”

Leopold’s meditations on history and ecology helped him understand the nature of human-land interaction, which in turn is critical in
figuring out how to align human action along ecological principles. “We now decipher these reactions retrospectively. What could possibly be more important than to foresee and control them?”30 Leopold recognized that humans occupy a special place in the biotic community. We are the only species capable of making such a lasting impact on the land in such a short span of time. This is felicitously captured in Leopold’s citation of the 1927 poem Tristram by Edwin Arlington Robinson:

Whether you will or not,  
You are a king, Tristram, for you are one  
Of the time-tested few that leave the world,  
When they are gone, not the same place it was.  
Mark what you leave.31

The implication here is that humans need to extend ethical criteria to embrace our interactions with land. Leopold made plain that the prevailing “Abrahamic” conception of man as conqueror of the biotic community and of land as property belonging to man needs to be urgently replaced, since man was—and still is—growing in numbers and mechanized capability. This historical import of this task was not lost on Leopold. Failure in not effecting a change in our collective mindset would have long-lasting consequences.

In his 1923 essay “Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest,” Leopold revealed his awareness of how our present actions become part of history and will subsequently be judged in the future. In the essay’s conclusion Leopold asked whether the “special nobility inherent in the human race” will be manifested as “a society decently respectful of its own and all other life, capable of inhabiting the earth without defiling it,” or as a society possessing self-destructive traits, like the potato bug, “which exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself”; either way, “we will be judged in ‘the derisive silence of eternity.’”32

LEOPOLD’S HISTORICAL SENSE OF BEING

How does Leopold’s sense of history fit into the context of Heidegger’s concept of historical being? While Leopold did not explicitly ask Heidegger’s fundamental question of the essence of being, he appeared to have traced the same path. The question of conservation that Leopold was reflecting upon—how humans can enter into a harmonious relationship with the land—may not be a historical question in Heidegger’s sense that it marked the beginning of history. However—and as noted earlier—previous societies have had to grapple with environmental conservation issues in order to survive, and the course of history is partially influenced by the ability of societies to overcome this challenge.33 In this sense, the problem of conservation can be considered as a historical problem.

While pursuing the question of conservation, Leopold turned toward history, referring to history that is both immediate and distant, both human and natural. History provides a rich source of lessons and experience through which the full measure of human being was revealed. For Leopold, two key steps arise in our relation to history. First, he had a strong sense of learning from history in order to recognize the importance of preserving civilization by maintaining the critical “state of mutual and interdependent cooperation between human animals, other animals, plants, and soils.”34 The imperative here is to align human activity along ecological principles. Guidance for this challenge can be gleaned from historical precedents, which is similar to Heidegger’s idea of engaging with one’s cultural heritage by creatively appropriating it as a guiding resource.

Second, Leopold was mindful of the fact that history is being made every day and was therefore aware that actions need to be carefully considered. This brings to mind Heidegger’s view that one must consider the historical nature of one’s being and how history is happening through the present. In an essay written around 1938, Leopold deplored the overworked status of the technical staff at the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, calling it “a dangerous condition when history is being made daily.”35 His historical awareness is illustrated again in the 1942 essay “The Last Stand.” The last stand of old-growth northern hardwoods in Michigan’s Porcupine Mountains was threatened by wartime cutting, and Leopold wrote the essay to raise public awareness. Leopold cites how the old-growth maple forest is “one of the most highly organized
commodities on earth” that cannot be replaced by artificial planting. He portrayed the Porcupine stand as “a chapter in national history which we should not be allowed to forget. When we abolish the last sample of the Great Uncut, we are, in a sense, burning books.”

Cutting the old-growth stand constitutes a historical act of destroying the ecological heritage of the country while extending the destruction caused by the Second World War; hence, cutting it must be avoided.

Wilderness is one of the domains in which individuals can cultivate a sense of history. Invoking Daniel Boone (1734–1820), a famous pioneer and frontiersman in American history, Leopold notes the following on the value of wildlife in American culture:

There is value in any experience that reminds us of our distinctive national origins and evolution, i.e. that stimulates awareness of history. Such awareness is ‘nationalism’ in its best sense. For lack of any other short name, I shall call this, in our case, the ‘split-rail value.’ For example: a boy scout has tanned a coonskin cap, and goes Daniel-Booneing in the willow thicket below the tracks. He is re-enacting American history. He is, to that extent, culturally prepared to face the dark and bloody realities of the present.

In wilderness one can re-enact the same action as their ancestors—like the boy scout who explores the willow thicket—thereby participating in an historical act. The hunter is likewise re-enacting an atavistic and allegorical drama when he is pursuing his quarry—“the eternal chase!” For Leopold, the pattern of historical relationships between humans and other organisms or things is replicated, to a certain extent, during the development of individual humans: “ontogeny repeats phylogeny in society as well as in the individual.”

Thus, the boy scout will explore the willow thicket just as Leopold had explored in his adolescence the swamp woods and ravines in Burlington, Iowa.

This can be interpreted as an example of what Heidegger means when he writes that by apprehending oneself in the context of history, a connection is established between self and others (though when Heidegger formulated his concept of being, he was probably not thinking of community as including soils, water, and other species, as Leopold did).

Leopold’s account of human and natural history draws relationships between an individual human being and other species, other humans, and other objects, past and present. Accordingly, one is connected to the sandhill crane through evolutionary history and to one’s cultural ancestors by re-enacting the same drama on the land. One is therefore not acting in a vacuum in the present; instead one possesses a rich heritage that one can authentically engage with as one’s being is advanced through the progress of time.

REFLECTIONS

How does Leopold’s personal history compare with what we have discussed so far? Leopold’s open and inquiring mind allowed his thinking to broaden with maturity. This enabled him to evolve from a young forester with “narrowly focused values and the eternally cruising types of views that are typical of young persons” to, in later life, a professor in wildlife management who was concerned with the broader issue of conservation.

Leopold’s willingness to revise his thinking is illustrated by the issue of predator control. His enthusiastic stance on predator control softened when northern Arizona led to an unchecked deer population in the late 1910s. By 1924–1925, an estimated 60 percent of the deer population was removed through reinstated hunting. It would take science and management techniques two decades to catch up with change in thinking on the issue of predator control in an essay, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” written in April 1944 after much prodding from his former student and long-time collaborator Albert Hochbaum. Leopold’s memory is cherished today because of his “courage to change and grow in professional life, to put his thoughts on paper, and to risk criticism of his unconventional beliefs.”

How is Leopold viewed today as a historical figure? We look to him for inspiration and try to decipher through his writings how he might have responded to our present environmental situation. In this sense he
can be thought of as our intellectual progenitor whose works we retrieve for our own use. Through his writing we are forced to reflect on whether things have improved in the ethical and environmental realms since his time; it is probably fair to say that the same issues that he was grappling with have on the whole regressed since then. At the same time, we are reminded that his articulation of the land ethic marks only the beginning of the work that is needed to achieve conservation. Leopold’s work—especially his land ethic—is a template for us to follow and not the final word on the matter. He recognized this himself: “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written.’”

How do we proceed? If we are historical beings, as Heidegger asserts, then our present task is to apprehend ourselves in the context of history and to inform our actions by our cultural resources, including those bequeathed to us by Leopold.

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NOTES


3. Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 204.


11. Ibid., 143.

12. Ibid., 141.

13. Ibid., 143-44.


17. It is remarkably coincidental that Leopold and the distinguished historian Frederick Jackson Turner—“two men for whom history, frontiers, and wilderness defined the very contours of their lives and their work, and whose work in turn defined the contours of history, frontiers, and wilderness”—moved into the same street in Madison, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1924. Meine, Aldo Leopold, 253.


19. Ibid. See the preface by the editors.


23. Ibid.

24. Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 205.


26. Ibid.


33. Although conceivably the earliest human settlements may not have had to contend much with environment issues given the low level of technology and relatively small size of human population during that time

34. Leopold, “The Conservation Ethic.”

35. Leopold, “Be Your Own Emperor.”


37. Ibid. Leopold campaigned vigorously for protection of the old-growth forest; as a result of efforts by him and others, the forest was kept as a state park in 1943. See editors’ preface and Meine, Aldo Leopold, 434-35.

38. Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 177.

39. Ibid., 151, 68, and 81.

40. Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 178.

41. Meine, Aldo Leopold, 26.


43. Meine, Aldo Leopold, 240-42.

44. Ibid., 453-59.

45. Kennedy, “Understanding Professional Career Evolution.”

46. Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 225.