

Respect Our Ethics

Op-Ed, By: Kathy Pielsticker

“There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus’ slave girls, is still property. The land relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.”

- Aldo Leopold

Earlier this week, as I sat listening to the vote of the Joint Finance Committee, I thought of those lines from the Sand County Almanac. How would Leopold have reacted if he had witnessed the Committee’s vote to gut the Stewardship Fund?...The Stewardship Fund which preserves so many of the precious lands that he loved. Would Leopold have shaken his head knowingly, when the Committee, hell bent on saving every penny, voted to liquidate lands *already* protected by the state? Or would there been disbelief on his weathered face, wondering how things could have changed so little in 55 years?

As for me, after 25 years of working as a professional conservationist, I admit tears filled my eyes. I reeled at the gap in our community’s ethics. Before becoming a soil scientist I studied religion for four years - all types of faiths. It wasn’t until I read Leopold’s treatise on the land ethic that I found the missing voice, the missing piece. As he said, “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate... A land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

So, how long will it be before our state legislators, in particular those eleven short-sighted members of the Joint Finance Committee, realize that our community is larger than the narrow world that they inhabit? When will they realize that Wisconsinites treasure the natural, open spaces that make our state unique? Don’t they know that we take pride in our northern forests, our pristine lakes, and our colorful prairies? Do they not also want to see them preserved for our children and our grandchildren? It seems that Wisconsin’s citizens possess much loftier ethics than those portrayed by the actions of the Joint Finance Committee this week.

The fact that they have chosen not to listen to our cries illustrates why it is so important to make sure that the voices of the people of Wisconsin, all of us who value and respect the land as part of our community, are heard by those who make decisions for us. The community of Wisconsinites that care about the wider community of soil, water, plants and animals “or collectively the land” must vote in order to be heard by our legislators. Conservation starts in the community, but it lives in the heart and its battles are won and lost in the voting booth.

Today, we turn to the words of Aldo Leopold to comfort us, but tomorrow we turn to them fortify us in the fight to reverse the Committee’s decision and restore full funding to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund. “In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* ...It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”

My message to our state legislators is simple ...respect our land....respect our community...respect Wisconsin's land ethic!

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