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McKee, Samuel  (2024) Book review: Roberta L. Millstein, 'The Land Is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium'. *Philosophy in Review*, 44 (4). pp. 19-21. ISSN 1206-5269

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115576ar>

Publisher: Consortium Erudit

Version: Published Version

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Philosophy in Review



Roberta L. Millstein, 'The Land Is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium'

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Volume 44, Number 4, November 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115576ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115576ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McKee, S. (2024). Review of [Roberta L. Millstein, 'The Land Is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium']. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(4), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115576ar>

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Roberta L. Millstein. *The Land is Our Community: Aldo Leopold's Environmental Ethic for the New Millennium.* Chicago University Press 2024. 184 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226834467); \$29.00 USD (Paperback 9780226834481).

Millstein's comprehensive but accessible work brings back to the present the importance of Aldo Leopold's "land ethic". It functions as much more than a revisiting of his most famous work, *A Sand County Almanac*, but opens modern conservationism to the light of Leopold's ideas and critique.

This relatively short (but both broad and deep) work is a strong blend of environmental ethics, history and philosophy of biology. It demonstrates how Leopold's land ethic is as relevant to our modern discussions around climate change, land use, biodiversity and evolutionary biology as it was originally. However, many people have attempted to scrutinize and translate the ideas of Leopold, and here Millstein is keen to sift through these muddled and sometimes contradictory interpretations of Leopold in order to bring a clearer reading of him.

Leopold's vision of a land ethic that could be applied to any area of the planet, with ideas imparted of how we as human communities as well as individuals interrelate with the environment, is well applied in brief chapters, each addressing one aspect of it. The aforementioned challenges of disagreement over what Leopold saw and meant necessitate Millstein's tackling each concept in turn: how do we clearly interpret Leopold in light of modern understandings of climate change and environmental ethics? What is interdependence? How do we define and understand land communities? What is land health and how best should it be understood today? How do we campaign and defend the land ethic in practice and in policy? What should the implementation of the land ethic look like? Each idea, in turn, is clearly presented with reference to modern ideas and movements.

The land ethic, as conceived of by Aldo Leopold, is a lifetime's work in the field and in academia. It argues for 'an expansion of our ethical obligations beyond the purely human to include what he variously called the "land community" or the "biotic community" – communities of interdependent humans, nonhuman animals, plants, soils, and waters, understood collectively.' (2) It is most likely that those working in these fields will know him in name, if not well-studied. His influence on the early development of the modern movement in academia is well attested, but here is presented the goal of a fuller application of his land ethic to our situation. It can be persuasively argued that our dire environmental situations as local communities and as a planet is more severe than Leopold could have dreamt of almost eighty years ago, and yet he has proven something of a prophet on numerous occasions. Given his prescient ability to foresee many of our modern challenges, Millstein makes a case for revisiting those ideas in detail as well as retracing his steps towards the success that Leopold had in many different locations during his career.

Among the questions raised is the issue of our conception of interrelatedness, and where humans should be situated on the causal chain. Interdependence is the central role in the land ethic (49). When considering our destructive power on the food chain, and our skill in overreaching beyond wise means, how should we best understand human relations to the entire biosphere at each



level, from local to planetary? Here, definitions really matter. Interdependence should mean more than just a food chain to include higher levels of dependency and trophic relationships. This requires more work to properly conceive of human effects on each trophic level, and where (perhaps controversially) human presence works as a positive in the causal chain. What can contemporary ecological findings tell us? (49)

Those in philosophy of biology may find the question of what constitutes a ‘land community’ almost as complex as the definition of a species, or the question of what life is. When land is occupied by multiple moving congregants, some migrating from thousands of miles away such as migratory geese, who is a true resident, and do they constitute a community if they dwell there for only a season? And if so, how high up the chain should they be placed? What due consideration should be given in conceiving of a land community to such temporal visitors? Ecosystems thrive or diminish often on the overplay of the hand of one resident, or an invasive species. How we define these ecosystem components was a triumph of effort by Leopold, but today we find globalization, movements caused by climate change, more extreme weather, temperature fluctuations and overpopulation raising the issue to new heights and with greater urgency.

Other important considerations raised by Millstein’s work could be prescient for those in philosophy of biology. For example, Millstein (intentionally or inadvertently) touches on the issue of speciesism. When considering soil health, or the overall definition of ‘land health’ as a concept, we can tend to fixate on what she calls ‘charismatic megafauna’ (29) such as wolves and deer. However, Leopold put great emphasis on the soil and often read the trees and overall brushland as first indicator. Modern field genomics can now reveal to us much more of the constitution of the lowest level of fauna in bacteria, archaea and smaller organisms. Where should one’s emphasis lie, and what should be considered the keystone species? Definition of ‘land community’ (55) is a strong consideration of the book and a foundation of Leopold’s legacy in environmental ethics.

Those in modern conservation science will find much to ponder in Millstein’s chapter on ‘land health’ and how to understand a community’s ‘capacity for self-renewal.’ (83) Timescale here is an important consideration. If a community can recover in ten years, then is this a positive? Certainly, grave concern is raised for communities that will never be able to recover or can only return half of the carrying capacity of its previous incarnation. This is of great importance in the book for people in the field of environmental ethics. The two intersected most heavily in the exploration of land health, but again it must rest in agreement on what this means as a term to be applied across multiple divergent ecosystems. Stability was a great conception of Leopold’s and Millstein gives good space to its application to some modern ecosystem concerns (95).

It is worth asking whether this should be an entire book in itself. Millstein’s work serves as both an introduction to those unfamiliar with Leopold, a celebration of the strength of his legacy, and a good classical application to modern environmental ethics and conservationism. However, this work should now be followed with a fuller work on Leopoldian land health to the modern situations most urgent globally.

The work concludes with emphasis on policy. Having argued clearly for the land ethic as a modern interdisciplinary application, what *The Land is our Community* can bring is one lens with

good articulation of clarity to our modern context of environmental science and ethics. It can fit broadly across the scientific and philosophical education and applications of land health. Leopold's land ethic is a good concept for an overarching land ethic which has been presented with clarity to the modern reader. How one agrees on definition and application will be an interesting debate for both sides of the academic disciplines.

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