



# A Recollection Of The Deep Ecological Experience Of Aldo Leopold As An American Naturalist

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## Abstract:

*In the history of American Naturalism, Aldo Leopold's writings and philosophy has immensely contributed to the understanding of Man's relationship with Mother Nature. His perspective of the whole ecological system and issues rise from his deep and profound experiences as a Naturalist. This Research Paper is a literary recollection of Leopold's one such experience as narrated in his epoch-making prose essay, "Think Like a Mountain" included in his book, A Sand County Almanac. Leopold's narration builds a wide awareness in the readers about their place in the Universe, inviting their positive contribution in the appreciation and conservation of and all life forms on the Earth. Arne Naess' Deep Ecology Movement is taken as the literary theory of analysing Leopold's concept of Land Ethics and American Spirituality.*

**Keywords:** Naturalists, Nature, Life-forms, Deep Ecology, Biocentric, Egalitarianism, Wildlife, Self-Realization

## Introduction – Arne Naess' Deep Ecology:

Man's deep interrelatedness with the vastness of the universe comes out of deep questioning and awareness. The same aspect of 'self' and its relation to Nature is expounded in the grassroot movement, Deep Ecology Movement, formulated by Dr. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who applied his formidable philosophical skills in understanding the ecological crisis and its resolution. Deeply touched by the thought of Spinoza and Gandhi, Arne Naess, coined the term "Deep Ecology" in 1972 to express a vision of the world in which one protects the environment as a part of oneself. A movement was born to promote an awareness of the oneness and interconnection of all life and its cycles of change and transformation. In Naess' own words:

“Life is fundamentally one . . . The deep ecology movement is the ecology movement which questions deeper. . . The adjective ‘deep’ stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not” (Naess “From Ecology to Ecosophy” 166).

Naess believed that man’s individual self should be understood as deeply connected with and as part of nature, not dissociated from it. Deep ecologists often call that conception of human nature as the “ecological self” and it represents humans acting and being in harmony with nature, not in opposition to it. When this ‘ecological self’ is realized, it will recognize and abide by the norms of an environmental ethic that will end the abuses of nature that typify the traditional self, which is trapped in anthropocentric attitudes. Moreover, the ecological self will practise a “biocentric egalitarianism” in which each natural entity is held as being inherently equal to every other entity (Madsen par. 3-4).

### **Aldo Leopold’s Deep Experience:**

A striking example of one such experience, which was of sufficient intensity to trigger a total reorientation in one’s life as a wildlife manager and ecologist was provided by Aldo Leopold in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*. In the 1920s, the US government had appointed Aldo Leopold to develop a rational, scientific policy for eradicating the wolf population from the entire United States. The justification provided to him by the government for this intervention was that wolves competed with sport hunters for hunting the deer, so that fewer wolves and even no wolves would mean more deer for the hunters. Such hunting games were still very popular among the royal and the elite circle of the society. It was a matter of pride to return triumphantly with a deer’s or a tiger’s skull in hand. As a wildlife manager of those times, Leopold adhered to the unquestioning belief that humans were superior to the rest of nature and were thus morally justified in manipulating the situation or to maximize human welfare or for their thirst for entertainment.

One morning, on his duty, Leopold’s troupe found sight of a pack of wolves on whom a fierce rain of gun shots were showered by them and eventually an old wolf was gunned down by the side of the river. Leopold rushed down to gloat at her death. What he saw totally transformed him Leopold writes in his chapter entitled, “Thinking Like a Mountain”:

“There was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain. I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view” (130).

For the first time in his life, Leopold felt completely at one with the wide, ecological reality. He felt that it had a power to communicate its magnificence, had its own life, history and its own trajectory into the future:

It must have been a moment of tremendous liberation and expansion of consciousness, of joy and energy to experience the ecosystem as a great being, dignified and valuable in itself. This narrow, manipulative wildlife manager's mind fell away. The mind which saw nature as a dead machine there for human use, vanished. In its place was the pristine recognition of the vast being of living nature, of what is now called 'Gaia'. (Harding, 15)

This incident left such a great impression on Leopold's mind that his attitude towards nature and man's role totally changed. An altogether different phenomenal image of the world made him realize his mistake. He felt a sense of irreparable loss in the dying eyes of the wolf. This sense reverberated itself in all the forms around including the stony still mountains melting his heart inconsolably. Harding states in this matter:

Something in the dying eyes of the wolf reached beyond Leopold's training and triggered a recognition of where he was. After this experience, he saw the world differently and went on to develop a land ethic, in which he stated that humans are not a superior species with the right to manage and control the rest of nature, but rather that humans are a plain member of the biotic community. (15)

### **Conclusion:**

Such a spontaneous experience, as that of Aldo Leopold, was importantly emphasized by Arne Naess as the requisite for one's Self-Realization. In such an experience one will see that all objects are nodes (a connecting point at which several lines come together) in a vast web of relationship. One will sense a wide identification with all the things around. This identification involves a heightened sense of empathy and an expansion of one's concern with non-human life. Harding asserts:

We understand that other being, ranging from microbes to multi cellular life forms to ecosystems and watersheds to Earth as a whole are engaged in the process of unfolding their innate potentials. Naess called this process Self-Realization and this expanded sense with the expanded ecological self, one realizes that all are endowed with intrinsic value, irrespective of any economic or other utilitarian value they might have for human ends. Our own human striving for Self-Realization is on equal footing to the strivings of other beings. Thus this ecocentric view contrasts with the anthropocentric view, which ascribes intrinsic value to humans, valuing only if it is useful to our own species. (15)

Thus Aldo Leopold's single yet valuable experience turns out to be a life's lesson to all the aspirants whose sole efforts are focussed towards bringing people together in working towards a healthy and a harmonious living in tune with the Natural Order in which all creation finds its source.

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