1. **What is Leopold’s thesis?**

When attempting to understand a work in philosophy it is often helpful to first identify the conclusion or thesis being defended. Leopold’s aim is to defend what he calls the land ethic. “Land” he explains, “is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.” Waters are also included in this energetic circuit. So are humans and their societies. In very general terms we can think of land as any biotic system consisting of multiple species that are adapted to specialized ecological roles, and through which energy flows in a cyclical fashion. A peat bog, a coral reef, a forest, and intertidal region- all of these would be considered forms of land on Leopold’s view.

What then is the land ethic? Interestingly, Leopold has relatively little to say about the content of this moral system. In several places throughout the text he alludes to this system in terms of an emotional connection with or an “intense consciousness” of the land. Perhaps the clearest statement of Leopold’s land ethic occurs in this passage:

“The ‘key-log’ which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” (172)

This is quite a complex statement and it is worthwhile unpacking some of its elements. Firstly, Leopold is concluding that that land use issues are more than just economic problems. One thing that becomes clear is that Leopold employs a narrow conception of economics. For him, economic considerations have to do with whether a farmer or resource manager will benefit financially from some action. This contrasts with the broader sense of economics more frequently used today. Economic decisions in the broad sense involve the quantification of costs and benefits, not solely in monetary terms, but also in terms of how they impact human welfare. Do not worry if that distinction (between the narrow sense of economic analysis that focuses on money and the broader sense that focuses on welfare) is less than crystal clear at the moment. It is something we return to later in course. For the time being, just make sure that you understand this element of Leopold’s conclusion. It can be summarised as follows:

1. *Acting solely out of economic interest (in the narrow sense of doing what is most profitable) does not solve or avoid land use issues.*
At this stage we are still unpacking the conclusion, so we will consider what sorts of land use issues Leopold has in mind and, indeed, what argument he provides in support of this conclusion.

Turning to the next element in the previously cited passage, note that Leopold treats ethical and aesthetic considerations on a par. This is a controversial view. Some argue that aesthetic considerations—e.g. the judgment that a landscape is beautiful—are subordinate to ethical considerations—e.g. the judgment that the senseless destruction of species is morally wrong. For instance, it might seem that aesthetic judgments are “subjective” in the sense that their truth or falsity depends on the psychological makeup of the subject. By contrast, the argument goes, the truth or falsity of ethical judgments do not depend on individual psychology. These are questions that I want to sidestep for now. My reasons for this are, firstly, that this position is not one that Leopold spends time defending. Instead he simply takes the objectivity of aesthetic judgments for granted. Second, we will be returning to this issue in more detail in week 5 of the course. So let’s set questions about aesthetics aside and summarize the second element of Leopold’s thesis as follows:

2. **Aesthetic and ethical considerations, as well as economic ones, have relevance to land management issues.**

Before moving to the third and final element of his conclusion there is something important to note here. Notice that Leopold offers no explanation for how these different factors can or should be weighed against one another. For example, suppose that a wilderness preserve has a certain amount of aesthetic appeal and it also has ethical standing as a biotic community (as Leopold would suggest). How do these considerations stack up against the fact that logging the forest would produce considerable economic benefit, perhaps for an impoverished community? Arguably, any acceptable environmental ethics must do more than identify the things that have ethical or aesthetic value, it must also tell us how to weigh those factors against competing concerns. If this is, in fact, a requirement for an acceptable ethical theory, then it is not clear that Leopold’s land ethic makes the grade.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the previously quoted passage is the final two sentences, where Leopold provides the content of the land ethic. He claims that an action is right if it promotes the integrity, stability and beauty of a biotic community, and morally wrong if it tends otherwise. Here we learn something fundamental about Leopold— that he is what philosophers call a consequentialist. This term refers to any moral theorist who evaluates the rightness or wrongness of an action exclusively in terms of its consequences. By contrast, some non-consequentialist thinkers evaluate right and wrong in
terms of the intentions that motivate an action. Although this commitment to consequentialism exposes Leopold to certain kinds of criticisms, these are not issues that I want to explore here. Instead, we shall focus on the sorts of consequences that, on his view, render an action right or wrong.

Let’s think critically about Leopold’s suggestion that, according to the Land Ethic, an action is morally right if and only if it promotes the beauty, integrity and stability of a biotic community. One potential problem with this claim is that, if taken literally, then a very large number of actions are morally wrong. Biotic communities are in an almost constant state of flux. What about when a tree falls or a deer is killed by a predator. Surely Leopold does not consider such “natural” perturbations morally offensive. I think that a more accurate representation of the land ethic is as follows:

3. **It is morally wrong to perform actions that result in large scale changes to biotic communities.**

The emphasis on *large scale* disruption avoids the absurd implication that almost everything in nature is immoral. Furthermore this interpretation agrees with Leopold’s view that modern humans are unique in their potential for destructive capacity (thanks to technology).

One might object that this statement is more vague than Leopold’s because it does not specify the kinds of changes that are morally significant (e.g. to beauty, integrity or stability). However these were imprecise notions to begin with, and I think that Leopold’s conclusion benefits from this cleaner formulation.

So where are we? We have unpacked Leopold’s rather terse conclusion into three logically distinct components. The first, a statement about the inadequacies of economic thinking, is one that I will return to in the third and final section of today’s lecture. The second conclusion about the importance of aesthetics, ethics and economics is something we shall set aside for now, if only because it seems to raise too many issues. The third conclusion I shall focus on in the next section, where we consider (my interpretation of) the argument Leopold’s presents in its support.

2. Leopold’s moral expansion argument

The central argument that is often attributed to Leopold in defence of the Land Ethic is what I will call the moral expansion argument. It begins with the historical observation that there have been periods in human cultural history when people’s moral horizons were more restricted than today. The example that Leopold cites is the mythical character of Odysseus, who served as a moral touchstone for the
ancient Athenians. Odysseus, the story goes, punished several of his slaves by hanging on the suspicion of misbehaviour. Leopold suggests that this action would not have been regarded by Homer or his contemporaries as a moral transgression. Ancient Athenian, he explains, viewed slaves as property, not as persons. Looking back from our current vantage point this attitude strikes us as morally outrageous. Clearly, in this case, our moral horizons have expanded to recognize that slaves are morally on par with any other human. The subtext of Leopold’s historical observation is that the limitations of a culture’s moral horizon are often not apparent to its members.

We are not at the stage of reconstructing Leopold’s argument for his third conclusion. So let’s articulate this key premise as follows:

*P1) Human moral horizons have expanded over the course of our cultural history.*

Let me stop here and introduce some terminology. The first set of terms I want to introduce is a standard philosophical distinction between two different types of claims. A *descriptive* claim is one that purports to accurately describe some fact or sequence of facts about the world. For example, the claim that human moral horizons have expanded to include slaves is a purported description of historical events. By contrast, a *normative* claim states not how the world is, but instead how it ought to be. The term ‘normative’ derives from norms, which specify regulations or standards, for instance, of conduct. The claim that one *should* treat humans no differently than slaves is a normative claim. However, the claim that humans once did not recognize this norm, and that they now do, is descriptive.

So far, Leopold has only provided us with a descriptive claim. He has suggested that over the course of human history our moral horizons have expanded. His third conclusion, however, is normative. That is, he wants to conclude that people should avoid actions that result in large scale disruption to biotic communities. Does this conclusion follow logically from *P1*? The answer is no, it does not. Something is missing from the argument. The way that we know something is missing is because one can accept the premise as true but deny the truth of the conclusion. That is, one can accept that Athenian moral horizons were more restrictive than our own, while denying that ours should be extended to other members of the biotic community. Many philosophers think that this is generally the case of arguments that attempt to derive a normative from a descriptive claim. “You can’t derive an ought from an is” the saying goes. I am not going to take a stance on this general issue here. Instead, let’s be charitable Leopold by thinking of some additional premises that might bolster his argument.
We might begin by asking, what drives a cultures’ moral horizon to expand in the first place? Perhaps this will provide some insight into whether ours should be expanded to include biotic communities.

Leopold suggests that the answer to these questions has something to do with human social and cultural evolution. As we shall see in class next week, this is a topic that the philosopher Baird Callicott has thought extensively about. I will have more to say about his interpretation of Leopold on Monday, January 17th. In the mean time I want to suggest that Leopold regards the expansion of humanity’s moral horizon has a sort of inevitable outcome. On this reading Leopold has much in common with the social philosophers Karl Marx and G.W.F. Hegel. These thinkers assumed that all cultures follow a natural course of progress towards increased moral enlightenment. On this view, each historical epoch gives birth to a more advanced society that recognizes and transcends the shortcomings of its predecessor. On this view, this mechanism of moral enlightenment involves a sort of ratchet-effect, where cultures advance incrementally in one direction and cannot go back.

My suggestion is that something like this is in fact operative behind the scenes of Leopold’s argument. That is, I think that he considers moral expansion as a sort of historical inevitability - or, as he might put it, as the next stage in our cultural evolution. But how does this lend support to his moral expansion argument?

Suppose that it was true that human history was on an inevitable track towards moral progress. One might then use prior advances to forecast the direction in which society is heading. Some might argue that this sort of analysis suggests that human morality is expanding outwards – initially, only certain humans had moral status. Then our horizon expanded to include all humans. More recently, sentient animals have been recognized as morally significant. On the assumption that humanity is on a track towards increased progress, it might seem plausible that this expansion will continue. That is, assuming we have not reached our moral pinnacle as a society, then the next likely step, one might argue, is to include non-sentient creatures like plants and insects.

Suppose then that these are the implicit premises that Leopold is relying on to derive his third conclusion from P1.

P2) The expansion of our moral horizons constitutes a trend towards greater enlightenment.

P3) Members of the biotic community are the next step in this trend.
This reading of Leopold’s argument has at least one advantage, it supplies his historical observation with a certain amount of normative “oomph”. That is, the expansion of our moral horizon to include biotic communities is now seen as part of the same historical unfolding as the extension of moral rights to slaves. If these two steps are lumped together into a single expansion event then perhaps they can be underwritten by the same justification. We are all familiar with the justification for including slaves within our moral sphere. Since slaves are inherently no different from other humans, it is on pain of logical inconsistency that one extends moral standing to one group but denies it from the other. Leopold’s suggestion is that this same line of reasoning extends to the process of moral expansion in its entirety, thereby enveloping even non-human members of the moral community.

The problem with this argument, however, is that there are all sorts of reasons to reject the Hegelian-Marxist image of moral progress. As is demonstrated by such events as the rise of the Third Reich in 1930s Germany, the scope of our moral horizons are flexible in both directions. Contemporary moral psychologists recognize that this flexibility is sensitive to certain kinds of rhetoric. For example, an effective way to exclude some subgroup from one’s moral sphere is to identify them as parasites who benefit from the honest labour of the majority. It stands to reason that similar tricks could be used to manipulate the scope of one’s moral domain to include some group. Hence, like Leopold, we are justified in being suspicious of the boundaries of our culture’s moral horizon. However, unlike him we cannot assume that humanity’s moral horizon inevitably expands in a direction of greater improvement. Sometimes our horizons retract, and some expansions might be spurious. What this line of thinking suggests is that each expansion of a culture’s moral horizon requires independent justification. Hence, we can grant that the expansion to include slaves was legitimate, but then ask why our moral horizons should extend beyond the boundaries of our species.

There is another reason for rejecting the Hegelian-Marxist picture which I will mention here only in passing. An important lesson for environmental philosophers is that many decisions involve moral trade-offs. The improvement of a society’s standard of living, for example, can lead to a destruction of wilderness. This picture of competing moral and social goods does not fit with the idea of unidirectional moral progress. For many decisions there might simply not be a simple fact of the matter as to whether the world is, all things considered, morally better or worse off.

This concludes, for now, my discussion of Leopold’s moral expansion argument. Notice that nothing I have said implies that his third conclusion is false. It might turn out that, in fact, people should avoid actions that cause large disruptions to biotic communities. What I think I have shown is that,
according to my best attempt to do justice to what he says, Leopold cannot offer a good reason for accepting this conclusion.

   Recall, however, that Lepold also concludes that economic reasoning cannot, by itself, resolve land use issues. I now want to turn to a separate argument that he offers for this conclusion.

3. Leopold’s argument for the necessity of an “ecological conscience”.

I have argued up to this point that Leopold’s argument for the Land Ethic is fails to support his main conclusion, as I have reconstructed it. I now want to turn to Leopold’s critique to alternative frameworks for environmental ethics. Of particular importance is his argument for the necessity of an ecological conscience, and his related objection to “enlightened self interest” as an adequate foundation for environmental ethics.

Leopold begins this section by recounting is experiences with the Wisconsin bureau of land management board. Soil erosion was a widely recognized problem in his day. Leopold explains that this process could have been avoided with more responsible land use practices, although these would have decreased the profit margins of most farmers. To Leopold’s frustration, conservation movements failed to help people see that they must forego short term, economic thinking and consider big picture. He laments over this situation as follows:

   “The usual answer to this dilemma is ‘more conservation education.’ No one will debate this, but is it certain that only the volume of education needs stepping up? Is something lacking in content as well?

   It is difficult to give a fair summary of its content in brief form, but, as I understand it, the content is substantially this: obey the law, vote right, join some organizations, and practice what conservation is profitable on your own land; the government will do the rest.

   ...It defines no right and wrong, assigns no obligation, calls for no sacrifice, implies no change in the current philosophy of values. In respect of land use, it urges only enlightened self interest. Just how far will such education take us? An example will perhaps yield a partial answer.” (165-6)
Leopold goes on to describe an effort by the Wisconsin Legislature to decrease the rate of soil erosion due to the poor use of farms and especially of public land. Farmers were given the opportunity to generate their own set of guidelines to mitigate these issues, and they utterly failed to do so. Instead they continued with the same practices that benefitted them individually in the short term, but which threaten them collectively in the long run.

Leopold offers a diagnosis of what is wrong with the conservation ethic that prevailed in his time: “One basic weakness in a conservation system based wholly on economic motives is that most members of the land community have no economic value”. Once again it is important to be clear about what he means here by economic value, because Leopold’s understanding of this term differs slightly from contemporary usage. By economic value Leopold means actual or direct market value. Something has direct market value if there is a going price at which it is traded. Many of the things essential to a healthy functioning of the land have no such market value. Nutrient-rich soil, water catchment areas to mitigate flooding, top predators to prevent the population explosion of grazing species like deer – these are just some of the examples of what are known today as ecosystem services. Although we depend indirectly for our long term well being on these services, Leopold reasons, they have no market value. However, since the current environmental ethic of his day focuses only on market value, these services are seen as valueless.

Of course, none of this is news to public policy makers or philosophers. Leopold is describing a scenario widely known as the tragedy of the commons. According to this scenario, repeated time and again throughout history, agents acting in their personal self interest end up depleting some shared resource and harming themselves in the long run. The standard solution to this well known problem is to impose government regulations. A system of rewards and punishments, it is argued, can successfully change the economic payoffs so that farmers are no longer have the financial incentive to deplete their land to its maximum yield.

However, Leopold is cynical about this solution to the tragedy of the commons. Here is what he says:

To sum up: a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes falsely, I think, that economic parts of the biotic clock will function
without the uneconomic parts. *It tends to relegate to government functions that are too large, too complex, or too widely dispersed to be performed by government*" (168)

The final sentence is at the crux of Leopold’s critique of existing conservation ethics. On his view, government is simply too cumbersome to deal with such large, complicated and pervasive problems as those which lead to the degradation of the land. It is here that I want to leave the lecture and perhaps open up a discussion. Is Leopold justified in being so cynical about the prospects of government agencies in avoiding tragedy of the commons situations? Or, is his thinking unduly biased by his experiences with the state government of Wisconsin?

As a way of probing your thoughts on these issues I have posted some striking documentaries on the website. One of them is a locally produced documentary by a group of villagers living in the congo. If you want to see an extreme case of a tragedy of the commons situation, check this out.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmIEESAHD4A

The other documentary provides a more optimistic outlook on how enforcing a user pay system for ecosystem services might save a communal watershed.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iahCmZ- dVE