

LAND TRUST ALLIANCE RALLY 2010
WORKSHOP B-20

Treatise on
NATURE-BASED LAND ETHIC
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Nearly two generations ago Aldo Leopold fostered a Land Ethic mindful of a much wider community of interests than were defined by human need and our temporal imperatives. It is important today to recover that message, prior to embarking on plans, projects and other actions on the land.

The conventional approach to land use and land stewardship is human-centric. Special effort must be made to see the whole from a point of view profoundly “other” than our familiar, embedded anthropological hierarchy. A nature-based approach sees humans on the same plane as non-human animals. Then it further broadens the base to include all elements of the land. This perspective provides a more thorough awareness of the whole and the dynamics of its parts.

The holistic** approach is both simpler and more complex. It is more complex because, looking beyond the needs of a single species, it takes whole systems into consideration. It is simpler because more effort is spent on understanding the natural dynamics of place, with its varied terrain and life forms, than on intervention. And rather than letting convenience or convention or preconceived notions rule, nature-based land stewardship is guided by, and seeks to leverage, natural processes.

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

A nature-based ethic requires us to view land with an open mind, seeking to grasp the interconnections of species. This entails careful observation and documentation through the seasons and over time, relying more on insight than book learning, with Nature as mentor. We exercise restraint and caution before deciding to intervene (or not) because so much is at stake for the interwoven macro & micro life systems that are the land’s components.

What we can’t see is as important as what we can see. Micro-organisms in the soil and water contribute to soil health. Because soil is the basic building block of terrestrial life, it makes sense to manage land for optimum soil production and minimum soil disturbance. We take incremental steps, act gradually and pay attention to everything. Because everything is connected.

NATURE-BASED LAND MANAGEMENT

When engaging in actions (e.g. access, fire suppression, drainage, handling critters, etc.), we practice moderation and restraint. Human-needs aspects of projects are not eliminated, but they may not always be paramount. Only the most essential are undertaken, after careful deliberation and with respect for existing natural dynamics.

In practice this means we give attention to the inter-workings of geology, soils, wetlands, uplands and waterways; vegetation and wildlife; roads and other development impacts; what's working and what's not. We identify which species are native and which are not. Of non-natives, we ask how biologically functional they are. Are they benign (i.e. beneficially or neutrally integrated with native flora & fauna)? If so, we leave them undisturbed for further observation, documentation & discussion. If not, we remove them, weighing the effects of gradual vs. sudden removal, and acting accordingly based on what's best for the health of the overall system.

In a relatively healthy ecosystem, Nature's seed bank is extensive. Of the native trees, grasses and other vegetation present, which are regenerating? Which are not? Removing invasive species often releases the native seed bank. What happens can be observed and documented over the course of successive seasons.

Our role is first to observe and then, if warranted, to take modest adaptive steps that minimize damage and enhance biological function of the ecosystem.

For folks seeking deeper meaning in life, working collaboratively with Nature is spiritually rewarding. For folks concerned about global warming, it is more carbon friendly than aggressive, high-tech interventions are. It is also more cost effective.

To do less harm, do it the nature-based way.

** Holistic - emphasizing the importance of the organic, interdependent relationship between the whole and its parts.