Guiding Outdoor Recreation Toward the Land Ethic

BY CHARLES J. LIST

Introduction

The Adirondacks and the Lake Champlain region provide many opportunities for outdoor recreation. There are also potential and actual conflicts which result from these activities, both between the participants, and between the activities and appropriate uses of the land. Some of the more familiar examples of these conflicts are those between motorized recreation (snowmobiles, four-wheelers, jet-skis) and non-motorized (cross-country skiing, hiking, canoeing). The latest DEC unit management plan even attempts to deal with some of these issues. On Lake Champlain we have fishing boats, sailboats, water skiers, jet skiers sometimes competing for space. In the Adirondacks, we find overlapping uses as well: hunting, hiking, rock climbing, bird-watching, etc.

Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic, I believe, is a means for both evaluating and transforming such recreation along three dimensions. First, the aesthetic appeal of outdoor practices may be enriched and focused upon the value of the experience for the participant. Second, there is an ecological dimension which requires an understanding of relationships necessary between recreationists and the land. Third, the ethical commitments made in the form of codes of conduct for outdoor practices may be transformed by placing them in the context of the land ethic.

This paper will first summarize and interpret the land ethic with an eye toward guiding outdoor practices. Second, two matters of local interest will be considered: fishing tournaments and catch and release fly fishing. These cases will provide the opportunity to test whether the land ethic does provide the means for evaluating and resolving some of the issues raised, as well as transforming the practices.

The Land Ethic

“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.”

This famous principle of the land ethic has, for good reasons, been subject to continued analysis and criticisms. Rather than defending my interpretation here, I shall merely state it. (See “Is Hunting A Right Thing?” in Environmental Ethics Vol. 18 for the defense.)

Of first importance in understanding this principle is to discover what a “thing” is which might be right or wrong. My view, which differs from more standard treatments of Leopold, interprets this key concept as not an individual action of, say, an outdoor recreationist, but as a practice or policy. Practices are collective entities which represent the shared beliefs of the practitioners. Practices, such as angling, hunting, farming, or logging are the units of analysis for the land ethic. The actions of individuals are evaluated and transformed by the practice, and the practice, and its tendencies, is evaluated by the land ethic.

It is this concept of a practice that mediates between the actions of individuals and the principle of the land ethic. It is this three-tiered model of ethical evaluation that allows the actions of outdoor recreationists to be evaluated. Individual actions are to be evaluated in terms of the established community standards of the practice and, where these practices concern the land, they are in turn evaluated by the land ethic.

In the case of angling, Leopold assumes there is a community of anglers with certain common elements. First, there may be stated or unstated codes of conduct which regulate the behavior of anglers. Second, there is an interest in the maintenance and continuity of the activity. Third, there are valued experiences and memories which anglers derive. These, it should be emphasized, are already present in the practice and these are the commitments which the land ethic seeks to extend and transform.

With this foundation in place let us look at the three modes of guidance applied by the land ethic.

The first mode of guidance for practices supplied by the land ethic concerns standards of sportsmanship or codes of conduct which are developed for the practice. These codes have become a familiar product of organizations concerned with outdoor recreation: Trout Unlimited, The Atlantic Salmon Federation, The Izaak Walton League, etc. These codes and commitments do not coincide in

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detail but usually contain elements concerned with safety for participants, a commitment to conservation broadly defined, and perhaps some guidance as to proper etiquette in dealing with others. Underlying these is the assumption of integrity, that participants will adhere to these standards because of the quality of their characters. Further, such standards will be maintained in the face of inducements to cheat, even if no one else is present.

The second mode of guidance concerns the rewards participants may expect: the quality of their experiences or the internal goods which may be derived. These refined experiences are broadly speaking aesthetic. It is the conjunction of certain kinds of natural environments with activities which invite participation in those environments which account for the aesthetic appreciation. Leopold himself often compares hunters and anglers to poets and artists: they do what they do for one reason: "the thrill to beauty." Standing in the way of this thrill are the innumerable gadgets and technologies which mediate and insulate the participant from the full experience. The quality of the experience resides in its contrast to everyday life. Such practices should be, in Leopold's words, "a defiance of the contemporary."

The third mode of guidance is ecological in that it concerns the relation between one's activity and the land which makes it possible. Again there is a prior commitment to provide the source of this transformation: if one wants to fish, one needs fish; fish need certain kinds of conditions to thrive; those conditions must be maintained if the activity is to continue. This source of ecological awareness is developed in the direction of the stability of the land by teaching stewardship and husbandry. For example, the value of native Adirondack brook trout is expanded to the value of the ecosystem which ensures their flourishing. Knowledge of the means to such an end is gained not merely in the classroom but by hands-on projects. (It is a shame that such projects are often reserved for "experts" when so much benefit could be derived for the participants in the outdoor practice itself.)

To conclude this admittedly abstract and academic discussion of the land ethic, I think it should be clear that the central values stated in the principle of the land ethic—integrity, stability, and beauty—are summary concepts for the three modes of guidance for practices. The ethical mode of guidance is captured by the concept of integrity, the aesthetic by beauty, and the ecological by stability. These values, found first in the commitments of practices of outdoor recreation (and elsewhere) are then to be grown in the direction of the good of the biotic community.

Angling in Fishing Tournaments

Fishing tournaments are often evaluated on the basis of economic success and there is little doubt that money does flow in. For instance, in the "14th Annual Rotary International Fishing Classic," about 100 advertisers hope to see some benefit from the tournament. This tournament is held on Lake Champlain each year in June. But, the land ethic asks us to include non-economic values such as integrity, stability, and beauty. How do such tournaments stand when judged by these?

The first kind of value to be evaluated is generally what I called aesthetic. What is valuable in the experience of fishing? If Leopold is right, it's the way in which the experience re-enacts a more primitive means of living. It allows us to feel, if only for a day, the contrast between the way we live now and the way our ancestors lived, when fishing fed the family and so meant more than a day's diversion. This experience is made more real by the skills necessary to fish well, skills which are too frequently made superfluous by technological gadgets: instead of finding fish we have fish finders, instead of reading the water we have published "hot-spots" and C-B scanners; instead of navigating by the sun and stars we have GPS. To the extent that skills are replaced by gadgets, the value of the experience is degraded. Unfortunately, these gadgets are perceived as being necessary to compete well in tournaments: fast boats, fish finders, CB radios, and GPS are standard equipment. Surely this replacement of skill with gadgets materially affects the quality of the experience of angling, the satisfaction gained, the internal rewards available.

A second kind of value in activities like fishing is their requirement of personal responsibility and integrity. Codes of sportsmanship for fishing are voluntary restraints we impose upon ourselves where no one would be the wiser if we cheated. We think that activities such as fishing have the capacity to build character and that the habits of self-control and integrity learned in these activities will extend naturally to other areas of our lives. But these commitments may break down in the face of the pressures of a fishing competition. Where money prizes are involved, the internal satisfaction of self-control and good sportsmanship are too easily forgotten. The possibility and, sadly, reality, of cheating in such tournaments only confirms this. This feature is dealt with in an interesting way by the Rotary Tournament. They say, in the rules of the tournament that "In order to maintain the integrity of the 'Classic,' there must be an affirming witness (to verify the catch)..." This rule makes it plain that the integrity of the tournament participants is open to question.

A third source of value concerns not the experience of fishing, nor its connection to our character, but rather its connection to our environment. We need to be reminded of the connections between our outdoor activities and the environmental conditions which support them. The reason there are salmon and lake trout to be caught as tokens in a fishing competition are multiple and complex. They at least include a prolific stocking program, control of lampreys, a cleaner lake, and a sustained effort by local anglers and fishery professionals to maintain a premier fishing resource. The environmental conditions which are necessary for a fishing tournament to exist are conditions we must continually monitor and
nurture. This effort is at least in part the responsibility of those of us who use the resource, including participants in fishing tournaments. Such a commitment to the continuing stability of the fishing, and, even more important, toward that time when it may no longer be necessary to artificially replenish the stocks of fish, would be not only a credit to the current generation of anglers, but an invaluable gift to our children.

We need to ask, then, to what extent are these non-economic values served by a fishing tournament? Are gadgets replacing skill? Is personal integrity fighting a losing battle with monetary reward and glory? Is economic prosperity valued over or even instead of ecological health? Unfortunately, the trends in fishing tournaments seem to lead to an affirmative answer to these questions.

**Catch and Release Fly Fishing**

Like fishing tournaments, Catch and Release Fly Fishing (CRFF) offers a way of practicing angling. Also like tournament fishing, it allows for many variations of locale, species, and style. The Adirondacks offer hundreds of streams and rivers, ponds and lakes. In order to make the contrast as clear as possible, I shall assume CRFF is not being done as a part of a tournament (although it could be), and that there is a sub-practice which forms a community of catch and release fly anglers.

Evaluating CRFF along the lines suggested above, we need to examine the commitments inherent in the practice to aesthetic appreciation, ethical integrity, and ecological awareness.

CRFF places a premium on skill and the quality of the experience of fly fishing. Perhaps no outdoor activity has a richer literature devoted to it. This literature emphasizes the pleasures of the activity over number or size of fish caught. It emphasizes beauty of both the location and the quarry. And the catch and release doctrine requires that the beautiful catch be allowed to continue to survive. The skills of fly-tying, reading water, casting, insect identification, are all highlighted. These skills and the quality of the resulting experience are inducements to further actions including stream preservation and water quality.

CRFF requires a high degree of restraint on the part of the angler. This is not merely present in the actual requirement of catch and release, but in restraining what Joseph Sax calls "a mere will to conquer." Constraining this will to conquer is one way of developing the kind of integrity that angling promises. If integrity means constancy in the face of adversity, constancy is learned in CRFF in the face of the difficulties of the practice and the mere will to conquer.

The value of stability, the ecological mode of guidance, is also endorsed by CRFF. The sense of being a part of a biotic community is developed by some of the very skills required: knowing the insect life, knowing the characteristics of a healthy stream, knowing the qualities of wild fish as opposed to stockers. These are inducements to work toward the continuation of and enhancement to these qualities. Stream clean-ups and restoration, lobbying, involvement in environmental groups are all expressions of this commitment.

For example, my experience with the Lake Champlain Chapter of Trout Unlimited has allowed me to observe these commitments first hand. The environmental actions of this group are founded in their concern for the trout and salmon fishery and are expressed in diverse ways: yearly clean-ups of the Saranac River, stream bank improvements on the Salmon River, lobbying for and securing funding for a fish ladder on the Saranac, youth education programs, etc.

Examples of these values as linked to the Adirondack experience are plentiful. One might examine Ernest Schwiebert's classics, *Matching the Hatch or Nymphs*. For a discussion of conservation efforts on the West Branch of the Ausable, see Cecil Heacox's *The Complete Brown Trout*. The long history of fly fishing in the Adirondacks is told by Paul Schullery in *American Fly Fishing*.

CRFF has the potential to become a model for outdoor recreation as viewed from the land ethic. Yet this is not guaranteed. There is always the possibility of being satiated by stocked fish, by being seduced by gadgets and packaged experiences, of investing a few dollars to join an organization rather than one's time in the work required. Angling in general and CRFF in particular is subject to the same kinds of pressures associated with any outdoor practice: commercialization and even corruption.

In conclusion, while CRFF appears comparatively closer to the ideals of the land ethic than tournament fishing, it must be remarked that the land ethic is interested in tendencies, not absolutes. Remember that "a thing (practice) is right when it tends to preserve..." Given this, there is no reason why fishing competitions may not be oriented in the right direction. The Rotary Classic, for example, is already encouraging catch and release and donating some of the proceeds to fish hatcheries. While I am sure there may be other suggestions, a few occur to me. Perhaps an inducement to work on water and fishery issues in lieu of entry fees. Perhaps the experience of fishing could receive equal billing with the winner of the tournament? Perhaps the involved anglers or coordinators could be charged with developing a code of conduct? At any rate, the same inherent interests are present in tournament fishing as in CRFF and the land ethic, if it has merit, should be able to guide those interests.