

## Why Nurturing Environmental Writing Matters

Anthony Anella, *Founder & President, Leopold Writing Program*



*The land is where we live and where the consequences of our presence accumulate, determining what else we can do, and what we can no longer do. The land is thus the book of our lives. Each day we write upon it new pages, some splendid, some sordid, informing our progeny of the truth about us whatever we may write elsewhere.*

—ROGER G. KENNEDY, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause*

As the father of three children who will live their lives in the 21st century, my primary concern is how they will survive the reality of a changing climate. My son and oldest daughter were born at the end of the last century, and my youngest daughter at the beginning of the new millennium. How will they adapt to climate change with all its known and unknown ramifications?

Hope for our children depends on our ability to break through the prevailing orthodoxy that views humans as separate from nature and therefor allows our accounting systems to externalize the environmental costs of our economic activities. The only accounting system that really matters is the one that measures the health of our planet. You can't have a truly healthy economy over the long-term without preserving the ecological health of the system as a whole.

The words economy and ecology both derive from the same Greek root, *oikos*, which means "house, dwelling place, habitation", but over time their subject matters have become falsely separated. Today, because of this separation, ecologists and economists view the world much differently. What divides economics from ecology is the same way of looking at the world that separates our understanding of the world into scientific and philosophic silos. Physics is not chemistry according to this view, geology is not biology, and psychology is somehow separate from the soul.

Of all the “ologies” we have created to understand nature, only ecology cuts across these artificial boundaries to create a unifying understanding of the whole, including humanity’s place within that whole. The crux of the matter is the economic health of society depends on the ecologic health of the planet. An economy is only sustainable if it is informed by ecology.

The prevailing orthodoxy will change only when our stories change. Stories both reflect and create our realities. They are how we orient ourselves in the world. They are the lines we draw on paper to make the maps of our lives. They are also the lines we draw on the land that determine what we can do and what we can no longer do. Ecology is the story that tells us what we can do. Economics should be the story that tells us what we can no longer do. Ethics are the stories that bridge the divide. We can’t heal the land without changing the stories we tell about our relationship with nature. As the internationally-celebrated nature writer and ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan has written, we can’t proceed with environmental

restoration in a meaningful way without environmental “re-story-ation.”

The solutions to the existential problems posed by climate change and biodiversity loss will be cultural as much as they will be technological. Will social status be measured by consumption or by conservation? Will progress be defined by growth for growth’s sake or by living within our means both economically and ecologically? Will we, as Aldo Leopold posed the question, continue to view the land “as a commodity belonging to us” or “as a community to which we belong?”

Leopold “purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as an ethic is ever written.... It evolves in the minds of a thinking community.” Leopold understood that just as biological diversity is critical for a healthy ecosystem, so too cultural diversity—the different stories we tell about the world that shape the different ways we view the world—is critical for the survival of life on our planet. No one culture has all the answers. Honoring cultural diversity, just like preserving biologic diversity, is a way to hedge our bets.

The Leopold Writing Program nurtures environmental writing—by 6th – 12th graders who participate in the Aldo Leopold Writing Contest, by early to mid-career professional writers who participate in the Aldo & Estella Leopold Residency, and by distinguished writers who give the Annual Leopold Lecture. By nurturing environmental writing, the Leopold Writing Program is making a contribution to the critically important cultural conversation about how to heal the land.

Please join this effort by contributing to the Leopold Writing Program. 🌱



Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation

# Where Birds Whispered In My Ear

Priyanka Kumar



Priyanka Kumar,  
2020 Aldo & Estella  
Leopold Resident

For at least the last twenty years, sirens have been sounding about the climate crisis, but billions of people and entire countries went about their business as usual, unwilling or unable to wrestle with abstract problems that might impact them at an unspecified future date. There is no longer any ethical justification for such professed ignorance, inaction, or denial. For starters, the climate crisis is no longer an abstract problem. If you live in Los Angeles, like a writer friend of mine, the smoke from record-busting megafires clouds your doorstep and you can't step out for your daily walk—the only outing that was keeping you sane during the COVID pandemic. If you are a violet-green swallow, you are fleeing the millions of burning acres that have already charred endangered sage grouse and their habitat in the state of Washington. Your fat reserves are low, you remain undernourished from a global insect die-off, and, along with hundreds of your companion swallows, you give up the ghost while flying past the drought-stricken state of New Mexico.

The recent bird die-offs are a bitter pill: I have just returned from a Leopold Writing Residency at Mi Casita, where I reveled in observing birds daily around Aldo and Estella's historic cabin. As August wore on, I attempted to keep my head down and complete the manuscript of my book, "Conversations With Birds," written to the music of a dozen mice dancing between the boards of the staircase. But in the late afternoons when colorful birds began to flit outside the cabin, an hour would mysteriously vanish.

Seeing a female western tanager from my desk, I would think, "Ah, now I can do a visual comparison of the size of this bird with the juvenile tanager I'd seen this morning." But as though anticipating my approach, the lemony-colored female ducked into the glossy, tapered leaves of a south-facing Gambel oak thicket. To improve my chance of locating the bird, I ambled out to the porch, but felt compelled to look first at a dusky flycatcher diving admirably for flies in the shimmering afternoon light. The female tanager at last showed herself and I observed that it was

significantly larger than the juvenile I'd seen on the ground this morning.

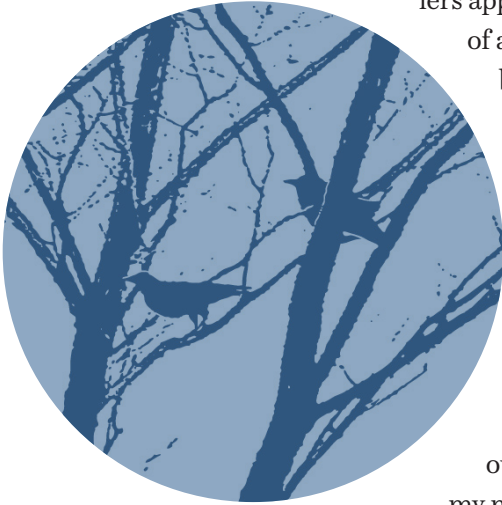
As the tanager alighted from a scrawny oak, behind the thicket was some rustling movement.

A magnificent set of chocolate-velvety antlers appeared. I glimpsed the mouth of a buck munching oak leaves, but when I shifted position, the buck disappeared. I slipped on my shoes and rushed around to the back to look for the buck. No luck.

Now that I was out here, I couldn't resist climbing up the boulders to the overlook. I quite forgot that my manuscript was waiting. As I

reached the cement square and gazed at the trucks on the road below and the mountains beyond, two swifts wheeled above at just the right pace so that my binoculars kept up with them. A nighthawk with prominent white bands on dark brown wings bolted past. This was an ideal vantage point from where to peer at the barn below.

Seeing bird activity behind the barn, I naturally headed down there. A Townsend's solitaire flew up to last year's mule-ear flower stalk. Beyond the fence, a Steller's jay was smacking a nut on the branch of a ponderosa pine. A house finch dared the solitaire and perched on an adjacent dried mule-ear flower. The solitaire stubbornly out-perched the finch and me. I finally wandered over toward the meadow out front, noting some female finches along the way. But what was that? A coyote racing past the meadow! I quickened my pace wondering where the coyote was headed. The animal vanished like the wind. Instead I got close views of a pair of dusky flycatchers, and the elusive female tanager flew by adding a streak of color to the sun-bleached afternoon.



Around the Leopold cabin, fifty-five species of birds, to be precise, have whispered in my ear and roguishly prodded me away from my desk. The only other place where I've experienced such a current that obliged me to spend my waking hours outside (or ruminating about the outside) is when as a child I lived in remote northeastern India. Mi Casita is of course more than simply any old cabin. Aldo Leopold poured into this place the tender hopes of a young man in love; he finished the ceiling himself, created the front path, and paid carpenters out of his pocket after Forest Service funds ran out. Inside the cabin, space flows—one room yields to another. Only in his mid-twenties then, Aldo designed this place with a sure hand. Had he learned from his maternal grandfather, who was trained as an architect?

In the evenings, as I delved deep into the battles for conservation, before and after Aldo's time, I felt sure that Mi Casita should remain a space that fosters careful ecological thought and evolving ideas about how we can cope with the climate crisis. Aldo Leopold was a master of evolving thought—consider how he pivoted after he realized that his initial ideology about predator control was misguided. Today, when biologists and naturalists are called upon to

decipher ever-stranger mysteries such as the current bird die-offs in the Southwest, Mi Casita is a refuge—an edifice rich with symbolism, where we can ponder our fast-changing relationship with the land. Preserving an old structure may pose a unique set of challenges, but



this is one cabin that must remain shielded from commercial considerations. Mi Casita has already survived 108 years, and if we'll go on repairing its cracks and listening to birdsong from its porch, what it can teach us won't be exhausted in the 108 years to come. 🌿



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

# Mi Casita vs. Madison

Emily Wortman-Wunder



Emily Wortman-Wunder,  
2020 Aldo & Estella  
Leopold Resident

“Hard left  
turns can  
look like  
disaster.”

Lately I have been thinking of transitions, hard left turns, and changes of heart. How, for example, my twenty-five-year-old self would cringe to see me now: a suburban homeowner who camps maybe twice a year. Back then I proclaimed loudly that I, like Aldo Leopold, was one who could not live without wild things—or would have, if I’d ever read him. I hadn’t, though, because nature writing was bogus. Why read about nature when you could be in it?

I have been thinking this as I sit at the ample desk at Mi Casita, the house in Tres Piedras, New Mexico, that Leopold built. I’ve been invited here to work on my novel about environmental degradation: clearly, I’ve gotten over my aversion to nature writing. But what got me here was something more complex than just getting older.

Leopold was about 25 when he designed this house, a brand new Forest Supervisor who had just won the hand of Estella Bergere, of Santa Fe. He was on top of the world—for exactly seven months, until an attack of kidney disease almost killed him. He and Estella had to retreat to his parents’ house in Iowa, where he was laid up for eighteen interminable months.

Hard left turns can look like disaster. The illness cut short Leopold’s Forest Service career, and he and Estella never lived in Mi Casita again. Leopold spent the next decade patching together a series of short-term jobs, from forest inspector to chamber of commerce secretary. Finally, they had to leave the Southwest altogether.

I remember the moment I knew I wouldn't be returning to my seasonal job as a wild-life technician for the Forest Service. It was the morning after my husband and I had signed a contract for a house in Fort Collins, and as the excitement of having our bid accepted began to wear off, I realized I was never going to spend the summer in a tent again. I could feel the world suddenly contract, and I grew panicky. How was I going to maintain a connection with nature if I was stuck in town?

The house where Leopold lived in Madison, Wisconsin, that he and Estella bought in 1924.

Photo courtesy of Madelyn Leopold



I inventoried vacant lots and abandoned properties and highway interchanges. What did these things tell us—about themselves, and about us?

The house where Leopold lived for two and a half decades—almost half his life—was not this cabin in New Mexico. It was the house in downtown Madison, Wisconsin, that he and Estella bought in 1924. With sidewalks, lawn, and neighbors on every side, the house was and is stolidly residential. It was there, however, that he wrote his most important work, from “The Land Ethic” to the quietly revolutionary *A Sand County Almanac*. What gives? How was Madison his radical place?

Leopold's eighteen months of sick leave are often pointed to as the thing that made him a radical. It was then he was finally able to read, reflect, and clarify his ideas. However, I believe the real change came later, in the confines of his Madison study. Living in town—and travelling frequently to get out of it—forced him to seek out the intimate connections between the civilized and the wild.

Like me. At first, stuck in town, I read—Leopold, and other nature writers. I explored rivers and canals and any open space I could find.

Then I started paying attention: how did wild animals use this space? Children? The homeless? I inventoried vacant lots and abandoned properties and highway interchanges. What did these things tell us—about themselves, and about us?

And as I searched, I started to write. I wrote about the land we try to forget: the wasted land, the broken land. My work built on the years I spent craning my neck into the tops of endless aspen groves, searching for goshawk nests—but it required the long dry spell living in the city in order to bloom.

In this I had a guide in Leopold. He is as eloquent about scouring pioneer cemeteries for remnant prairie species as he is about exploring the pristine wilderness of northern Mexico. He knew what it was to take the place where you've washed up and find what makes it interesting.

It can be painful to think of the Leopolds' house in Madison, Wisconsin, when standing on the porch of Mi Casita, with its sweeping view of the Rio Grande Valley. It is so achingly beautiful here. Nevertheless, it was not this beauty alone that made Leopold—it was that he had to leave it behind. And his response to that loss makes a lesson for us all. 🍃

# One Mission. Three Programs. All Generations.

## ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST

For 6th – 12th grade students in New Mexico, the Aldo Leopold Writing Contest engages the next generation of leaders in an urgent conversation about how to address the changing realities brought about by climate disruption, biodiversity loss, growing freshwater demands and other conservation issues. It engages the students, their peers, their teachers, their parents and grandparents, and their larger communities, and gives voice to the generation of writers who will be most affected by those changing environmental realities. Since its beginning in 2009, over 2,000 students have participated in the Contest.

The 2020 Aldo Leopold Writing Contest prompt centered on the relationship between ecology and economy, words that share a common Greek root. Over 200 essays were submitted. Top honors and \$500 cash awards went to Matthew Oswald, Grade 10 (also awarded Overall Best Essay); Merrick Word-Brown, Grade 8; and Avery Bell, Grade 7. **To read the essays, visit [leopoldwritingprogram.org](http://leopoldwritingprogram.org).**

### 2021 CONTEST PROMPT

***“Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets, but humbler folk may circumvent this restriction if they know how. To plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a good shovel.”***  
—Aldo Leopold

As the novel coronavirus spread in 2020, we needed to stay home. We had to turn back to familiar landscapes, reacquaint ourselves with our yards and neighborhoods, and look more closely at our own skies and landscapes.

“Using Leopold’s land ethic as a guidepost, think about lessons we can learn from staying home. What acts of creation – be that as poet or as planter – did you unexpectedly find yourself taking up, and how did your creations build on some of New Mexico’s senses of dwelling with the Earth, such as *querencia*, kinship, *acequias*, and aridity?”

## ALDO & ESTELLA LEOPOLD RESIDENCY

An inspiring retreat for emerging to mid-career environmental writers and respected thinkers interested in reshaping the cultural story about the relationship between humans and Nature. Selected residents spend one month at Mi Casita, Aldo and Estella’s first home in northern New Mexico, and receive a \$750 stipend to help defray travel and living expenses.

### PAST RESIDENTS

Courtney White (2012)  
John Hausdoerffer (2013)  
Paul Bogard (2013)  
Leeanna Torres (2014)  
Bonnie Harper-Lore (2014)  
Tovar Cerulli (2015)  
Gavin Van Horn (2015)  
Andrew Gulliford (2016)  
Priscilla Solis Ybarra (2016)  
Maya Kapoor (2017)  
Ariana Kramer (2017)  
Andrea Clearfield (2017)  
Ben Goldfarb (2017)  
Laura Pritchett (2018)  
Matt Jones (2018)  
Matt Barnes (2018)  
Laura Paskus (2019)  
Priyanka Kumar (2020)  
Emily Wortman-Wunder (2020)

**Included in this newsletter are essays written by our two 2020 residents, Priyanka Kumar and Emily Wortman-Wunder.**

**For profiles of the other residents, visit [leopoldwritingprogram.org](http://leopoldwritingprogram.org)**

## ANNUAL LEOPOLD LECTURE

This lecture features a distinguished environmental thinker who inspires and challenges audiences to explore today’s critical environmental issues. To complete the intergenerational nature of the Leopold Writing Program, the lecturer presents the awards to the 6th-12th grade winners of the Writing Contest.

### PAST LECTURERS

**Barry Lopez**, the author of *Arctic Dreams*, a National Book Award winner.

**David Parsons**, a career wildlife biologist who led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Program from 1990 to 1999.

**David E. Stuart**, an internationally recognized anthropologist whose most cited books are *Prehistoric New Mexico* and *Anasazi America*.



**William D. Nordhaus**, an Albuquerque native and the 2018 Nobel Laureate in Economics for his work creating a quantitative model that describes the global interplay between the economy and climate, was scheduled to lecture in April 2020. Because of the pandemic the lecture was postponed.

Dr. Nordhaus has agreed to present his lecture, “Skiing and Fishing on a Hot Planet,” as soon as it is safe to do so.

# 2021 Events Calendar



## FEBRUARY 16

Writing Contest essay submittal deadline

## MARCH 1

Residency application deadline

## MARCH 29

Writing Contest winner announcement

## MARCH 31

Residency selection announcement

## APRIL 19

Annual Leopold Lecture and Writing Contest Awards Ceremony  
*Tentative due to pandemic*

## MAY-OCTOBER

Residency season

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## Your Financial Support Matters

The Leopold Writing Program cultivates environmental leaders and promotes the land ethic through its writing programs, educational initiatives, and public lectures. To continue to accomplish our goals, we need your support.

**Please mail your contribution or donate online at [leopoldwritingprogram.org](http://leopoldwritingprogram.org)**

**Gift options include cash, bequests or memorial gifts, stocks, bonds, real property, and annuities. To discuss giving opportunities, contact Anthony Anella at 505-265-8713.**

## Yes, I want to support the Leopold Writing Program!

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