

THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2020 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER

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“Well guys, we’re certainly in some hot water...”

Our teacher’s words echoed dismally through the classroom as we stared at the temperature graph. Its bright red curve looked as though it were racing the y-axis to the top of the page. Still, perhaps more sobering, was the indisputable downward turn of the water level curve, whose bumpy descent, in the words of one plucky student, resembled “a violent playground slide”.

Every year, our 7th grade science teacher took her class on a field trip to assess the health of the Rio Grande, and while my class was proud to contribute to a science project over 15 years in the making, the data came as a shock. For many of us, the river was not a resource to be conserved, but rather, a silent guarantee. After all, we swam in its banks, fished its streams, and relied on the food irrigated with its water. But that day, we were forced to confront a startling reality: the resources upon which we depend – and which are often taken for granted – are not infinite. Moreover, the consequences of their depletion would be detrimental to our everyday lives.

Now, as I drive past the dusty river bed on my way to school, what I find most worrisome about that lesson was not our lack of statistical knowledge concerning the state of our river (after all, such things can be taught), but rather, the inherent disconnect between our reliance on natural resources, and our concern for the biotic environments from which they stem. As a society, too often, our policies and practices degrade our land – depleting its natural resources and disrupting its biotic communities – for the sake of economic opportunity. Paradoxically, it is these ecosystems (as well as the natural resources they provide) which allow for human development in the first place. Thus, we have created a destructive feedback loop, in which our economic expansion depletes the very resources necessary to sustain it. The solution, then, is to reunite our understanding of ecology and economy, as one cannot exist without the other.

Etymology tells us that both “economy” and “ecology” stem from the Greek root, “Oikos”, which is defined as a house or family resources. Thus, we can assume that an economy refers to the management, production, and consumption of our land’s resources, while ecology is primarily concerned with the dwelling place (or “home”) of these resources. This common root reveals two important facts. Firstly, that it is impossible to have prosperity without the tools required for prospering. Secondly, it reveals that if we value prosperity, then we also value the systems and resources required to achieve it. By reuniting our understanding of these two concepts, we allow ourselves to apply the same sense urgency, imperativeness, and importance to ecological concerns as we previously held for economic ones. And when the sustainability of resources becomes as important a priority as the spending of them, we can more easily solve today’s environmental concerns.

Of course, it is not necessary to analyze etymology to grasp the inherent importance of the environment in our economic and financial well-being. Aldo-Leopold understood that land, animals, and nature have an inherent value beyond the monetary one we assign it. Nature is beautiful, and just as we depend on it, we have a moral responsibility to it. To ensure its resources last beyond us and are not destroyed on a whim.



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