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## **Moonrise over Metal**

There is a photograph by Ansel Adams called “Moonrise over Hernandez, NM.” The photograph, taken in 1941, depicts a quiet town that rests below the moon, veiled in shadows yet illuminated by a celestial glister. In the distance is the expansive view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, their contours softened by the ethereal glow.

Recently, the Sangre de Cristo peaks have been illuminated not by an ethereal glow, but by raging infernos that paint the landscapes in hues of red and orange. Increasingly frequent and severe fires because of climate change have large repercussions on the biotic community. They replace entire swaths of vegetation with non-native plants, fragment habitats, increase soil erosion, and contribute to pollution.

Transportation, industry, and electric power kindle this flame. Tools we use in our everyday lives such as phones, cars, and the gas that heats our houses have chain reactions in the environment. They tip the scales of a balanced and harmonious system.

We harnessed fire, using it to cook our food, make our tools and weapons. As we gathered around campfires, we started connecting socially with others, slowly forming an rudimentary language. We used “slash and burn” tactics to clear land, raise crops, and graze cattle. The pyramid of consumers and producers, intricately balanced through centuries of evolution and incremental change, was eliminated and replaced with monocropping systems. Large swaths of wheat stretching for acres upon acres became preferred over biodiversity. We used guano from birds on islands off of South America as fertilizer leading to the contamination of our water systems. Our rapacious plunder of the land led to radical changes in ecosystems. As Leopold predicted in his essay “The Land Ethic”, “Man’s invention of tools has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope”<sup>1</sup>

I calculate my tools in numbers. To me they are not tools, but effects. A single average passenger vehicle emits around 4.6 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year<sup>2</sup>. In the United States, thirty to forty percent of food is wasted.<sup>3</sup> Every Google search requires energy as well. Our lives are a series of choices. If we understand the repercussions of our actions, we are better able to mitigate the climate crisis. So, I plant carrots, arugula, and peas in my subsistence garden. I raise chickens to reduce emissions needed for storing and

<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p.217

<sup>2</sup> “Greenhouse Gas Emissions from a Typical Passenger Vehicle” | US EPA

<sup>3</sup> “Food Waste” | USDA

transporting processed eggs. I replace pesticides on my plants with ladybugs. I care for butterfly bushes in my front yard for the monarch butterflies that pollinate in the summer during their migration to Canada. As Leopold reminds us, "The evolution of land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process."<sup>4</sup>

I pull to the side of New Mexico Highway 285 outside of Española. Ahead is the San Jose Churchyard and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that Ansel Adams photographed more than eighty years ago. The view of the Sangres is obstructed by the tin roofs of houses, the sounds of nature smothered by the roar of cars whizzing past. The lights of Hernandez turn the ink-black quiet into an artificial buzz. We have the most extraordinary and alarming talent to bend the natural order to our liking by using light, combustion, or metal corrugation. Humans have the unique capability to plunder the land and obstruct nature with tools. But humans also have the remarkable ability to understand our impacts on the environment and implement a set of values and ethics to rebalance the scales.

Leopold's land ethic requires each individual to understand their role: not to conquer and extract from the land, but to be citizens within it. Unlike our tools, we can understand the interconnected web of existence and our place inside of it. When I use tools, I keep in mind Leopold's words. I hope to align my choices with the individual, society, and the biotic community. I consider myself a denizen of the natural world.

#### Works Cited

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Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p.225