

*“When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”* Aldo Leopold in *The Land Ethic*.

Feeling a sense of belonging in nature’s community takes time. Truly experiencing nature requires repetition, but after an infinite amount of missteps, you can feel the land. You know which branches to avoid, which trail will keep you on track, and all your senses can feel when the desert is thirsty or when it’s about to rain. And thus, you can feel the losses caused by climatic changes. Sporadic snowfall, dry riverbeds, and dusty trails caused by little rain become a saddening part of your daily routine--the paths you once traveled on often close for fire danger; the snow you once played in becomes an increasingly distant memory. You are a part of the circuitous pattern where the movements of nature exist in tandem with each other.

Growing up in the mountains and deserts between Taos and Albuquerque, I am monumentally lucky to be able to see land “as a community to which [I] belong.” As such, my ability to experience nature in its purest forms is heightened. From trail running and rock climbing in the desert to skiing and backpacking in the high country, adverse conditions are normal--in fact, they’re where I feel most at home. When I go out for a run every day or gear up to go hiking, I accept the risks of nature and find unexpected beauty. In doing so, my anxiety and emotional turmoil melt away. I am focused only on that moment, on the soil under my feet and the sky overhead. Ultimately, the natural wonder forces any distress or discomfort to become trivial. I know I can do only my best to get to the next moment and appreciate every bit of it. Appreciate every storm and every stumble; the good conditions and the bad, because I am taking my small place in nature’s circuit.

My connection to my local ecosystems makes the impaired access to environmentalism in today's world starkly apparent. Not everyone gets the opportunity to be a part of nature’s community; not everyone gets to feel the way nature breathes in this circuit, to be affected by it. Especially in urban spaces affected by poverty, like many regions of Albuquerque, income disparities and financial injustice keep families confined to crumbling infrastructure that is not ethically or ecologically sound. These systems of oppression give citizens no choice but to cling to whatever resources are readily accessible, whether it be fossil fuels or single-use plastics. At this point, the environment can’t be in the question, only survival.

By *inflicting* these injustices, another part of the environmental circuit is *afflicted*. This directly corresponds to Newton's Third Law of Motion, which states that "For every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction." Everything we do as humans is part of the land, so the only ethical option is to react to it in that way. By ensuring that everyone, regardless of their gender, race, body type, or socioeconomic class has the opportunity and resources to realize their role in nature we can ensure that we can give back to the land that sustains us.

Aldo Leopold emphasized time and time again that "care for people cannot be separated from care for the land," and in these times, that ideology becomes increasingly important. Improving access and awareness of the public green spaces that are often within mere miles of our New Mexico homes is the most crucial step to nurture a thinking community that has sufficient knowledge and commitment to care for the land and in doing so, become a part of it. Experiencing nature as an integral part of our community is the foundation of the Land Ethic, and by guarding the right to this experience, we do not have the capacity to protect the spaces that are so critical to our survival. Regardless of location or demographic, young people can take steps to promote positive change by quite literally taking a single step out their door. Ultimately, land is *not* merely the soil upon which we stand. It is a living, breathing system, and to cultivate the critical thought that Aldo Leopold envisioned, this perception is key.