

John W. Byram

Director, University of New Mexico Press

First Annual Leopold Lecture, Guest Speaker Introduction (4/23/2017)

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to The Leopold Writing Program's first annual Leopold Lecture event. Thank you for coming together to celebrate the student winners of the 2017 Aldo Leopold Writing Contest and also to take inspiration from our distinguished speaker, author (and world-traveler) Mr. Barry Lopez.

You have already listened to several different people today talk a bit about the impact that twentieth century ecologist Aldo Leopold has had on how current stakeholders think about the goals, process, and practice of environmental conservation, but let me briefly say a bit more about how some larger traditions of the peoples and cultures of the Southwest may have influenced Leopold's thinking about the larger ecological connections between humans and the rest of the natural world.

A twenty-four-year-old Aldo Leopold—a young Yale Forest School graduate working for the fledgling US Forest Service—arrived in New Mexico in 1911 to take the position as deputy supervisor of the Carson National Forest. Over the next thirteen years, Leopold traveled widely throughout our state, and among his accomplishments is credited with playing an essential role in the federal government's 1924 decision to formally designate the Gila National Forest in the southwestern part of New Mexico as the first wilderness area in the United States. Leopold even served as the first secretary of the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce during WWI where he championed a number of local watershed protection issues. He also somehow found the time to fall in love and marry schoolteacher Estella Luna Otero Bergere from Santa Fe whose ancestry

could be traced to a prominent Spanish land grant family that counted the Duke of Albuquerque as one of its forebears. Leopold, and his growing family, eventually left New Mexico for Wisconsin in 1924, but continued to occasionally return to the Southwest to visit relatives and friends. Historians have argued that his years in New Mexico had a fundamental impact during the following decades in the way Leopold thought about environmental ecosystems and how to protect them.

Leopold wrote in material that was collected for the 1949 publication of *A Sand County Almanac* that:

“The scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little we know about it. The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: ‘What good is it?’ If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.”

Leopold dubbed this approach to recognizing and championing the interrelationship between humans and the environment, creating a “land ethic”:

“We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in....A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve

this capacity....The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process.”
[Aldo Leopold “The Land Ethic,” 1949]

It is significant that Leopold’s conviction mirrors a widespread guiding principle of Native American nations that there is an essential harmony found in all aspects of the natural world, and these core relationships are reinforced with ceremonial offerings to the land throughout one’s life. The environment is sacred and grounds humans with a special connection to place that cannot be separated from one’s identity. For example, Diné elder Mary T. Begay has said that

“Our way of life is our religion, and our teaching. If we are relocated by force, we will die slowly. The people would not be in balance with Mother Earth and Sky Father and the spiritual people. In every way, here we are connected to the land. We belong here.”

The Diné phrase for “the land” can be loosely translated to “the Great Self” where the natural environment and one’s identity are inseparable.

Our keynote speaker today, Barry Lopez, has written eloquently about a similarly powerful connection to place:

“A continually refreshed sense of the unplumbable complexity of patterns in the natural world, patterns that are ever present and discernible, and which incorporate the observer, undermine the feeling that one is alone in the world, or meaningless in it. The effort to know a place deeply is, ultimately, an expression of the human desire to belong, to fit somewhere. The determination to know a particular place, in my experience, is consistently rewarded. And every natural place, to my mind, is open to being known. And somewhere in this process a person begins to sense that they themselves are becoming known, so that when they are absent from that

place they know that place misses them. And this reciprocity, to know and be known, reinforces a sense that one is necessary in the world.” [Barry Lopez “The Invitation,” 2015]

Mr. Lopez has also linked this special sense of rootedness to the idea of *querencia*, a familiar concept throughout Southwestern Hispanic and Latino traditions:

“In Spanish, *la querencia* refers to a place on the ground where one feels secure, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn. It comes from the verb *querer*, to desire, but this verb also carries the sense of accepting a challenge. . . . [T]he idea itself is quite beautiful—a place in which we know exactly who we are. The place from which we speak our deepest beliefs. *Querencia* conveys more than “hearth.” . . . I would like to take this word *querencia* beyond its ordinary meaning and suggest that it applies to our challenge in the modern world, that our search for a *querencia* is both a response to threat and a desire to find out who we are. And the discovery of a *querencia*, I believe, hinges on the perfection of a sense of place. A sense of place must include, at the very least, knowledge of what is inviolate about the relationship between a people and the place they occupy, and certainly, too, how the destruction of this relationship, or the failure to attend to it, wounds people.” [Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America*, 1990]

Viewed in this light, Aldo Leopold’s actions and beliefs regarding environmental conservation during and after his years living and working in the Southwest establish a direct link to these powerful Native and Hispanic concepts of place. Leopold’s proposal of a “land ethic,” that underscores how people and the land are fundamentally interconnected, reinforces and complements these traditional cultural perspectives. In that light, let us all continue to celebrate the concepts of these fundamental connections that make us a part of nature—whether you prefer calling it a land ethic, the Great Self, or *la querencia*—as we embrace what it means

to understand—and draw strength from—our place within the larger interconnected ecosystem of our planet.

With that final bit of unsolicited encouragement, let me now get on with the afternoon's important business and introduce our guest speaker. A true artist of diverse interests and talents, Barry Lopez is the author of a wide array of influential books including the nonfiction classics *Of Wolves and Men*, a National Book Award finalist in 1978, and *Arctic Dreams*, winner of the National Book Award in 1986; and a number of works of fiction, including *Light Action in the Caribbean*, *Field Notes*, and *Resistance*. His most recent collection of short stories, *Outside*, was published by Trinity University Press in 2014. Among his many awards and honors, Mr. Lopez has received the Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the John Burroughs and John Hay Medals, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, five National Science Foundation Fellowships, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship, as well as Pushcart Prizes in fiction and nonfiction. His essays are widely anthologized and he has written for publications such as *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The American Scholar*, *The Paris Review*, *Orion*, *Outside*, and *National Geographic*. Here in New Mexico, Mr. Lopez also serves on the advisory board of the avant-garde and uniquely experimental Theater Grottesco in Santa Fe.

Please welcome to the stage—Mr. Barry Lopez!