

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER

The Leopold Standard



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Recently, a colleague and I placed a memorial plaque on the Millennium Circle at the Boone and Crockett Club headquarters in Missoula, Montana, to the memory of three aspiring wildlife biologists. It reads, “Rick F. Seegmiller, Ph.D., Terri L. Steel, and Martha I. Grinder; Ph.D. Wildlife Students That Met The Leopold Standard—Taken Before Their Time.” Rick was killed in an airplane accident while radio-tracking desert bighorn sheep in the Harquahala Mountains, Arizona, for his Ph.D. Terry died of a brain aneurism after returning from the field studying desert bighorn sheep in Canyonlands National Park, Utah. Martha had just completed the final chapter of her dissertation on coyotes and decided to go for a run. She was killed by a hit-and-run driver in Tucson, Arizona. All three were dedicated and enthusiastic and would certainly have been leaders in the wildlife profession well into the 21st Century.

However, what is the Leopold Standard? H. Albert Hochbaum, one of Aldo Leopold’s masters students, wrote that “Aldo Leopold is considerably more than a person; in fact, he is probably less a person than he is a Standard.” This comment captured the high regard in which his students and the new generation of wildlife biologists in the 1930s and 1940s revered Professor Leopold. Simply mentioning the Leopold Standard brings to mind excellence in the consideration of wildlife and wildlife habitat. The “Standard” referenced by Hochbaum referred to the highest ideal in integrity, moral commitment to management and conservation, leadership, and the scientific stewardship of all wildlife resources. This is the standard every wildlife biologist should strive for. Others in the profession like Jack Ward Thomas have addressed the issue a bit differently by asking, in times of conservation conflicts, “What would Aldo have done?”

I often ask the same question and wonder about the integrity of the Leopold Standard especially when wildlife is the inevitable loser due to human activities. For example, how does the Leopold Standard apply to the Jennings Law in New Mexico? This 1997 State law allows farmers and ranchers to shoot crop-threatening game with no-strings-attached as long as the killings are reported within 24 hours. Earlier this year the New Mexico Game and Fish Department reported that 39 pronghorns were shot—legally, under this law—in northern New Mexico. Due to questionable marksmanship, some animals were only injured and left to suffer needlessly. Much of the meat could not be salvaged in a timely fashion and went to waste. Society certainly has to consider ways to mitigate for lost crops but shooting native wildlife because it consumes forage planted within their habitat is not acceptable. Where are the ethics? Where are the values? Where is the Leopold Standard?

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The same can be said of the border fence between the U.S. and Mexico even now being constructed across the desert Southwest in the name of homeland security. Laws that have been developed for the protection of wildlife in the United States and Mexico are trumped, trampled, and ignored so a fence can be constructed without consideration of endangered Sonoran pronghorns—and jaguars, black bears, mule deer, desert bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and uncounted other species. The fence is only part of the picture. How do we rationalize or adjust our values as the U.S. Border Patrol, in the name of homeland security, travels across wilderness areas, national wildlife refuges and monuments, and damages fragile desert landscapes in an upward spiraling and never-ending cat-and-mouse search for illegal immigrants, drug runners, and potential terrorists who are also trampling our landscapes? We may

ultimately win the battle against illegal entry into the U.S.—which is an important issue to Americans—but at what cost to the environment and wildlife?

These may be government programs that will be difficult or impossible to mitigate, but we can ask the same questions about issues we do have more direct influence over—such as urbanization, road development, eroded hunting practices, land conflicts, and the use and abuse of national resources. Unfortunately, the almighty dollar, arrogance, and tunnel vision many times are the driving forces when a decision is to be made. It is often easy to compromise principles, look the other way, or develop mitigation that looks good on paper but still leaves wildlife and its habitat in a situation poorer than before human intrusion.

Although these and similar situations grab national headlines, there are many more that receive little, if any, national publicity. Every day local, private, state, and federal organizations and individuals are dedicating their life and professions to maintaining and enhancing conditions for wildlife in a human-dominated world and their contributions are significant across the globe. Just a few examples include the Pima County Conservation Program in Arizona and the Blackfoot Challenge in Montana that strive to protect wildlife and wildlife habitat from development; programs sponsored by the Boone and Crockett Club and the Welder Wildlife Foundation to educate teachers so they are more ecologically efficient in the classroom; undergraduate and graduate programs around the country that offer degrees in wildlife management and conservation; the recent delisting of gray wolves in the Northern Rockies and Great Lakes regions; and current efforts to establish viable populations of Mexican gray wolves in the Southwest. In my experience, those involved in these and similar programs have at least one thing in common: the Leopold Standard—a certain integrity and moral commitment to wildlife management and conservation, leadership, and scientific stewardship of all wildlife resources. Something everyone interested in all things wild should strive for. ■