



Celebrating 50 Years

Living a Land Ethic

By James Edward Mills

Kansas rancher Bill Sproul is every inch an imposing cattleman. Standing tall in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat with a barrel chest and enormous hands, his size contradicts a gentle manner, a soft-spoken voice and a curious mind. An advocate for the importance of conscientious land management, Sproul considers himself a citizen of a natural community. Though he earns his living from the production and sale of beef cattle, Sproul believes his wealth as a rancher comes more from the land upon which they graze.

"I'm a grass farmer. The cattle are just harvesters," he said in an interview. "The whole key is how much grass you can grow."

Nestled in the Flint Hills region of Chautauqua County near Sedan, Kansas, Sproul Ranch is a model of thoughtful land stewardship. The Sprouls, who were honored with Sand County Foundation's Leopold Conservation Award in 2015, have reversed decades of abuse to restore biodiversity, natural beauty and economic productivity to the land. The ranch is part of an intricate ecological system, achieving greater land health each year. It uses natural forces and native species to enhance biotic processes that have made this lush landscape of rolling tall-grass prairie thrive.



In addition to his own land, Sproul manages the ranchland of others. Although it's not his own land, he manages it as if he has a long-term stake in its health. "It's not like a rental car that you're going to beat up because you know you're just going to return it," Sproul said. "Even if you don't own it you've got to take care of it for the next person."

Rather than focusing on the short-term benefits of high yields in a given season, Sproul operates on a time horizon that spans generations. This long-range investment strategy might run contrary to the interests of tenant farmers or non-resident corporate land managers who demand an immediate return. But in Sproul's experience, fewer inputs of time, labor, commercial fertilizers and pesticides result in increased profitability over many years of production. After several seasons of ecologically conscious land management, he realized that by prioritizing the integrity and resilience of his soil, he could bank on recurring dividends from his initial investment for many years to come.

Keeping an eye toward long-term conservation investments on rented land can be a difficult sell for some land managers, especially when you have short-term leases. "It's hard to invest sweat equity into something when you're not sure if

you're going to have it a year or two from now," Sproul said. However, Sproul's long-term outlook and management practices on leased land have enhanced his reputation among lessors in the area. He's had other landowners offer him leases because of improvements he has made to the land he manages.

The landowner Sproul currently leases from approached him ten years ago to manage her land. Although the lease is a one-year, short-term deal, she has continued the arrangement with Sproul despite offers from other managers. Their relationship is built on trust. Sproul is largely given free rein over the land management decisions. However, he has frequent communication with the landowner, and they work together to develop plans to invest in upgrades when needed.

Despite his abiding environmental ethos, Sproul is a self-described capitalist. "I was raised under commodity agriculture, where it was instilled in you to increase productivity," he said. "Everything was based off of what it would take to increase production with no regard for the land or anything around it. Your main focus was how do you produce more on the same acres?"

Like most ranchers, Sproul focused on what he perceived as his profit center, the cattle. But by adding more steers to the land he suffered the

consequences for overgrazing. He fought a losing battle as he applied chemical fertilizers in the hopes of boosting his production. That offered no sustainable solution, as he found himself right back where he started within a season or two. Searching for answers, Sproul read books that offered a few valuable suggestions on how he might better manage his land. The one that stood out, he said, was "A Sand County Almanac" by Aldo Leopold.

"From that book, I learned that when we abuse land it's because we view it as a commodity. It belongs to us, and we can do whatever we want to with it," Sproul said. "But when you start to understand and view the land as a community in which you belong, that's when it really struck me about how I was treating the land up until that point."

This philosophical shift in his thinking changed how Sproul saw his relationship with the land. Much like interactions

within human communities, there are standards of ethical behavior, practices of respect, courtesy, dependency and sacrifice that benefit the interests of everyone involved. Sproul began making long-term investments of time and resources in the conservation of the ecosystem in which his community makes its home. Sproul discovered that by cooperating with the natural environment he could become part of its successful growth and development. By consciously directing his focus toward the priorities of a resilient ecosystem, he



learned how to become a member of this biotic community and an equal recipient of the prosperity it generates.

"After I started going down that road of community-based conservation, I started looking way on out into the future," Sproul said. "The way I do things now is I think about how they will affect things 10 years from now. Or what things will look like 30 years from now."

Like many ranchers across North America, Sproul has embraced and instilled in his children this method of ecological consciousness, defined decades ago by the great conservationist Aldo Leopold, who called it a Land Ethic.

Originally trained and employed as a forester, Leopold cared deeply about the land, how it works and how we affect it. Through the influences of Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the United States Forest Service, Leopold began his career subscribing to Pinchot's philosophy of management of natural resources in perpetuity. With an emphasis on the utilitarian use of the land for "the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run," Pinchot was an advocate for the ongoing productivity of the natural environment

beyond the short-term benefits of financial gain. Leopold expanded and enriched Pinchot's idea to include the management of the land as a complete ecosystem that included the integrity and health of the biotic community, as well as the sustainable use of resources. A Land Ethic provides the moral framework, a system of right and wrong, upon which conscientious land management is based.

For 32 years, University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Emeritus Stanley Temple held the academic position once occupied by Leopold. As a scholar of Leopold's Land Ethic, he explores the "ecological conscience," which Leopold espoused as a philosophical ethos of practical land management.

"A conscience is a deeply seated moral compass that we all have, that we've usually been given by our parents or people who influenced us when we were young, by essentially the previous generation. It gets passed on as a tradition, a learned recognition of what's right and what's wrong in the way we conduct ourselves," Temple said in an interview. "For Leopold, putting ecology into it means we're adding moral brakes on what's right and wrong to do in an ecological context rather than a social context."

When applied to the productive management of private land, the basic principles of conservation include the economic incentives of financial gain. Farmers and ranchers have a vested interest in the long-term resilience of the community from which they earn their living. Guided by the Land Ethic, modern private land managers operate under an ecological timescale that allows for the regeneration of depleted soil and water resources.

In the most practical sense, agriculture is a business. Like any enterprise, farming, ranching and forestry are often swayed more profoundly by the whims of market forces than the pull of a moral compass. The virtues of right and wrong may sometimes yield to economic considerations. When the short-term rewards override long-term benefits, environmental protection may seem more like a luxury than a vital imperative. The wisdom of Leopold's Land Ethic didn't really catch on until many years after his death in 1948.

"It wasn't until the late '60s with the rise of the modern environmental movement that we recognized the value of a Land Ethic for the same reason that Leopold did," Temple said. "You have to believe in something that transcends individual self-interest and economics if you're going to promote environmental sustainability."

The idea of a Land Ethic guiding society in its relationship with the environment is a fairly recent phenomenon. It has only been within our lifetime that it has taken off. That's not to say that no one had a land ethic before then. There were, of course, those who obviously did for a variety of very personal reasons. Sometimes it was a religious or cultural belief. Sometimes it was the generational transfer of that moral compass. But it wasn't something that we thought that we needed to embrace as modern society.



"Embracing a Land Ethic becomes extraordinarily urgent in the 21st century as pressures on ecological systems, on the land, if you will, have become much greater than they ever were in Leopold's time," Temple said. "And as we grapple with how to cope with all those pressures, Leopold's Land Ethic is an idea whose time has come."

As members of the biotic community and stewards of the natural environment, land managers can play a vital role in improving water quality, wildlife habitat and soil health. Through practices of thoughtful land stewardship, farmers and ranchers can assure the long-term viability of soil and water resources for future generations. Passed down as a tradition of environmental protection, the Land Ethic may serve as a guiding principle for the preservation of life on Earth. 🌱





On the Cover: "Marshland Elegy - Aldo Leopold", Owen Gromme, 1978

Sand County Foundation commissioned noted wildlife artist and conservationist Owen Gromme to paint "Marshland Elegy" as a tribute to Aldo Leopold and his essay of the same name. The oil on canvas painting depicts 15 sandhill cranes at the edge of a marsh pond across the road from the Leopold "shack" described in "A Sand County Almanac". Gromme conveyed the painting, along with multiple signed and numbered prints, for the benefit of Sand County Foundation.



Celebrating 50 Years