The Pope of Sand County: The Environmental Aesthetics of Laudato si’ and Aldo Leopold

Andrew Kuzma

The way to begin solving environmental problems, Pope Francis says in the encyclical Laudato si’, is by “learning to see and appreciate beauty.” The pope was not the first to make this suggestion. Environmental ethicists have long known that the beauty of a place can motivate people to protect it. It can also sometimes lead people to a superficial conservationism: privileging “pretty” places and ignoring “ugly” ones. How we see beauty in the natural world matters. Aldo Leopold, one of the first modern environmentalists, had an undeniable appreciation for the beauty of the natural world. In A Sand County Almanac, Leopold reflects upon his experiences as a hunter, farmer, land manager, and conservationist. Famous for introducing the concept of the “land ethic,” the book also contains a “land aesthetic.”

This paper will show that LS and A Sand County Almanac present similar environmental aesthetics. First, I will consider how Francis uses beauty in LS, proposing that he employs an objective understanding of beauty. I then look to what environmental ethicists have said about the application of beauty to determine what makes an environmental aesthetic robust rather than superficial. Comparing the pope’s aesthetic to Leopold’s “land aesthetic” reveals a similar nature-centric outlook: Both emphasize receptivity to objective natural beauty. Finally, I examine how A Sand County Almanac both demonstrates receptivity to natural beauty and provides the reader with an aesthetic experience.

Andrew Kuzma, PhD, is a Catholic moral theologian and an adjunct at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1 Francis, Laudato si’ (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), sec. 215; hereafter cited in text as LS; references are to section numbers.

I contend, consequently, that reading *A Sand County Almanac* represents one way to begin “learning to see and appreciate beauty.” Catholics wishing to apply the teachings of *LS* will find in Leopold a concrete representation of what Francis advocates. Furthermore, acknowledging the similarity of the pope’s and Leopold’s aesthetics provides both Catholics and secular environmental ethicists with common ground to address environmental problems. Both see the same beauty in the same way, even if each defines the ultimate significance of the beauty differently (e.g., as having its final purpose in God or in the biotic community). Given the severity of environmental degradation, finding an approach that helps people of good will (whether Catholic or secular) make common cause is of the utmost importance.

**Beauty in *Laudato si’***

The first thing to note is that Francis uses the concept of beauty in several different ways. There is the basic, visual sense. Regarding pollution, he says, “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.... Once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish” (*LS* 21). This “aesthetic” is probably what most people have in mind when they refer to the beauty of nature: a visually appealing landscape. But the pope also uses beauty to describe the greater theological and metaphysical significance of the natural world. He reminds the reader that St. Francis of Assisi “invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness” (*LS* 12). This use of beauty, unlike Francis’s lamenting of rubbish-covered landscapes, necessitates that one have faith. The beauty of the natural world communicates God’s goodness and God’s own self. But the ability to “read” the book of nature—to see that every material thing reflects God’s love—is determined by faith. “Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding” (*LS* 79). Believers can “see” something that nonbelievers cannot. Francis uses beauty in yet another way to describe human actions. When discussing the value of aesthetically pleasing cities, he identifies “another kind of beauty”—namely, “people’s quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, encounter, and mutual assistance” (*LS* 150). How people live can be beautiful. This beauty takes into account not only visual appeal but also social justice.

The pope’s uses of beauty are certainly not univocal, but neither are they contradictory. Throughout the encyclical, Francis appeals to that basic sense of visual prettiness. People should not, he might have said,
fill the Grand Canyon with garbage lest they mar its beauty. Everyone can affirm this teaching. You do not need to be a Christian to recognize that a polluted landscape is ugly. Nothing about the pope’s other, more theological uses of beauty (e.g., reading the book of nature) challenges this basic understanding. The visual beauty of the world also reveals God. “The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us” (LS 84, emphasis added). The moral or spiritual aspects of this judgment do not conflict with the visual. The visual, by the same token, does not challenge these other meanings. Judging “quality of life” aesthetically, for instance, recognizes that a city filled with refuse is not a pleasant place to live spiritually or visually. Christians, by virtue of their faith, might see God in the magnificence of the Grand Canyon, but what they see first is a canyon. Faith, of course, is important to Francis. It opens our eyes to a greater beauty. At the same time, even if people of good will cannot read the book of nature, they are not blind to natural beauty, and the beauty they see there is the same beauty that people of faith see.

We can harmonize these various uses and their implications if we take into account that Francis possesses an objective understanding of beauty. Whether he is talking about landscapes, the book of nature, or planning cities, he describes beauty as something that we recognize. It exists whether humans see it or not. After all, the whole idea behind the book of nature is that faith opens our eyes to something that was always there. Even when it comes to human creations, seeing beauty is about recognizing truth. Francis exclaims, “Who can deny the beauty of an aircraft or a skyscraper?” (LS 103). Denying the splendor of these marvels is tantamount to denying reality. Accordingly, there is no substitute for lost natural beauty, just as there is no substitute for a lost work of art. (We can write new plays, but we cannot replace Sophocles’ lost works.) Criticizing our overreliance on technology, the pope observes, “We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves” (LS 34). Once the beauty of the natural world is gone, we cannot replace it because we did not create it. Beauty is a truth that we discover, not a label that we affix.

Francis’s objective understanding of beauty is rooted in the concept of beauty as a transcendental property of being. Everything that exists participates in being. The transcendental properties are specific terms used to describe being. Various properties have been advanced over the centuries, but the most common have been “unity,” “truth,” and “goodness.” Less common has been “beauty.” St. Bonaventure, whom Francis relies upon throughout LS, likely considered beauty to be one of the
transcendental properties. These properties are convertible—they all describe the same thing and everything that exists participates in all of them. If something is true, it is also good and beautiful. If something is beautiful, it is also good and true. Admittedly, in LS the pope does not explicitly refer to beauty as a transcendental property of being. Yet he speaks of beauty as if it were. In sections 12 and 243, he refers to God’s “infinite beauty.” He recalls Pope John Paul II’s words that “when we contemplate with wonder the universe in all its grandeur and beauty, we must praise the whole Trinity.” And he reminds us that, as St. Bonaventure teaches, “each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure” (LS 239). Every created thing reflects the source of existence. Everything, consequently, possesses a beauty that reflects infinite beauty.

The variety of Francis’s uses are, in fact, his application of beauty as a transcendental. For the Christian, beautiful things in the world (whether they be flowers, cities, or forms of life) reflect infinite beauty, which is God. God is beauty, and so beauty is the ground of reality. Truly seeing beauty means becoming aware that “each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us” (LS 221). Both the beautiful landscape and the beautiful lifestyle receive their beauty from the one, ultimate beauty.

To that end, the root problem behind ecological degradation is a lack of receptivity to the objective beauty of the natural world. The reason people find it so easy to mistreat the world is because they do not see it for what it really is. It is not, Francis explains, “a problem to be solved,” but “a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (LS 12). The solution is a matter of perception. People need an aesthetic education.

“The relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked.” By learning to see and appreciate

---


beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market. (LS 215)

Yes, we need to act differently, but the first step in acting differently is thinking differently. We need a new mindset formed in the mold of St. Francis’s.

No one proclaims, “Praise be to you, my Lord,” as St. Francis did when he walked among rocks and trees and birds. To Pope Francis, “Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically” (LS 10). St. Francis provides more than a set of rules or actions. He is the model of a life formed by beauty. This approach, accordingly, requires language and categories “which transcend the language of mathematics and biology” (LS 11). In short, people must appeal to beauty.

Indeed, the pope presents ecological degradation as an aesthetic failure. The modern world is ruled, he explains, by the “technocratic paradigm” (LS 101). This paradigm controls thoughts and actions by putting a misplaced trust in technology. For all the benefits that technological advancement has wrought, it has also given human beings the ability to destroy everything (LS 103–105). Yet people tend to focus only on the benefits—a single-mindedness not supported by concrete evidence. When ecological problems arise, we look to technology to solve them. Pope Francis points out that while “technology, which, linked to business interests, is presented as the only way of solving these problems, [it] in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others” (LS 20). People hold up technology only as a solution and never as a problem, when in fact it can be both (sometimes simultaneously). The technocratic paradigm obscures our ability to see this reality.

Behind all the obvious material downsides of the technocratic paradigm—the physical damage human beings have done to the environment—lies the malformation of cultures and individuals. The technocratic paradigm “leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume” (LS 203). Modern human beings live in a “throwaway culture” (LS 22). People accept
waste rather than adopt a circular model of production based on natural ecosystems. Without downplaying the gravity of these problems, Francis says that people should respond to them with joy. In fact, he notes that many ecological problems result from a lack of joy (see *LS* 11, 12).

Indeed, the aesthetics of *LS* encompasses Francis’s general promotion of open-mindedness and inclusivity. Michael Northcott argues that the pope introduces two developments into Catholic social teaching: new duties to the environment and the inclusion of nonhuman creatures in the redemption offered by Christ.\(^6\) Anatoly Aseneta makes the case that *LS* actually takes strides towards rejecting anthropocentrism and expanding concern for nonhuman animals.\(^7\) Celia Deanne-Drummond highlights the way the pope speaks as both a prophet and a priest for our time.\(^8\) David von Schlichten notes that many of Francis’s arguments align with the goals of ecofeminism.\(^9\) Each points out ways that Francis encourages us to see something that may be new to us but that has always been there.

The primary lesson that the pope draws from St. Francis, accordingly, is that people ought to be formed by the objective beauty of the natural world. That St. Francis loved creatures to the extent that he called them “brother” and “sister,” the pope contends, “cannot be written off as naïve romanticism” (*LS* 11). The way human beings perceive nature forms the way they treat it. If we lack an “openness to awe and wonder ... in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.” If, on the other hand, “we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (*LS* 11). The aesthetic education that Francis recommends is openness to the world; it is a willingness to let the natural world form our minds and our actions. The better we see the beauty of the natural world, the better we will know how to care for it. Moreover, as Reinhard Cardinal Marx comments, beauty is “indispensable for human development and for satisfaction with life.”\(^10\) For Marx, beauty is part of Francis’s vision of integral

\(^7\) Anatoly Angelo R. Aseneta, “*Laudato Si’* on Non-Human Animals,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (June 2017): 230–45.
\(^9\) David Von Schlichten, “Strange as This Weather Has Been: Teaching *Laudato Si’* and Ecofeminism,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (March 2017): 159–68.
progress, which recognizes that everything is connected. Paying attention to it is not, then, a solution to one particular problem, but a necessity if human civilization and the planet are to move in a positive direction.

At the end of the encyclical, Francis suggests looking to the tradition, Scripture, and sources in Christian spirituality to begin one’s aesthetic education. These are Catholic resources, rich in wisdom. But Catholics should also, following the pope’s reasoning, look to the world itself and so make common cause with those who also appreciate the beauty of nature.\(^{11}\)

**Beauty in Environmental Ethics**

Applying beauty to environmental ethics is not without peril. For Francis, all forms of earthly beauty, in finite ways, express the infinite beauty of God. Whether he talks of beauty as a magnificent vista or as a desirable quality of life, his various uses ultimately come together under the belief in beauty as a transcendental property of being. Still, practical difficulties remain. If the beauty of the natural world motivates action, how should it motivate? Should we find our moral norms in the majesty of the setting sun or in the delicate ecosystem of a swamp? Which aesthetic value has the greater influence on moral thinking: the pleasing vision or the intellectual appreciation? Furthermore, if we can talk about beauty in these various ways, what should we do if preserving one form of beauty means destroying another? Secular environmental ethicists have also considered the moral value of beauty. While they differ from *LS* regarding the ultimate source of that beauty, they advocate its use in ways methodologically and conceptually similar to Francis’s aesthetic education. Like the pope, environmental ethicists have embraced the use of beauty so long as it is objective and rooted in nature itself.

Long before *LS*, environmental ethicists identified the ways that beauty leads to a flawed ethic. Here we consider two commonly acknowledged concerns: (1) that beauty provides only a shallow appreciation of nature, and (2) that beauty is an intrinsically subjective experience incapable of setting objective moral norms. Reviewing the problems with these applications will help us to see how the appreciation of beauty that Francis recommends aligns with Leopold’s (aesthetic) land ethic.

\(^{11}\) Dale Jamieson suggests that *LS* is significant not because Francis is saying anything revolutionary, but because non-Catholics tend to listen more to this pope than they have to other popes. Jamieson, “Why *Laudato si’* Matters,” *Environment* 57, no. 6 (November–December 2015): 19–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2015.1089140.
First, some environmental ethicists worry that basing an environmental ethic on beauty would be shallow or superficial. Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott explain that the definition of beauty as picturesque has dominated the Western aesthetic appreciation of nature for centuries.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Picturesque} recalls eighteenth-century Romantic aesthetics, which uses the categories \textit{beautiful}, \textit{sublime}, and \textit{picturesque}. While the beautiful refers to things pleasing and well ordered, and the sublime refers to the terrifying and chaotic, the picturesque (the middle ground) refers to what is dynamic and vibrant, as well as pleasing to the eye.\textsuperscript{13} Picturesque is primarily visual. It applies, as one might expect, to landscapes that would make good pictures. In fact, J. Baird Callicott points out that the very word \textit{landscape} was originally used exclusively for this genre of painting.\textsuperscript{14}

On the one hand, picturesque beauty has motivated environmental action. People have often put the most effort into preserving places that are “pretty.”\textsuperscript{15} Is it any wonder, for instance, that US national parks contain the most visually stunning landscapes in North America? On the other hand, the problem with applying picturesque beauty is that it saves only these places. Pretty places are saved, but places that do not meet this trivial criterion (e.g., the diversity of insect species or the possession of a unique variety of fungus) are not. Callicott concludes, “Western appreciation of natural beauty is recent and derivative from art…. It does not flow from nature itself; it is not directly oriented to nature on nature’s own terms…. It is superficial and narcissistic. In a word, it is trivial.”\textsuperscript{16} This use of beauty is shallow. It requires no engagement, interaction, or understanding of a natural environment. Consequently, whatever action picturesque beauty might motivate would be equally shallow.

Second, some worry that aesthetic appreciation, being a subjective experience, cannot provide an objective moral norm. Holmes Rolston III argues that beauty exists only within the mind of the human perceiver. “The forest is not even green without us”—\textit{green} is simply how we

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Carlson and Lintott, 4.
\item Callicott, “Leopold’s Land Aesthetic,” 108.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
describe our perception of chlorophyll—“much less beautiful.”
Ned Hettinger maintains that aesthetic appreciation is unavoidably and
damningly subjective. “Environmental aesthetics needs some type of
objectivity if it is to help us adjudicate between developers who like strip
malls and environmentalists who do not.” It is not enough to say that
developers are wrong; in their eyes a strip mall may truly be more
beautiful than a forest. If that is the case, it seems that there is no way to
rely on beauty to promote moral environmental care.

Despite these two potentially destructive uses of beauty, environ-
mental ethicists have also acknowledged the possible value of beauty.
Rolston’s final answer to the question of whether we can base an effective
environmental ethic on aesthetics is no and yes: no, when “aestheticians
begin, rather shallowly,” but yes, “where aesthetics comes to find and to
be founded on natural history.” A shallow understanding of beauty or
one mired in subjectivity will only lead to shallow or self-serving actions.
But an aesthetics informed by nature could provide a constructive, ob-
jective ethic. Carlson and Lintott list five requirements for a constructive
environmental aesthetics: (1) “acentric rather than simply anthropo-
centric,” (2) “environmentally focused rather than scenery obsessed,” (3)
“serious and deep rather than superficial and trivial,” (4) “objective
rather than subjective,” and (5) “morally engaged rather than morally
neutral or even morally vacuous.” Hettinger proposes a “constrained
pluralism” based on an objective view of nature, but flexible enough to
allow a variety of subjective responses. The common thread running
through this hesitant acceptance of beauty is the need for receptivity—
that the beauty we use to ground ethics be drawn from nature itself.
Callicott argues that this sort of nature-centric, objective aesthetics is
found in the work of the naturalist to whom all of the above environ-
mentalists are heirs: Aldo Leopold.

Leopold is most well known for his “land ethic.” The closest he comes to
defining this ethic is the following statement: “A thing is right when it
tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic com-
community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

---

17 Rolston, “From Beauty to Duty,” 328.
19 Rolston, “From Beauty to Duty,” 337.
23 Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There (New York:
wrong, first of all, requires that we actually interact with the land. But we do not confer value on the land by doing so. The land ethic, Leopold says, “enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” We do not need to find a way to give the land value. We simply need to be more receptive to its intrinsic value.

Callicott sees in Leopold, alongside this land ethic, a “land aesthetic” built upon receptivity. In this aesthetic, “form follows function.” Beauty, for Leopold, has less to do with a picturesque assessment and more with “the integrity of its evolutionary heritage and ecological processes.” For example, we must judge the aesthetic qualities of a particular marshland on its particular history and biological processes. Every place has its own particular beauty. We, as human beings, simply need to learn to see it. The real challenge in shaping a “conservation esthetic,” concludes Leopold, “is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.”

Leopold discovers beauty in the land. Callicott, accordingly, deems Leopold’s aesthetics to be “the only genuinely autonomous natural aesthetic in Western philosophical literature.”

Here, consequently, is where we find consonance between Francis and Leopold: Both promote an objective, nature-centric aesthetic. LS presents beauty as neither picturesque nor subjective. Francis’s references to beautiful landscapes might call to mind a picturesque aesthetic. But again and again throughout the encyclical, he emphasizes that it is the contemplation of the beauty already existing in the world that shapes our mindsets. He says of Christ: “The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder…. He often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father, and invited his disciples to perceive a divine message in things” (LS 97).

Christ taught his disciples to “perceive a divine message” that was already there, expressed by particular natural forms (e.g., lilies of the

---

24 Leopold, 204.
26 Callicott, 109.
27 Leopold, Sand County Almanac, 176–77.
field). This aesthetic aligns most closely to the objective, nature-centered aesthetics introduced by Leopold and championed by Carlson and Lintott, Rolston, and Hettinger. Leopold, like Christ, St. Francis, and then Pope Francis, lets nature express itself. Leopold does not, of course, hold up Christ or the saints as moral exemplars. Nonetheless, what the pope says that Christ does (attends to beauty in the world) is remarkably similar to what Leopold says we should do (build receptivity).

Leopold is not, of course, a theologian. Daniel Cowdin cautions that there are particular problems with “theologizing” Leopold’s land ethic. For one thing, a land ethic does not easily fit into the “framework of natural evil, cosmic redemption, and eschatological visions of nonpredatory peace” that characterizes much of Christian theology. Death and predation are “good” in the land ethic, but “evil” in the Christian narrative of salvation. Cowdin does not think that these differences are insurmountable; he simply points out that Christians seeking to adopt a land ethic need to address them. Christians should not look to Leopold to provide a ready-made aesthetic education that addresses every nuance of theology.

By the same token, they do not need to theologize Leopold to find guidance in his writings. Reconciling these cosmologies would be complicated, but not impossible. For instance, while the Christian narrative of salvation typically casts death as evil, it does not condemn decomposition. There is no reason, in other words, why Christian theology cannot find beauty in the cycle of life and death and still bemoan the loss and pain of death. There is ample biblical precedent for respecting times and seasons—for example, “For everything there is a season ... a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted” (Eccl 3:1–2).

The most important agreement between Francis and Leopold is that they both let nature speak for itself. Francis’s “openness to awe and wonder” (LS 11) is just as nature-centric as Leopold’s “receptivity.”

---

30 Cowdin, 268.
31 Cowdin, for instance, begins his article by saying: “The problem, and necessary challenge, is how to theologize Aldo Leopold.” Cowdin, “Moral Status of Otherkind,” 261. I am not issuing a challenge to the place of Leopold in Cowdin’s argument regarding the moral status of otherkind in Christian ethics. For my purposes, however, neither Leopold nor his land ethic needs to be brought within the fold of Christian ethics.
32 Leopold, Sand County Almanac, 177.
Francis says that if we appreciate natural beauty, then “sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (LS 11). In Leopold's writings, we see that his actions and observations spring from his receptivity to the land. His writing, consequently, offers us an example of the kind of receptivity that Francis advocates. The pope wants people to be open to the world. *A Sand County Almanac* shows us what this aesthetic education looks like in practice.

**Leopold’s Nature Writing: Providing an Aesthetic Education**

What makes Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* particularly useful is that it both demonstrates receptivity and forms the reader to be receptive. This book was the seed of modern environmental ethics and remains one of the most popular works in the field nearly seventy years after its publication. According to John Tallmadge, a literature professor, it is not what Leopold says but how he says it that explains this lasting appeal. Leopold writes about natural beauty, and he does so in a beautiful way. A botany textbook might provide information about a flower through an exhausting and plodding recitation of facts. Leopold, on the other hand, re-expresses the actual experience of seeing a beautiful flower. Tallmadge puts it this way: “[Leopold’s] book stays with us because, in reading it, we experience something analogous to what Leopold experiences in nature itself.” Leopold describes his interactions with nature as something that is cognitive, as well as dynamic and affective. In the final part of this essay, I argue that *A Sand County Almanac* helps us learn to see and appreciate beauty by, first, demonstrating how to be receptive to the natural world and, second, actually providing the reader with an aesthetic experience.

*A Sand County Almanac* is an example of nature writing, a genre that combines personal experience with scientific commentary. (If a bookstore were to have a “nature writing” shelf, one would expect to find Leopold’s

---

33 Kathryn Norlock makes a similar argument regarding the possibility of ecofeminists embracing Leopold. While she acknowledges and affirms certain ecofeminist critiques (namely, Leopold’s lack of attention to gender biases and his lifelong practice of recreational hunting), she also maintains that these do not define Leopold as a whole. On the contrary, she recommends taking receptivity, and the accompanying perceptivity and love, to be “the core of his philosophy.” Norlock, “Building Receptivity: Leopold’s Land Ethic and Critical Feminist Interpretation,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (December 2011): 491–509.


35 Tallmadge, 111.
book sitting alongside the works of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson.) Tallmadge explains that the term “usually means descriptive or narrative literature that falls between scientific reportage and imaginative fiction.” The key difference between nature writing and what we might call scientific writing is this imaginative element. Whether it takes the form of fictional narration or philosophical musing, the imaginative element frees the genre to do more than report quantifiable data. Nature writers, Tallmadge asserts, “use scientific facts to enrich and deepen their readers’ experience.” Leopold’s prose is not a simple exposition of information, but one can sense a mountain of data behind it. He was not a philosopher or an ethicist in the academic sense, but he did have ethical sensibilities. To understand A Sand County Almanac’s significance, then, we need to approach the book as a “work of art.”

First, A Sand County Almanac demonstrates receptivity to nature. Leopold’s observations and actions model what this mindset should look like. It requires, to begin with, that one actually interact with the land. In the essay “65290,” Leopold gives the reader the following information regarding the lifespan of chickadees: “Of 97 chicks banded during the decade, 65290 was the only one contriving to survive for five winters. Three reached 4 years, 7 reached 3 years, 19 reached 2 years, and 67 disappeared during their first winter.” He reports these sorts of figures frequently. Other examples include instructions on how to properly read dates from tree rings (“You must always subtract one from the year of lesser growth”), the number of wild plant species blooming on the University of Wisconsin campus compared to his farm (120 vs. 226), and the number of geese that stop by his farm in the spring (“Our record is 642 geese counted in on 11 April 1946”). Shorn from context, these examples are just data. They are interesting, to be sure, but not particularly astounding. What they reveal, though, is what it looks like to know a place. Interacting with nature is an intimate activity. Leopold’s

---

36 Tallmadge, 111.  
37 Tallmadge, 111.  
38 Philosopher J. Baird Callicott, for instance, wrote the philosophical text In Defense of the Land Ethic to develop the philosophy behind Leopold’s land ethic (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).  
39 Tallmadge, “Anatomy of a Classic,” 110–11; Callicott similarly sums up the lasting appeal of Leopold’s book: “For all its charm and apparent simplicity, A Sand County Almanac is as incisive as it is transformative,” preface to Companion, vii.  
40 Leopold, Sand County Almanac, 91.  
41 Leopold, 83, 47, 19.
appreciation is embedded in his knowledge of the micro-level details of the land around him.

This presentation of knowledge demonstrates the manner of Leopold’s receptivity. That he reports on the lifespan of chickadees and the number of wild flowers testifies to an active openness to the world. Leopold reads the data, and he makes conclusions. His data set is the entire world, but his conclusions are, appropriately, humble. Regarding tree rings, Leopold clarifies just how much and how little they can tell us: “When one pine shows a short year but his neighbors do not, you may safely interpolate some purely local or individual adversity: a fire scar, a gnawing meadowmouse, a windburn, or some local bottleneck in that dark laboratory we call the soil.”

What was the reason behind a short year of growth? Leopold offers possibilities but no firm conclusion. His approach to perception, according to Kathryn Norlock, is “openness” to the world, to “engrossing oneself in the physical presence of the object of understanding in order to begin asking the right questions.” In Norlock’s reading, the actual, lived experience of a place is indispensable for Leopold. Indeed, one can know that meadow mice and fire damage pine trees only if one has seen a gnawed or charred tree. Practicing this sort of receptivity, however, requires that we accept that some things are indeterminable. Norlock observes, “[Leopold] recommended pursuing greater knowledge of the particular facts about one’s object of study, even as he recognized the limits of factual information.” Leopold knows enough to know when an answer is unknowable. His receptivity is characterized by the fact that he continually asks questions and then embraces the myriad possibilities that nature offers.

Leopold’s receptivity is an expression of this nature-centric mindset. In “The Geese Return,” he perceives that “the corn stubbles selected by the geese for feeding are usually those occupying former prairies.” Why do the geese prefer former prairies? Leopold admits, “No man knows whether this bias for prairie corn reflects some superior nutritional value, or some ancestral tradition…. Perhaps it reflects the simpler fact that prairie cornfields tend to be large.” The lack of finality in Leopold’s observations does not make them less reliable or scientific. He speculates

---

42 Leopold, 83.
44 Norlock, 493.
45 Leopold, Sand County Almanac, 20.
46 Leopold, 20.
freely and often because his receptivity to the natural world allows him to admit when he simply does not have enough information. It is clear to the reader, moreover, that Leopold possesses a more accurate vision of the world as a result.

Leopold’s receptivity is more than cautiousness regarding interpretation; it defines his entire orientation to the land. His articulation of this receptivity is clearest in “Thinking Like a Mountain,” arguably the most well-known essay in A Sand County Almanac. In it, Leopold recounts the moment in his life when his thought shifted from anthropocentric to nature-centric. He says that as a young, eager sportsman he imagined that a mountain without wolves “would mean hunters’ paradise.” When he sees a wolf die, however, Leopold reflects upon the cascade of effects that would follow the disappearance of even a single species. Without wolves to cull the population, deer would overpopulate the mountain and strip it bare of greenery. After the deer had eaten themselves into oblivion, the hunter would have nothing to hunt. A hunter’s perspective, Leopold realized, is too small. Though human beings choose to be receptive, this receptivity necessitates adopting a broader perspective: learning to see from the mountain’s point of view. Leopold demonstrates this perspective in his interactions with the land—from his intimate knowledge of it, to his speculations, to his land ethic.

Second, the aesthetic experience offered by Leopold’s writing forms the reader to adopt this receptivity. Leopold does more than demonstrate what it looks like to be receptive. He gives the reader the chance to know what it feels like to be receptive. As Tallmadge says, he gives the reader an experience of the natural world analogous to what he experiences with his own receptive, nature-centric orientation. To put it in the terms of LS: He creates a sense of awe and wonder that reflects the awe and wonder that he feels when he interacts with the world.

Leopold’s simple prose captivatingly re-expresses natural beauty. “Simple” sounds like a backhanded compliment, but it is exactly why it is so affective. Tallmadge insists that the apparent simplicity belies the author’s mastery: “It flows smoothly and effortlessly…. The narrator’s manner is confident and relaxed; his tone, though earnest, is light and conversational. He prefers a limpid, everyday vocabulary, avoiding jargon…. One senses that each word carries a great deal of meaning.”

47 Leopold, 130.
49 Tallmadge, 115.
“Conversational” perhaps best describes the feeling of reading *A Sand County Almanac*. One never has the sense that Leopold pontificates or talks down to his reader—an impressive feat given his encyclopedic knowledge (consider, for instance, his year-by-year narration of the life of an 80-year-old oak).\(^{50}\)

The way Leopold avoids jargon and yet accurately depicts the world makes his writing engaging. In the opening essay, “January,” the reader accompanies Leopold on a trek following the path of a skunk. On his walk he meets a mouse, a “sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks,” and he sees a rough-legged hawk that “‘hovers like a kingfisher, and then drops like a feathered bomb into the marsh.’”\(^{51}\) The use of metaphor, simile, and simple language make Leopold’s observations—the observations of an expert—accessible to lay readers. Leopold’s ability to see the world in this way took years to cultivate. Readers, though, feel as if they have stepped into Leopold’s shoes. This, in nuce, is the style of *A Sand County Almanac*.

Leopold’s style trains his readers to be open to the enrapturing mystery of natural beauty. For Leopold, the mystery we encounter in the natural world is not a gap demanding to be filled. Taking joy in not knowing is part of accepting nature’s otherness—that it exists and functions regardless of human ken. Reflecting on why geese prefer the corn stubbles of former prairies, Leopold concludes, “If I could understand the thunderous debates that precede and follow these daily excursions to corn, I might soon learn the reason for the prairie-bias. But I cannot, and I am well content that it should remain a mystery. What a dull world if we knew all about geese!”\(^{52}\)

Geese are ubiquitous. Geese do not surprise us. Is there anything more mundane for a reader (especially one in the American Midwest) than geese? Yet Leopold leads the reader right up to the point where knowledge and observation fail. The goal of receptivity is mystery. We can never get inside the mind of a goose. However much we learn, however good our imagination, we can never escape our human perspective. But Leopold does not shrug and discount any attempt to learn more as ultimately futile. The mystery is his motivation. It is why learning the intimate details of a place is finally so satisfying. The more

---

\(^{50}\) Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 6–17.

\(^{51}\) Leopold, 4.

\(^{52}\) Leopold, 20.
you know, the more you can appreciate the mystery that is the natural world.

This appreciation is also why *A Sand Country Almanac* is such a natural fit for the lessons of *LS*. Francis says we need to approach nature with an “openness to awe and wonder” (11), to see that the “world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated” (12), so that we can create a mindset of “loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (220). For Francis, this awe leads to God. It does not, necessarily, for Leopold. But the sense of mystery is the same for both. It is the recognition of something larger than oneself, something that can be appreciated and even loved but never completely grasped.

*A Sand Country Almanac* exemplifies how to be receptive by giving the reader the eyes of an expert. Leopold shares Francis’s nature-centric mindset. The ultimate value of Leopold’s work is that it sets the reader on a path beyond the work itself. We can hold up Leopold as the expert, the aficionado, the man of discriminating taste. At the beginning of any pursuit of beauty, it helps to have this sort of guide. Leopold, too, understands that this kind of formation is a process. In the essay “Marshland Elegy,” he writes: “Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words.”\(^5^{3}\)

Leopold says that the quality of cranes lies beyond words, yet here are the words he uses to begin talking about them:

A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh. With almost imperceptible slowness it rolls a bank of fog across the wide morass. Like the white ghost of a glacier the mists advance, riding over phalanxes of tamarack, sliding across bog-meadows heavy with dew. A single silence hangs from horizon to horizon. . . . High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes. At last a glint of sun reveals the approach of a great echelon of birds. On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh.\(^5^{4}\)

*A Sand Country Almanac* cultivates a specific kind of response. It does not set out to be a textbook on conservation or biology. Leopold knows, as

---

\(^5^{3}\) Leopold, 96.

\(^5^{4}\) Leopold, 95.
stated above, that to begin to appreciate nature we must begin at the most basic level: the pretty. In his introduction to cranes, he draws attention to just that. They are a noble squadron (“a great echelon,” “on motionless wing”) soaring out of the mists of the past (“the white ghost of a glacier”) to alight on a majestic land (“over phalanxes of tamarack, [fog] sliding across bog-meadows heavy with dew”). The cranes are not just birds feeding in a Wisconsin swamp. They are, technically. But Leopold’s description is closer to conveying the truth of the place. Francis, likewise, wants us to learn to see this kind of truth. We need “a new way of thinking” if we want people to act differently (LS 215). The awe and wonder that Leopold exhibits in the above passage, and in A Sand County Almanac as a whole, point the reader in this direction.

Conclusion

Reading Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac represents one opportunity to begin developing the aesthetic appreciation called for by Francis. Leopold demonstrates how we ought to see the world and what our reaction to this new vision ought to look like. His own ethic is simple: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.”55 We can summarize his aesthetic even more simply as nature-centric receptivity. In this way, A Sand County Almanac and LS possess a common vision. Both set their readers at the beginning of a path. To follow it, one must actually go out into the world and practice the receptivity demonstrated by Leopold and imparted to the reader by his rich prose. We cannot know what is best for a place until we know that place. Once we have this true vision, we will know the right actions to take. Leopold does not offer the only way to learn how to see natural beauty and thereby solve environmental problems. The pope, after all, put forth St. Francis of Assisi as the exemplar par excellence. At the same time, the pope insists that “if we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out” (LS 63). Leopold clearly has wisdom to offer to Catholics, just as Catholics have wisdom to offer secular environmental ethicists.56 Both see the same beauty, but not in the same way. Thankfully, both can find a common cause and a common joy in learning to see and to share the beauty of the world. The more we can see this beauty, the more of it we can save.

55 Leopold, 224–25.
56 An example is St. Francis of Assisi’s realization of “how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.” LS, 10.