

Toward Intelligent Consumption

By Doug McCleary

What are its various dimensions?

Today the concept of an ethical content associated with land management has become widely accepted.

Aldo Leopold is usually credited with developing the concept of the land ethic.

If one accepts the extension of ethics to the management of land, it would seem to be a relatively minor leap of logic to accept the idea that one's consumption choices (which also affect land) have an ethical content as well. But today we seem to have a disconnect between our preferences for the land and consumption: our operating motto in the marketplace appears to be "shop til you drop" or "whoever dies with the most toys wins."

Leopold's land ethic: Is it really only "half-a-loaf" unless a consumption ethic accompanies it?

Leopold on responsible consumption, circa 1928:

"The American public for many years has been abusing the wasteful lumberman. A public which lives in wooden houses should be careful about throwing stones at lumbermen, even wasteful ones, until it has learned how its own arbitrary demands as to kinds and qualities of lumber help cause the waste which it decries..."

"The long and the short of the matter is that forest conservation depends in part on intelligent consumption, as well as intel-

ligent production of lumber."

Since 1928, the average size of the American family has declined by 36%, while the average size of the single family home being built in the U.S. has increased by more than 100%.

Adopting a personal land ethic is relatively easy for most of us today because it imposes the primary obligation to act on someone else. While few of us are resource producers anymore, we all remain resource consumers.

The relationship of consumption and land conservation

What we call economic laws are merely the impact of our changing wants on the land which supplies them. When that impact becomes destructive of our own tenure in the land, then the thing to examine is the validity of the wants themselves.

Our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy. Nothing could be more salutary at this stage than a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings.

Leopold's ideas have gone largely unheeded. As a society, the U.S. has yet to seriously connect land conservation with consumption. National Forest timber sales have declined from 10 billion board feet in 1988 to less than two billion board feet in 2000.

What are the ethical/moral credentials of a policy of forest management on U.S. public lands which has the effect of shifting the ecological impacts of our consumption to ecosystems somewhere else? (Not in my back yard - NIMBY.) This practice is politically, socially, and economically bankrupt.

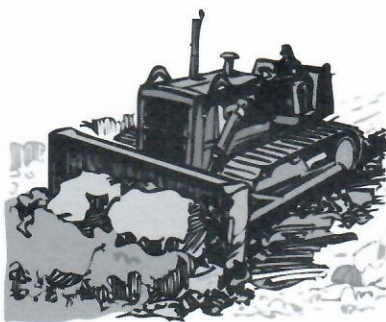
Those credentials are weak unless addressing consumption becomes an explicit and important part of the conservation equation. We also explicitly address the environmental transfer implications of shifting extraction from one ecosystem to another (whether public or private or domestic or international).

Certification is an important element in a strategy to connect conservation and consumption. Leopold himself advocated connecting conservation to the consumer marketplace. He said, "It is cheaper to raise wheat by exploitation than by honest farming. It wouldn't be cheaper if exploitation wheat lacked a market. You are the market, but transportation has robbed you of all power to discriminate. (Today if) you want conservation wheat, you will

(Continued on page 31)

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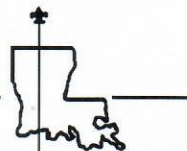


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have to raise it yourself."

But Leopold was well aware that "growing your own" is not the only option – "If we don't like the way landowner X is using the natural resources of which he is the owner, why do we buy his products? Why do we accord him the same social standing as landowner Y, who makes an honest attempt to use his land as if he were its trustee? why do we tell our government to reform Mr. X, instead of doing it ourselves? The answer must be either that we do not know the limits of what government can do, or that we don't care deeply enough to risk personal action or danger."

Leopold on the difficulties of identifying products of good land use

"I have no illusion that all of the products of land-abuse are as easy to identify, or as easy to do without, as a wild bird-skin on a hat. I do assert that many products of land-abuse can be

identified as such, and can be discriminated against, given the conviction that it is worth the trouble. conversely, the products of good land-use can often be singled out and favored."

Certification is one element of a strategy to connect conservation and consumption but it is insufficient by itself. Certification deals with the source of wood products, but has nothing to say about the amount used or about the use of wood vs. other materials.

Is a wealthy couple owning two large homes (one primary and one second home) all made out of certified forest products, environmentally superior to a less wealthy person living in a single, much more modest home not containing certified products?

Elements of an Intelligent Consumption Strategy

1. A foundation in ethics and/or moral authority.
2. Technical and scientific information to guide intelligent consumption choices.
3. Institutional incentives to encourage desirable administrative, economic and structural changes.

Ethics and moral authority suggests:

- Explicit recognition of the connections between consumption and environmental quality by opinion leaders and institutions in various sectors;
- Examination of current approaches to environmental ethics for their value in illuminating issues related to consumption;
- Greater scrutiny of the consumption messages delivered through advertising and product promotion practices, and the potential for these practices to be altered to support more and better informed choices;
- Evocation of a sense of place, and the commitment to environmental quality it entails, through literature and other modes of expression;
- Encouragement of study groups and other means of supporting those who seek to make intelligent consumption choices; and
- Avoidance of the language of shame and guilt that often accompanies messages regarding ethics.

Technical and Scientific Information

- Establishment of a National Materials Commission; support for a comprehensive study of the impacts of material use and consumption;
- Updating prior reports on the energy implications of alternative building materials;
- Establishment of a credible and independent clearinghouse for information on the environmental effects of materials use; and
- Development of an easily understood rating system to provide consumer information related to the environmental impacts associated with the manufacture, use, and disposal of materials.

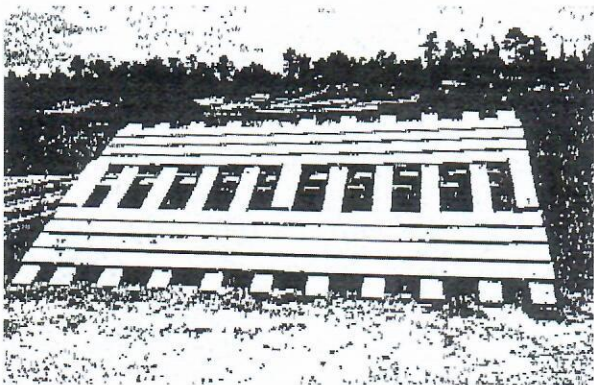
A National Materials Commission

Objectives:

- To develop a national materials policy and to provide guidance for authoritative research in support of more intelligent consumption.
- Initiate national studies to consider how the use of materials in the U.S. affects energy consumption, climate change, trade, the quality of the environment in the U.S. and other nations, and related topics.

(Continued on page 32)

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(Continued from page 31)

- Propose a product rating system that provides a broad spectrum of information related to the environmental effects of the manufacture, packaging, use, and disposal of the product.

Research and Development

- Continued strong support for basic research and development and preparation of a summary report on recent advances in life cycle analysis and "environmental footprint" analysis;
- Establishment of broadly agreed-upon protocols for testing materials as part of life cycle analysis; and
- Support for research in the social sciences on the connections between economic and environmental health and consumption.

Public Education

- Preparation of basic educational materials related to the production, use, and consumption of forest products and other materials;
- Promoting exploration of the environmental consequences of consumption at all educational levels;
- Support for interdisciplinary approaches to consumption-related topics and for critical approaches to "consumer literacy";
- Tailoring of educational materials to varied audiences; and
- Encouragement of partnerships to promote ecological literacy and responsible consumption outside formal educational settings.

Institutional Incentives and Barriers

Intelligent consumption recommends:

- Immediate consideration of a national materials policy;
- Development of a national environmental accounting system to trace the impact of material extraction, manufacture, use, and disposal;
- Fostering a national dialogue on desired future population and immigration policy and on the efficacy of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of well being; and
- Evaluation of and, where appropriate, promotion of producer "take back" laws and economic incentives (e.g. tax credits) designed to create more environmentally sound consumer products.

For Leopold, the Land Ethic did encompass the concept of intelligent consumption. Today, Society has yet to make that connection.

Leopold wrote that evidence that no land ethic existed at the time was that "a farmer who clears his woods off a 75 percent slope, turns his cows into the clearing, and dumps its rainfall, rocks, and soil into the community creek, is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society."

The evidence that no personal consumption ethic exists today is that: "a suburban dweller with a small family who lives in a 5000 sq. ft. home, owns three or four cars, commutes to work alone in a gas guzzling SUV (even though public transportation is available) and otherwise leads a highly resource consumptive lifestyle is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society. Indeed, her/his social status in the community may even be enhanced by virtue of that consumption." (*And in all probability, he detests loggers as wasteful, destructive rapers of the environment. Go figure. Bob Currie*) Intelligent consumption Project Website: <http://www.wisconsinacademy.org>. *

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