A Patch of Common Ground

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The natural resource professions, especially forestry, are undergoing a rapid, often perplexing transformation. Passions flare and indignation reigns in the many discussions of the appropriate role for natural resource managers and scientists There are appeals to assume a higher, nobler duty to save the planet. But to others, natural resource managers and scientists are analogous to physicians or automobile mechanics, providing technical expertise and service appropriately devoid of moral or ethical guidance. Debates often have the appearance of a cafeteria food fight; it is unclear who started the melee or what the issues were, but it is obvious that the participants are enjoying themselves.

Into the brawl step Zeide and Callicott, ostensibly partisans of two rival views of natural resource management Zeide asserts that Leopold, or at least those who subscribe to his ideas, adhere to a world view based on fallacious science and naïve philosophy. Callicott maintains that Leopold's ideas are nearly always based on credible science, and his philosophy, far from being extremist or at the intellectual fringe, calls for a more prudent balance between natural resource use and preservation.

Zeide and Callicott provide dramatically different perspectives on Aldo Leopold's writings. They amply demonstrate that many of Leopold's oft-quoted passages are vague, even cryptic, and can be interpreted to support nearly any natural resource management or policy position. Rather than ponder over what may have been meant by a particular passage in a 50-year-old document, however, we should focus on current policy issues that have direct relevance. Analyzing the nuances of writings from the first half of this century does little to allay the current discord in natural resource management and ecological policy. In fact, even as

Zeide and Callicott quarrel over ecosystem management, they agree on more than they might care to admit.

In most of its formulations, ecosystem management simply reflects a stage in the turbulent and continuing evolution of social values and priorities (Lackey 1998). As a decisionmaking tool, it is neither a beginning nor an end, nor is it inherently good or bad. Human values and preferences drive the goals of ecosystem management, but should there be societal values and preferences embedded in the basic definition of ecosystem management? If so, who decides which values and preferences will be incorporated? Specifically what are the proponents (and opponents) of ecosystem management advocating (and opposing), and do they have a mandate from society for their implicit values and preferences?

To be fair, not all conceptions of ecosystem management are as orthodox as the ones commonly offered by government bureaucracies. Some proponents argue that ecosystem management has, or should have, intrinsic moral and ethical imperatives: that preserving species or even individuals is a moral imperative, that ecological health is defined by what is "natural," and that bioegalitarianism should be the doctrine of choice (Merchant 1997). But such a definition of ecosystem management is definitely not what Zeide promotes, and presumably not one that Callicott would find intellectually comfortable.

Importantly, both Zeide and Callicott implicitly accept the premise that ecosystem management is place-based. They are ambiguous about whether the boundaries of the place of concern need to be clearly defined. But—of course here is where the crunch comes—those who set the boundaries in ecosystem management essentially define and constrain the policy or management problem. Should the boundaries be set within federally managed forestlands? All public lands? Should private forests be included? Should boundaries be set based on watersheds? Ecoregions? Airsheds? Bioregions? Socioeconomic factors?

Successful ecosystem management should maintain ecosystems in the appropriate condition to achieve desired social benefits; those benefits are defined by society, not scientists or other technical experts. But what is the appropriate ecological condition? Zeide and Callicott sidestep untangling the requisite concepts of ecological health, integrity, and sustainability. To be sure, everyone is in favor of health, integrity, and sustainability, but what do these terms connote in a policy context? And who decides what the definitions are in the practice of ecosystem management? Scientists? Managers? Regulators? Politicians? Religious leaders? The public?

Ecosystems can respond sustainably to a variety of human-induced stressors, including logging, fishing, grazing, and hunting, but there is a limit to the number of stressors an ecosystem can accommodate and still maintain a desired ecological condition. From a menu of ecologically feasible alternatives, society makes a choice—not exactly a novel notion in natural resource management. Far from arguing that ecosystem management (and Leopold) presupposes preservation, Callicott argues that the policy issue is one of deciding the tradeoffs between consumptive uses and various levels of preservation—a philosophical position synonymous with the classical natural resource management paradigm.

Biological diversity is perhaps at the core of the argument. Callicott seems to favor some moral standing for all species, though definitely not a standing equal to that enjoyed by humans. In contrast, Zeide considers biological diversity simply one element to consider in managing ecosystems and not one that ought to receive undue importance in defining management objectives. Ecosystem management does not necessarily result in emphasis on biological diversity. Depending on the societal values and priorities of concern, and within ecological constraints, management of a given area might result in preserving all biological diversity, aggressively cultivating one or a few preferred species, or increasing biological diversity by introducing species.

The proper role of science and scientific information is a flashpoint. Zeide chafes at the use of scientific arguments to advance ecosystem preservation values and preferences. Callicott is similarly suspicious of those who use a scientific imperative to justify intensive management of ecosystems. Both have cause for concern. Some scientists and natural resource managers unabashedly cloak their personal values and preferences in the language of science to justify management goals (Fitzsimmons 1996).

What Zeide and Callicott are really debating is not the nuances of Aldo Leopold's published words but the proper role of science and values in deciding ecological policy, especially under the rubric of ecosystem management. They both appear to agree that societal values and preferences determine, within ecological constraints, management goals. But what those values and preferences are, and how they should be translated into management goals, remain points of dissension.

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