IHR Fellows Program

2007-2008: The Humanities and Sustainability

Aldo Leopold: The “Fierce Green Fire” of Sustainability

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Abstract:

My research interests stem from these observations: 1) the humanities are central to sustainability, both its articulation and continuation; 2) Aldo Leopold’s application of this humanistic disposition contributed to his “Land Ethic,” a seminal statement on sustainability; and 3) Leopold’s intellectual rambles reflect sustainability’s central economic, social, political, and environmental tensions. With these assumptions framing my research, I will complete a publishable paper on Aldo Leopold’s 40-year intellectual development that underscores sustainability’s essential humanistic nature.

As the popular metaphor says, sustainability is about living off the interest without touching the capital. What I want to undertake in this fellowship is, first, a defense of the humanistic underpinning of that comment – interpreting sustainability through historical, ethical, and literary points of view, among other cultural perspectives. To emphasize these humanistic dependencies I will consider the life and work of Aldo Leopold, whose *A Sand County Almanac* is grounded in science and human values, expressed notably in the chapter “The Land Ethic.” The author’s long journey toward that ethic exposes critical tensions inherent in sustainability theory, and so by tracing his development – through journals, letters, and articles – we gain a deeper appreciation of our complex relationship to nature and thus our role in living and governing sustainably. I will complete a paper on the progression of Leopold’s resource philosophy, arguing that his “moral evolution,” as he describes it, is prompted by on-the-ground experience and scientific research, to be sure, but also by the way this knowledge is sifted through literature, philosophy, history, and other humanities texts and ideas. Simply put, for Leopold the humanities provided a way into the territory of sustainability that forestry manuals did not.