

LEOPOLD AND TRAPS

Aldo Leopold is best known for writing *A Sand County Almanac*, a work that has earned him a reputation as one of the greatest nature writers in U.S. history. In Curt Meine's biography of Leopold, Meine describes an incident that occurred when Leopold was only seventeen and then quotes from a letter Leopold wrote to his mother about it:

Aldo came upon a trapped muskrat trying to swim to an escape. After much difficulty, he managed to release the muskrat. He took the trap, and continued on until he came to a second trap, this one containing a muskrat several weeks dead. He took the second trap. A week later, Aldo returned and found a third trap and a third muskrat, dead half the winter. [In a letter to his mother, Aldo wrote], So you see, I have the three traps on my hands, which of course I will by no means give back to the person who traps in the breeding season, and much less if he leaves the carcasses to rot.¹

DISCUSSION

At the time these events took place, Leopold was attending the elite Lawrenceville Preparatory School in New Jersey. Meine describes this incident as an example of Leopold's "ecological conscience." The person who set the traps would more likely describe it as a crime. Young Leopold stole the traps. The theft was not triggered by moral outrage over muskrat killing: Leopold was a lifelong hunter, and *A Sand County Almanac* abounds with tales of hunting trips. Leopold was upset by two offenses

against his conservationist attitudes: trapping during breeding season and letting a trapped animal rot. Both offenses reduce the number of animals available to hunters and trappers who will use them wisely.

QUESTIONS

1. Compare Leopold's behavior to that of the lobstermen in Case 8: Martinicus Island. In each case, we see illegal (or "extrajudicial") means used to protect a common resource (muskrat or lobster) from excessive or wasteful exploitation. But the lobstermen cut traps only as a *last* resort; first, they send a warning. Leopold made no effort to send a warning; he took the traps as a *first* resort. Even if illegal behavior is sometimes justified in defense of environmental values, should it not be a last resort?
2. Was Leopold's theft morally justified by the behavior of the trap owner? Does it matter that the traps probably belonged to someone whose economic and social status was far below young Leopold's?
3. If you encountered a trap holding a long-dead animal, what would you do? Would you steal it as Leopold did? If you encountered a trap set out of season, what would you do? Would you contact a game warden? Would you steal the trap?
4. If you believe that trapping animals in the wild is *always* morally wrong, would you be morally justified in stealing even traps that are set legally? If you did, would you feel obliged to step forward—like the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society in Case 6: Reykjavik Raiders—and accept legal responsibility for your actions?
5. It is often difficult to make good decisions about whether to attempt to police another person's behavior. If your friends drop candy wrappers or cigarette butts on the ground, do you correct them? Should you? If your roommate habitually leaves a desk lamp burning, do you mention it? Do you unplug it? Do you eventually steal the lightbulb? These are small decisions about small matters. But each of us makes dozens of small decisions every day, and the cumulative consequences of such decisions for the environment may be quite large. To what extent should we try to improve the environmental performance of friends or strangers in our everyday lives?

NOTE

1. Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 37.

SOURCES

- Aldo Leopold Foundation. "Biography of Aldo Leopold." Available at www.aldoleopold.org/Biography/Biography.htm.
- Meine, Curt. *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.