

## Aldo Leopold and Ecofascism

We recognize that many conservation scientists have not yet acknowledged the ecofascism in Aldo Leopold's writings. We do not intend to erase Leopold's contributions, inspiration, or legacy. Rather, we confront and acknowledge Leopold's ecofascist writings in order to begin a needed process of truth and reconciliation (Katti, 2020). Our hope is that conservation organizations openly acknowledge these problematic writings and start the reconciliation process similar to current truth and reconciliation processes involving John Muir's name and legacy (Brune, 2020; Hanna, 2020).

Ecofascism merges ecological concepts and phenomena such as carrying capacity with racism and xenophobia (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1995; Dyett and Thomas, 2019). Ecofascist movements use these scientific ideas to justify valuing select groups of humans over other types of humans who are characterized as poor environmental stewards, less valuable, polluters, or drivers of population/consumption (Dyett and Thomas, 2019). A well-known historical example of ecofascism took place with the rise of the Nazi regime between 1900 and 1930, where spurious 'anthropology' supported superiority of a Nordic racial construct over all other races. This superiority was closely connected to preservation and stewardship of German soils and used to justify sterilization and genocide (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1995).

A second example that many conservation scientists may remember took place globally during the 1960s and 1970s, where fears of overpopulation were associated with racist and anti-immigration sentiments (Dyett and Thomas, 2019). These fears were used to justify policies that facilitated and funded forced or coerced sterilization of Indigenous, Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and poor white women in the U.S. (Gutiérrez and Fuentes, 2009; Pegoraro, 2015; Ralstin-Lewis, 2005) as well as poor men and women from Muslim communities, certain social castes, and tribal communities in India (Gupte, 2017; Vicziany, 1982). The newest iteration of ecofascism relates climate change and agricultural pollution to overpopulation with a focus on anti-immigration sentiments and perceived consumption in the Global South (Allison, 2020; Atkin, 2020; Reid and Bevenssee, 2020). This resurgence of ecofascism makes it especially important for the conservation community to confront and condone ecofascist writings of conservation legacies such as that of Aldo Leopold.

Evidence for Leopold's ecofascist viewpoints comes from his professional friendship and association with well-known ecofascist William Vogt, whom he wanted to recruit to the University of Wisconsin to start an ecological economics program centered around overpopulation (Lin, 2014; Powell, 2014); drafts and correspondence (Powell, 2016, 2014); as well as his 'Pioneers and Gullies [1924]' (Leopold, 1992a) and 'Ecology and Politics [1941]' (Leopold, 1992b) essays (Powell, 2014). Here, we focus textual analysis on direct evidence from the published essays 'Pioneers and Gullies [1924]' and 'Ecology and Politics [1941]'. In the second paragraph of 'Pioneers and Gullies [1924]', we find direct evidence that Leopold espoused the superiority of the Nordic racial construct above all others based on 'anthropology':

Pioneering a new country is hard labor. It has absorbed the best brawn and brains of the Nordic race since before the dawn of history. Anthropologists tell us that we, the Nordics, have a racial genius for pioneering, surpassing all other races in ability to reduce the wilderness to possession.

Aldo Leopold 'Pioneers and Gullies [1924]'

Leopold's reference to 'anthropologists,' is to the popular pseudoscience of 'physical anthropology' focused on Nordic superiority popularized during this time period, which was used to justify Nazi eugenics programs (Kyllingstad, 2012). Seventeen years later, Aldo Leopold delivered 'Ecology and Politics [1941]' as an introductory lecture to undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin. In 'Ecology and Politics [1941],' Leopold condemns the eugenics of the Hitler and Mussolini regimes but later praises British colonialism in South Africa. He also makes an ecofascist argument that some humans do not have the "capability" to determine their own population by comparing them to deer:

Let me return again to the fundamental assumptions of technological culture. We assume, I think naively, that increasing "take" (i.e. more extraction, conversion, and consumption of resources) always raises standards of living. Sometimes it merely raises population levels. Perhaps this is a bear chasing his own tail. When the British ameliorated the hard lot of South African natives (by medical service, better farming, etc.), the response was more natives rather than higher standards, and more strain on an already overcrowded range. Feeding starving deer is a close analogy. Deer starve because their range is unbalanced or overtaxed, and the price of ameliorating their lot is more deer, more need of feeding, more damage to the range, and eventual malnutrition and deterioration of the herd. Perhaps only animals capable of qualitative self-improvement and quantitative self-limitation can be safely ameliorated.

Aldo Leopold, 'Ecology and Politics [1941]'

The above excerpt has the defining characteristics of ecofascism—it marries the carrying capacity concept to settler-colonialism and racism to suggest that some human populations should be controlled, while others have the capacity for self-determination. We are not arguing that humans are above the laws of nature that apply to deer. Among deer, there are not certain groups of deer that self-improve and self-limit and groups that do not. We are saying that the analogy is racist in that it assigns certain behaviors and abilities to a socially constructed group of people (a race) who share the same genetic material as Leopold himself.

In his concluding remarks of the Ecology and Politics lecture, Leopold qualifies, but also supports the application of ecological concepts to control human populations by selecting for specific human 'stocks':

While the ecological view of politics offers no sure and certain path to a better future, and indeed casts doubt on some guide-signs heretofore accepted as reliable, it nevertheless offers a few assurances on what is the right direction.

There can be no doubt that better human stocks, both as to inheritance and environment, are more likely to find a *modus vivendi* than poorer ones. It is a truism that our education has lagged behind our tools, and you can't build better people with poorer materials.

Aldo Leopold, 'Ecology and Politics [1941]'

The first paragraph “offers... assurances” from ecological expertise to support xenophobic pseudoscience in the second paragraph. This combination of ecology with the assertion that some human stocks are “better” while others are “poorer” is another defining example of ecofascism.

We conclude this supplement by acknowledging that these words written by Leopold might be challenging for many in the conservation community. Some may be tempted to defend or dismiss these problematic ideas using the argument that Leopold was “of his time” (Meine, 2020) or that he did not explicitly connect population and race (Meine, 2021). We clearly observe that Leopold used ecological concepts to connect human population and race in this supplement in addition to the previous work (Powell, 2016, 2014). Continuing to defend or dismiss Leopold’s ecofascism is damaging to the creation of a more just and inclusive environmental science community. Understanding that conservation heroes were passionate and committed to non-human nature but still held xenophobic or racist beliefs can help to recognize why every human cannot experience the landscape with the same privilege and reception (Finney, 2020). In addition to creating a more inclusive community, identifying the problematic parts of conservation mythology will ultimately help to identify and condemn resurrections and iterations of the same problematic themes.

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