

Forester's Log: Linger on Leopold

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The Forester's Log is a monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Stuever is a forester in the American Southwest. She can be reached at sse@nmia.com. For more information on Aldo Leopold visit <http://www.aldoleopold.org>; for a calendar of Southwest Leopold events see <http://www.leopoldcelebration.org/>.

"I don't know what I am doing here," the speaker stood at the microphone on the conference stage. "Until yesterday, I didn't even know who Aldo Leopold was." Albino Garcia wasn't the only presenter new to writings of the mid 20th century forester. Leopold crafted visions for wildlife management, wilderness designations, fire use, land ethics, and an array of other significant natural resource concepts that are as valid today as they were more than a half century ago.

Garcia goes on to describe his work with youth that are on the front lines of gang wars. He explains that before his program had been asked to run a community garden, the only thing he had been planting in the ground were kids he was trying to help, but who had been shot and killed in their violent world. "I didn't know what to do with seeds, but many of the elders in our community agreed to show us..." By the time Garcia leaves the podium not a soul in the audience doubts why the young man is speaking at a conference dedicated to engendering a land ethic within the complicated fabric of our society.

John Francis starts his message with a short riff on his banjo. He is talking to the audience today, but he didn't talk for seventeen years. He explains that after observing an oil spill in the San Francisco Bay in 1971, he stopped riding in cars, and spent 22 years walking across the country, studying environmental issues at three universities along the way. When he found himself arguing with people about his decision to walk, he also stopped talking. Now, a United Nations Ambassador for the environment, Francis' life work continues, demonstrating that each person's actions can truly make significant differences.

Albuquerque Architect Tony Anella outlines another dilemma. He contrasts and compares two Albuquerque area subdivisions. La Luz is a centralized townhouse community with awesome mountain and river views and plenty of open space built in the earlier 1970's. River's Edge, a platted suburban subdivision within the same proximity to the Rio Grande was designed without regard to the environment. The settlement patterns of River's Edge are duplicated throughout the Southwest, despite the clear success of the La Luz model in providing a higher quality of life. Anella suggests that immediate profit is behind these poor land use choices. He is preaching to the choir. The conference participants are self-selected, sharing common ground through their respect for writings of the man who established the first Rio Grande park in the Albuquerque bosque.

A young mother stands at the audience mike juggling the month-old infant in her arms and asks why there is so much gray and white hair in the audience and on the stage? We are striving to be multi-cultural in our conversation, but how do we also be intergenerational?

Mixed among the tension of global climate change and rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions, the conference has also been a two-day celebration of successes. Stories of children monitoring ecosystems, thinned forests withstanding catastrophic wildfires, trees planted, arroyos recovered with grasses and erosion reducing rock structures, water quality improving as communities set higher standards.

This 'kickoff event' at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque is billed as "a cultural conversation," and the workshop ends in a discussion on how to move forward. One speaker suggests we don't need another conference, we just need to go out there and "do". However, despite the sellout crowd attending this event, it is clear we need thousands or millions of people engaged, not just a few hundred gathered for two days in Albuquerque. With 2009 representing 100-year anniversary of Aldo Leopold's arrival in the Southwest, there are dozens of events planned this year in Leopold's honor. At the end of this effort, perhaps Leopold's lessons will truly linger in our Southwestern psyche.