

*Land Ethics for Equestrian Trail Users*¹

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Among the most fundamental images of Euro-Americans pioneering the lands of the New World is the mounted horseman on a wild landscape. The horse and its rider are quintessential Americans.

While that image may carry with it more fantasy than reality, it is, nevertheless, what we dream of as a romantic past, and what we try to capture in order to bring forward an old flavor to our present. In short, whether we know it or not, in the equestrian trail experience, *we attempt to preserve a cultural heritage by reenacting it in a natural heritage setting.*

That the horseman and horse are increasingly unwelcome on the nation's public land trails seems to be paradoxical to the fundamental reasons for having public lands that serve to preserve cultural and natural heritages. Yet on closer examination, we find conflicts between the objectives of natural heritage conservation and the preservation of opportunities for the equestrian trail experience.

It would be a rare horseman who did not consider himself/herself to be a conservationist. However, when asked what they consciously do to harmoniously integrate equestrian trail use with numerous other values that Americans have for their public lands, the answer usually is to help build and repair horse trails on those lands.

Equestrians are steadily being constrained to less and less land because, in general, they have an insufficient awareness of broad-based natural resource conservation, and what role they should be playing in this process. It is inadequate and even callous to simply demand a place to ride a horse. However, it is entirely appropriate to argue for the experiential values of riding a horse on wild lands. Credibility is gained when one argues for these values *and* how they can be appropriately integrated with other values for these lands.

A land ethic must guide those arguments. The most basic statement guiding contemporary natural resource conservation is Aldo Leopold's 1949 articulation of the land ethic: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."² Leopold's writings and those of his biographers make it clear that he believed strongly that,

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² page 262 in Leopold, A. 1949 (1966) A Sand County Almanac With Essays on Conservation From Round River. Ballantine Books, New York, N.Y.

even in the wilderness, humans should be there interacting with the land. In fact, biographer Dr. Susan Flader wrote: “Most people who would quote Leopold’s statement of the land ethic would not understand it as he had intended.”³

Leopold sought a harmonious integration of humans as ecosystem⁴ component and human activity as ecological process. In his writings, he often defined conservation as “man and land in harmony.” He did not seek to take humans away from wild landscapes; instead, he sought appropriate human behaviors on those landscapes. Appropriate behaviors enhance ecosystem “integrity, stability, and beauty.” Inappropriate behaviors degrade them.

Trail equestrians must address fundamentally how their activities affect these basic ecosystem characteristics. In attempting to do so, the first thing do is to understand these terms.

Ecosystem *integrity* is descriptive of the array of ecosystem biotic (living organisms) and abiotic (physical aspects such as soils and water) components and processes natural to the particular system. The sizes of these arrays are referred to as natural diversity. Some systems naturally have low diversity and are always fragile. That is they will not tolerate a great deal of human activity before they undergo drastic change. Others may have high diversity and be “robust”, i.e., they can tolerate a great deal of human activity without major adverse effects on the natural ecosystem processes.

To the extent that equestrian use of trails adversely affects sensitive species, erodes soils, and lowers water quality, the ecosystem integrity is being degraded. The question that must immediately surface for equestrians is: “How do we design, use and manage the use of trails in order to avoid or minimize and mitigate these effects?” Every set of circumstances of intensity of trail use and ecosystem capacity to withstand that level of use will require novel management approaches.

Writing in the 1940s, Leopold accepted the ideas of the early ecologists about *stability*. The thinking was that in the absence of human influence, ecosystems tended to move to a general steady state condition. That is, they would simply change to some ultimate condition and remain there in a state of dynamic equilibrium. That theory is no longer accepted by ecologists. What is accepted is that ecosystems are always changing, and that there is an array of forces causing these changes. Human influences effect and affect change. That we do so is a natural thing as we must live on this planet and by the very nature of our life processes we affect the rest of the system. It is not that humans cause change that is unethical, but rather the kinds and degrees of change that we cause that becomes questionable.

³ Flader, S. 1976. Thinking Like a Mountain. Univ. of Nebraska Press. Lincoln, Nebraska. 284 pages.

⁴ While the term “ecosystem” was coined by Arthur Tansley in 1935, 13 years prior to Leopold’s death, he never used it. To him the term “land” was synonymous with, and for his purposes, preferable to the term ecosystem.

For instance, it is O.K. to ride your horse from Point A to Point B. It is how you drove or rode that is at issue. Did you drive or ride in a manner that threatened or destroyed life or property? If so, you behaved in a destabilizing manner. Things changed in an adverse and unacceptable way, i.e., the system was destabilized. However, if your activity left the rest of the system intact, then you did not significantly affect the natural rate of change. The system will continue to change, but the rate of change will not be destabilized by your activity.

It seems intuitively obvious that the most destabilizing influence that equestrians have on ecosystems is the acceleration of soil erosion. The question: “How do I design and use trails and stream crossings incorporated in those trails in manners that are appropriate to slope, soil and stream conditions?”

Finally, Leopold’s use of the term *beauty* incorporated two aspects of what is beautiful. The first is the obvious aesthetic beauty. Littered and eroded trails and stream banks are the antithesis of natural beauty. Only the most insensitive or totally unaware riders will fail to be adversely affected, even angered, by such visual stimuli. There is no harmony in a relationship characterized by such disrespect and abuse.

The second aspect of beauty is a deep sense of the full ecological dynamic. One who appreciates this beauty is struck by the questions: Where am I and who am I in all of this? What is the nature of this land, and how do I behave in order to achieve a harmony with it? As I feel my horse moving rhythmically under me, I also feel the rhythm of the symphony of the ecosystem dynamic; what part do I play in that symphony, and how well do I play it?

In summary, people are a part of the land. When we ride out on it we reenact rolls from our past. The reenactment can help us reflect on who we are and where we came from, but to do so requires an open and inquiring mind that searches for a differentiation between right and wrong ways to ride the land.