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Pretty Spoiled: Seward, Alaska and the Relevance of The Land Ethic

By Caitlin Campbell

Twenty-four pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon in hand, I walk down slip B of Seward's small boat harbor with my two friends.

"I think this is him," Kay whispers, eyeing up a dual engine aluminum fishing boat, with a fully enclosed cabin—a standard in Alaska. A thirty-something guy with a thick mustache, shaved head, and orange waders emerges. He's a friend of our friend who has offered to take us all fishing.

"Hi. Jacob?"
"Hey guys! How's it going?" He slaps our hands with his.

"Hope you like PBR," I say, handing him the case.
"Yeah! Sure! Great! You guys got your licenses?"

We ply the waters of Resurrection Bay, with the nightly south wind beating our bow. It's close to seven, but the sun hardly looks ready to turn in. Jacob sets up our poles and directs us to drop our lines about thirty pulls, the Silvers seem to be hanging out down there. I think about how deep the fjord drops underneath our bobbing hull. Almost a thousand feet. I hook two Silvers, but they get away.

"I think we've got a pod of orcas hanging out," Jacob says.

"No way. No way," I say. I've never seen orcas in the wild.

Then I hear the spouts, like snorkels being cleared, all around the boat. Black fins slice the water and stab at the sky. This pod of killer whales has also come for an evening fishing trip.

"There are so many of them," I breathe. One surfaces so near to the boat I can see the pink tint in the grey saddle patch behind his massive dorsal fin. I know he is a male because his fin is as straight as a knife blade. For a moment, we are all breathless.

Jacob looks around at our cetacean company. "Well no wonder we're not catching anything." He says it with a smile.

Seward, Alaska is a town of little more than 2,500 people, a population that doubles in the summer. Six main roads run parallel to one another, north to south. There is no stoplight in town. On First Street you can find the trailhead to Mount Marathon, the behemoth chunk of rock that watches over Seward. On sixth you can catch the bike path that winds from the Alaska SeaLife Center along Resurrection Bay to the small boat harbor. Stop right before the Harbormaster's office and you'll see the Kenai Fjords National Park visitor center, my office.

I lived in Seward through the summer of 2012. I fell in love. There was, of course, the wildlife: the black bear cub pawing around my house, the bald eagles soaring and squawking allover, and the impossibly beautiful whales at home in the bay. There were the glaciers, tucked away sleepily in the shaded nooks of mountains. There were the mountains so tall and so finely carved, each seemed to have its own looming personality. But as magical as Seward was, I didn't pretend that it was some untouched, wild place. It wasn't. And that's what amazed me most. There was the Starbucks in the town Safeway, the cruise ships, and the Silver Salmon Derby boats too. What amazed me was how they all existed together: the fishing boats and orcas, the bars and the bears. There weren't many humans, but when you counted the wildlife Seward was one *big* and diverse community.

Seward is far from the Wisconsin prairie where Aldo Leopold penned his concept of The Land Ethic. Seward is not really the place to go to see the loving tending of the earth that Leopold describes; Seward's soil isn't meant to grow much more than Sitka spruce. But if you are interested in seeing what Leopold meant when he said, "the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land," you should go. In Seward, people tend to treat moose like neighbors and whales like fellow fisherman. They remark that Mount Alice, or just "Alice", has fresh powder and exchange ideas for the best routes up "Bear". They share knowledge on the season's salmon runs. They know to stock up their freezers for winter.

Better yet, if you want to see how The Land Ethic is *relevant*, go to Seward. Here the unspoken truth is that residents rely on members of the biotic community to make a living. Fishermen know that while the sea lions and orcas might take their salmon, the presence of these majestic predators brings visitors who book up their charter boats. Residents know that while they can't hunt and fish in Kenai Fjords National Park, its existence is a lifeline to their economy. It's the "permanent pipeline," that conservationists insisted they would grow to love. In this town we can see that not only can people live as Leopold suggested, as members of an environmental community, they can also *benefit* from their participation as good members of that community. In this uncertain time in conservation, when many are asking *what's the point*, this might be the most pertinent aspect of The Land Ethic.

America's National Parks are an interesting case study of the application of, resistance to, and ultimately the benefit of fledgling The Land Ethic idea. Now regarded as "America's Best Idea," the first National Parks were championed for an array of reasons. Big game hunters like Teddy Roosevelt wanted to protect elk and bison. John Muir recognized the spiritual value in these places, what he called nature's cathedrals. Stephen Mather, the dapper and shrewd first director of the Park Service, invited wealthy politicians on trips through the parks, where he wined, dined, and convinced them of the intrinsic value of the land. They didn't know The Land Ethic yet, but these conservationists had the sense that they were doing the right thing.

But society did not yet recognize environmental ethic, and criticism of conservation was intense. Most economists thought it foolish for a young country to close off some of its most potentially profitable land for resource extraction. These critics weakened the authority of the Park Service, but with their antagonizing, finally forced conservationists to affirm their beliefs. The flooding of Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy valley for hydropower, for instance, made conservationists realize there had to be a line. What was right, and what was wrong? It was Leopold's beautiful articulation of The Land Ethic that finally drew the line. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, the stability, and beauty of the biotic community," he wrote. "It is wrong when it tends otherwise." It was this affirmation of the intrinsic value of land that fueled the passing of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, which set aside over 100 million acres of public lands, including Kenai Fjords National Park.

The debate about public lands in Alaska illuminates that the Land Ethic is most powerful when it demonstrates the advantage of acting as a member of (not pillager of) the ecological community. When ANILCA was passed, the lower forty-eight had already realized the benefit of The Land Ethic and the preservation of public lands. When Glacier National Park was established in 1910, for example, a stream of wealthy travelers boosted the local economy as they paid for food, transportation, and lodging. Similarly, the designation of National Parks brought positive change throughout the country. Visitors boosted the economy, the parks provided jobs, and park employees participated in the community, all the while ecological communities were protected for everyone's enjoyment. This realization was not immediate, but by 1980, in the lower forty-eight it was apparent.

Alaskans didn't have the same warm and fuzzy familiarity with the Park Service. Even in the relatively enlightened time of Kenai Fjords establishment, the town of Seward implemented and ordinance that the Park Service and its employees were not welcome. Only after a few years, when

residents saw that they stood to benefit from the park, its visitors, and its employees did the town revoke its ordinance. In fact, they requested the park be enlarged. Today Kenai Fjords National Park, along with other ecotourism businesses and conservation organizations, is a member of the Seward community. While the right of land to be a respected member in man's community got the park established, it was the positive impact the park had as a community member that made it accepted.

In fact, Leopold did recognize that being a good steward and being financially savvy were not mutually exclusive goals. "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right," he directed, "as well as what is economically expedient."

The recovery of endangered species like the sea otter provides another example of the relevance of The Land Ethic. When sea otter populations were almost eradicated by the fur trade of the 1800's, not only did we have an ethical obligation to save them, we stood to benefit from their survival. Sea otters are a keystone species; they promote the health of kelp ecosystems by keeping kelp-eating sea urchins in check. When sea otters are removed, the kelp beds, and all species that rely on them, suffer. By protecting the sea otter through bans on hunting, then through the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act, we have recognized their value as members of our community. And now, where the sea otters have recovered, we benefit from a stronger ecological community. In Seward, this means that kelp beds serve as nurseries for the fish Jacob catches, and visitors to the bay delightedly observe rafts of otters rolling in the surf.

Over fifty years after the publication of the *Sand County Almanac*, we are still discovering ways in which The Land Ethic is relevant. One concern that has emerged in only the past ten or fifteen years might rely on The Land Ethic for a solution: the right to roam. As we continue to learn the importance of creative play outdoors for our children's health from authors like Richard Louv, we can see the importance of protecting the integrity of our ecological neighborhoods. If we don't take care of our biotic community, if we don't preserve wild places, where will we play? Leopold wrote what has an eerie resonance today: "I am glad I will not be young in a future without wilderness." The idea that my children might not be so lucky, really really scares me. In our challenge to uphold The Land Ethic, we should remember that not only will our economies profit from our good judgment; our human spirit will thrive. What is more important than that?

Leopold wrote, "there are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot." I think many residents of Seward fall into that "cannot" category.

The day after seeing the orcas, Kay and I went out on the bay with her boss, the head of Kenai Fjords

National Park's media department. We hooked a pink salmon each and he hooked a silver before we headed home. On our way back, we pulled into a cove where a tour boat sat, engines silenced. Five humpback whales were bubble net feeding. They worked as a team, surrounding fish and rising at once, pleated throats stretched. We sat and watched them until they seemed stuffed and drifted apart. We finally continued back toward Seward, still amazed, still silent. As the town started to come into view, Kay's boss, a twenty-five year Seward resident remarked, "Yeah, I guess I'm pretty spoiled. I don't think I can live without this now."

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Food for Thought from Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic"

"That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics."

"A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

"Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. 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."

"No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions."

"A land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land."

"The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: 'What good is it?"