In Aldo Leopold's desk when he died was a sheaf of unpublished manuscripts that had accumulated over a lifetime of penetrating reflection on a wide range of conservation issues. Some were just fragments, beginnings of ideas for future essays; others were polished pieces—speeches, reports, technical and policy analyses, philosophical essays—that for one reason or another did not see print. "Wilderness," in which Leopold muses on an aesthetic deficit he noted in the landscape of Germany on a trip there in 1938, was found handwritten in pencil on yellow paper.

Leopold was not chary of consigning his words to print. During the course of his career he published some 500 articles and three books, culminating in his masterpiece, A Sand County Almanac, accepted for publication just days before his untimely death in 1948. A representative selection of his writings, published and unpublished, including his essay on Germany, is now appearing in book form: The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, copyright Aldo Leopold Shack Foundation). The essays, spanning nearly half a century from Leopold’s school days in the early 1900s to his death, offer insight into the evolution of his thinking on a range of lifelong concerns including the principal themes of the Almanac—ecology, aesthetics, and ethics—and his professional interests in forestry and wildlife management, soil conservation, conservation economics, sustainable agriculture, and the preservation of wilderness.

Leopold’s reflections on Germany’s landscape came at a critical time in his intellectual development. Indeed, the trip to Germany, his only voyage abroad, marked an epiphany in his personal transmutation of values—in his thinking about means and ends in his chosen professions, forestry and wildlife management, on his road to a land ethic.

In this year of the National Forests Centennial, it is appropriate to note that Leopold began his career as a forester in the national forests of the Southwest. Much as he sought to expand the boundaries of the forestry profession to include concern for wildlife, wilderness, and the integrity of mountain watersheds, he was thoroughly imbued with the traditional notion of conservation as efficient, scientific management for a sustained yield of forest products. In 1928 he left the Forest Service to begin laying the groundwork for a new profession, game management, modeled on the profession of forestry, and by 1933 he had published a major text for the new field and accepted a chair of game management created for him at the University of Wisconsin.

Then, out of the blue in June 1935, came...
Pinchot's jurisdiction. Just a month later, Pinchot's agency was receiving double its previous appropriation under its new title, the U.S. Forest Service.

And then TR and Pinchot really got down to business, so much so, in fact, that early in 1905—when TR was making his first trip to the White House, pretending to protest the president from proclaiming additional forest reserves in six western states (with the most forest acreage). As part of a major legislative package, the bill was too important for Roosevelt to simply veto, but if sign the bill he must, he did not have to sign it immediately. Over the next week and a half, the light at the White House burned far into the night. Gifford Pinchot pored over his maps, those indicating which forests still required protection in the six affected states. Each time Pinchot pointed his finger, Roosevelt drew his pen.

By July 3, 1907, and the close of congressional business, more that 16 million acres of new forest reserves (known since as “national forests”) had been established, each in direct opposition to the bill still sitting on Roosevelt’s desk. And then, Pinchot’s forest service promptly proposed a TRlected on his pen one more time, really signing away his authority to do what he would.

Cynically, perhaps, if sometimes with good reason, many Americans no longer consider their national leaders to be as vital or as committed. Then again, our cynicism may reflect nothing but our reluctance to admit that the beginning of any movement is often its most exciting stage. There have been moments of major accomplishments since the days of TR—most have simply been approved with far less personal attention, that does not make them any less important. The acquisition of private lands for national forests throughout the East: the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1916; and still more recently, the many directives authorizing the Forest Service to manage a broader range of other scenic, and recreational lands—these too have been significant milestones in the history of the national forests. It’s just that, lacking Roosevelt and Pinchot, we have not yet realized in the same way.

In the final analysis, the erosion of credibility that is the fate of government forestry today is probably traceable in large part to elements of indifference to the historical record. The promise 100 years ago was a national forest system that not only secured our country’s woods of wood production but also protected the landscape as a source of national pride. In managing the national forests, beauty and utility were to be viewed as inseparable.

No wonder that Gifford Pinchot lost patience with his own coming class of foresters. Schooled in Europe, he based his own line of reasoning on that classical forest model. Trees would not be cleared—rather they would be thinned.

Lepold on Wilderness

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Leopold had assumed that noneconomic species would automatically thrive if environmental conditions existed to produce a sustained yield of harvestable species. But within months of his return from Europe, he was telling students that the objective was to use the tools of management to maintain or restore diversity, healthful systems. Those were other events in Leopold’s life and in the world of ecological thought in the mid-1930s that helped to transform in his thinking. Not least was the humanity engendered by his personal efforts to restore the worn-out river bottom farm in the sand country of Wisconsin that he had acquired just months before leaving for Europe. Crucial to his understanding of the nature of a truly healthy system was a hunting trip the following year to the wilds of the Sierra Madre in northern Mexico, where he finally realized that all his life he had seen only sick land.

During the same years, ecologists began to appreciate anew the role of evolutionary processes in diversifying the biota and creating the conditions for healthy resilience, a key insight that would soon underlie Leopold’s land-ethic philosophy. But for a person like Leopold, who thought so deeply about what he observed in the field, it would be difficult to overestimate the impact of his German experience. Though a few scientific pieces had yet to fall into place, it is clear that in his unassuming, boundless essay on national forest’s aesthetic he grasped intuitively the essence of his own land ethic.
rills with an intensity long patent to all the world, admit any such esthetic defi- cit in their countryside. "Yes" and "no" are of course worthless as criteria of such a question. I offer in evidence first, the existence of a very vigorous esthetic discontent, in the form of a "National Forest" (nature-protectorism). The movement, the equivalent of which preceded the emergence of the wilder- ness idea in America. This impulse to save wild remnants is always, I think, the forerunner of the more important and complex task of mixing a degree of wildness with utility. I also submit that the Germans are still reading Cooper's "Leatherstocking:" and Parkman's "Oregon Trail," and still flock to the wild-west movies. And when I asked a forester with a philosophical bent why people did not flock to his post to camp out, as in America, he shrugged his shoulders and remarked that per- haps the tree-rows stood too close to- gether for convenient test! All of which, of course, does not answer the question. Or does it?

And this calls to mind what is per- haps the first element in the German deficit: their former passion for unnec- essary outdoor geometry. There is a lag in the affairs of men-the idea of which were seemingly buried with the cold hard minds of the early-industrial era rise up out of the earth today for us to live with. Most German forests, for example, though laid out over a hundred years ago, would do credit to any custod. The trees are not in rows and all of a kind, but often the various age-blocks are parallelograms, which only an early discovery of the ill-effects of wind saved from being rectangles. The age-blocks may be in ascending series—1, 2, 3—like the proverbial stepladder family. The bound- ary between wood and field tends to be sharp, straight, and absolute, un- broken by those charming little inden- tations in the form of draw, coulee, and stump-lot, which, especially in our "shiftless" farming regions, bind wood and field into an harmonious whole. The Germans are now making a deter- mined effort to get away from custic forest-experience has revealed that in about the third successive crop of conifers in "pure" stands the micro-scopic flora of the soil becomes upset and the trees quit growing, but it will be another generation before the new policy emerges in landscape form.

Not so easily, though, will come any respite from what the geometrical mind has done to the German rivers. If there were only room for them, it would be a splendid idea to collect all the highway engineers in the world, and also their intellectual kith and kin the Corps of Army Engineers, and set- tle them for life upon the perfect curves and tangents of some "im- proved" German river. I am aware, of course, that there are weighty com- mercial reasons for the canalization of the larger rivers, but I also saw many a creek and rivulet laid out straight as a dead snake, and with masonry banks to boot. I am depressed by such indigni- ties, and I have black misgivings over the swarm of new bureaus now out to improve the American country- side. It is, I think, an historical fact that the American bureau equipped with money, men, and machines ever re- fused on principle to straighten a river, save only one—the Soil Conservation Service.

Another more subtle (and to the average traveler, imperceptible) ele- ment in the deficit of wilderness is the near-extirpation of birds and animals of prey. I think it was Stewart Edward White who said that the existence of a single grizzly conferred a flavor to a whole county. From the German hills that flavor has vanished—a victim to the misguiden act of the game-keeper and the herdsmen. Even the ordinary hawks are nearly gone—in four months travel I counted only. And the great owl or "Uhu"—without whose vocal autumn the winter night becomes a mere blackness—perished only in the farthest Marches of East Prussia. Before our American sports- men and game keepers and stockmen have finished their self-appointed task of exterminating our American predators, I hope that we may begin to realize a truth already written bold and clear on the German landscape: that we are most over-artificialized land uses is bought at the expense of the public interest. The game-keeper buys an unnatural abundance of pests at the expense of the public's hawks and owls. The fish-culturist buys an unnatural abundance of fish at the expense of the public's herons, mergansers, and terns. The forester buys an unnatural increment of wood at the expense of the soil, and in that wood maintains an unnatural abundance of deer at the expense of all palatable shrubs and herbs. (See "The Great Kahlu Deer Die-Off," page 54—Ed.)

This effect of too many deer on the ground flora of the forest deserves spe- cial mention because it is an illusory burglary of esthetic wealth, the more dangerous because unintentional and unseen. Forest undergrowth consists of many species, some palatable to deer, others not. When too dense a deer population is built up, and there are no natural predators to trim it down, the palatable plants are grazed out, whereupon the deer must be arti- fically fed by the game-keeper, where- upon next year's pressure on the palat- able species is still further increased, etc. ad infinitum. The result is the extirpation of the palatable plants— that is to say an unnatural simplicity and monotonony in the vegetation of the forest floor, which is still further aggravated by the too-dense shade cast by the artificially crowded trees, and by the soil-sickness already mentioned as arising from conifers. One is put in mind of Shakespeare's warning that "virtue, grown into a pleurisy, dies of its own too much." Be that as it may, the forest landscape is deprived of a certain exuberance which arises from a rich variety of plants fighting with each other for a place in the sun. It is almost as if the geological clock had been set back to those dim ages when there were only pines and ferns. I never realized before that the melodies of nature are music only when played against the undertones of evolutionary history. In the German forest—that forest which inspired the Crillings, one now hears only a dismal fuge out of the timeless reaches of the carboni- ferous. AF