

## CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 25

### Returning to the Mountain

Aldo Leopold was one of the founders of the environmental movement in the mid-1900s. Many of us first heard of him when we read his book *A Sand County Almanac*. For me one of his quotes still has special significance today. He said, "*We must think like a mountain.*"

In his youth he was a hunter. He and his friends were quite intent on shooting all the wolves they could find because they were decimating the deer population. Then came the day when the group looked down the mountain and saw a mother wolf with some cubs. They started shooting. Then they scrambled down to finish off the animals. Leopold got there just in time to look into the deep green eyes of the dying mother wolf. He was converted.

Leopold noted that a lack of wolves eventually caused an explosion in the deer population. The deer then defoliated the mountain. So just as the deer feared the wolves, the mountain feared the deer.

Leopold's *Think Like a Mountain* was his way of saying we must recognize that all aspects of nature relate to one another. In a word, they are parts of a system and if we hope to preserve the Earth we must become systems thinkers.

In this new Anthropocene world of climate change, why do we have such a difficult time thinking in terms of systems? It may be for a number of reasons .

Perhaps it is because that kind of thinking is too long-range. We need to see more immediate tangible results from our efforts in the community. Or, maybe it is because we don't feel we have the expertise to think in terms of systems,

Maybe we recognize that there will be a great deal of hostile blowback if we start challenging existing systems. We may feel that we have enough conflict in our lives without causing more. Or maybe it is because we see thinking like a mountain in a climate changing world as just a waste of time.

So why is thinking like a mountain—systems thinking—so important? Because of what scientists have been telling us. Earth has been getting increasingly warmer. A recent [scientific review](#) has indicated that we must take definitive steps by 2030 or face a disastrous situation by 2040.

So what does "definitive steps" mean? It means learning to see how dealing with climate change affects all aspects of life as we have come to know it. Climate change is not a national problem. It is a civilization problem.

And how do we learn to think in systems? This can be uncomfortable. We are used to our own way of thinking so we usually start with what has been successful in the past.

(I'm reminded of a favorite cartoon. Two tethered astronauts have been on a space walk. They are looking into their cockpit. Apparently they have locked themselves out. This is slightly amusing. But it becomes really funny when you notice what one of the astronauts has in his hand—a wire coat hanger)

We can't just tweak our neo-liberal economic systems. They are based upon continual profits and almost unlimited access to Earth's resources. Our Gross Domestic Product is abusing Earth's Domestic Product. We need new living economic systems that can exist within a living Earth

We need political systems that respond to the needs of their constituents. We didn't elect our representatives to give them power. We elected them to give us power.

We can't simply adapt our legal systems to ensure our Earth will be protected and thrive. Our environmental laws are not designed to protect Earth. They are designed to limit the amount of damage we can do to Earth. And, as we are continuing to see, these laws can be wiped out in the blink of a political eye. We need an Earth democracy and legal systems where "trees have standing".

Given these complexities with existing systems it is obvious, to borrow a biblical expression, that we can't put new wine into old wine skins. It will burst them. Sustainability is not enough. We need regeneration.

So is there hope? I believe there is. As climate change is mentioned more frequently in the media, we are seeing communities and groups around the world taking positive steps.

A few weeks ago the Democratic Party in the U.S. House of Representatives tabled legislation called "[The Green New Deal](#)". Not only does the legislation call for complete clean energy by 2030, it is also a good example of systems thinking. The legislation also deals with the economy, jobs, health care, transportation and a number of other inter-related systems. It won't become law until, and if, the Democrats take over the government. But it is an indication of the future.

Somebody down there has been "Thinking Like a Mountain".

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