

E. Freyfogle, *Why Conservation is Failing and How it Can Regain Ground*

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Robert McDonald

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Eric Freyfogle has spent his career studying land-use law, and has written often about how a society's conception of property rights affects the patterns and ecological processes of a landscape. In his new book, provocatively titled *Why Conservation is Failing and How It Can Regain Ground*, he roams over much broader intellectual terrain. His central thesis is that conservationists have responded to their critics in a piecemeal and ad-hoc way. We have, according to Freyfogle, mostly offered technocratic solutions justified by occasional appeals to utilitarian philosophy, rather than a coherent moral vision of the world. He quite bravely steps forward onto the public stage to announce such a vision.

The most important, moving passage of the book is in its last six pages. Summoning the rhetoric of Aldo Leopold, Freyfogle writes a fictional presidential address to the United States, urging its citizens "to find ways to *keep* the land healthy... not for one generation but for many." Just as the physical danger from British tyranny forced the American colonists to work collectively, so should the ecological danger from modern technology force us to solve these problems collectively. The ecological flows between parcels of land, Freyfogle argues, make the health of a landscape necessarily a collective responsibility.

Freedom is only meaningful in this context if my liberty to do what I want with my land ends when I begin to hurt someone else's land. This hypothetical address by Freyfogle is a beautiful piece of prose, and well worth reading.

Freyfogle may have chosen to use the language of Leopold's "land ethic" simply because it is so compelling and direct. However, he becomes so enamored of Leopold that he loses his perspective. The vagueness inherent in Leopold's comment that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" receives little discussion. This is ironic because Freyfogle spends much of the book attacking other ideas for being vague. Sustainable development comes in for some serious criticism, both for being imprecise about what is being sustained and for whom, and also for being too utilitarian in philosophy for Freyfogle's tastes. Similarly, René Dubos and Michael Pollan have developed a loose metaphor, of caring for the environment as like a wise gardener's stewardship of his garden, which is attacked for not specifying what ethical responsibilities people have to the land above and beyond a utilitarian concern. By the end of the book, Freyfogle's excellent prose may have convinced the reader that Leopold's land ethic is more rhetorically compelling than other big motivating ideas in conservation biology, but he fails to convince the reader it is any more scientifically accurate or ethically precise than its competitors.

R. McDonald (✉)
Graduate School of Design, Harvard University,
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
e-mail: rmcDonald@gsd.harvard.edu

Freyfogle's book also draws much of its examples and its tone from the Midwestern ethos of Leopold. Freyfogle mostly considers land-use issues that would be important in an agrarian, rural setting. In the process, he fails to provide a vision of how Leopold's ideas would relate to the urban landscape most Americans live in, nor what the "land ethic" might mean for newer environmental movements like the search for environmental justice. Freyfogle was also clearly focusing on the concerns of Americans, which gives the book a clear defined scope. However, the perspectives of the developing countries, which led to the painful evolution of the concept of sustainable development, are missing from this book. Moreover, Freyfogle's open hostility to utilitarian concerns may strike readers from developing countries as a bit too idealistic.

Despite these shortcomings, Freyfogle's book should serve as a call to action for landscape ecologists. Many of us care deeply about the health of the land, and picked a career in landscape ecology to help safeguard it. Yet as a discipline we have grown increasingly focused on technical issues of studying the link between pattern and process. Perhaps this technical focus is natural and appropriate for scientists, but Freyfogle can serve as a useful gadfly, pestering us into acknowledging that for most environmental problems the major obstacle to their solution is not a lack of scientific data but a lack of societal motivation. To put it another way, there is a lack of compelling intellectual arguments for protecting whole landscapes. Freyfogle's book represents a good first step in the search for such arguments.