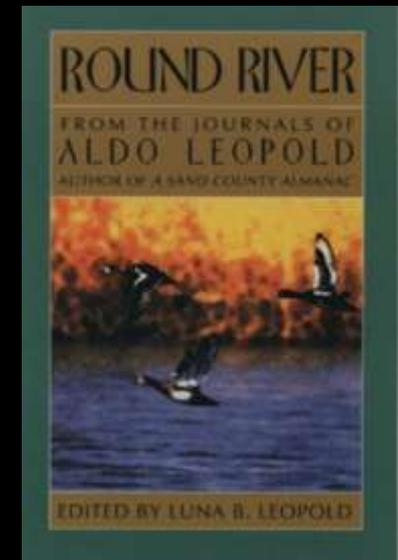


The Round River: Myth, Meaning, and Rivers

Kevin M. Anderson, Ph.D.

Austin Water - Center for Environmental Research



Fluvial Philosophy - Heraclitus c. 535 – c. 475 BC

A Greek philosopher of Ephesus, Heraclitus propounded a distinctive theory which he expressed in oracular language.

He is best known for his doctrines that things are constantly changing (universal flux or process) and that fire is the basic material of the world.

Plato indicates the source of the flux doctrine:

"Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things go and nothing stays, and comparing existents to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river" (Plato *Cratylus*)

What Heraclitus actually said is the following:

“On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow.”

Understand?



Heraclitus “On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow.”

Heraclitus derives a striking insight from an everyday encounter.

It makes perfectly good sense.

We call a body of water a river precisely because it consists of changing waters.

If the waters should cease to flow it would not be a river, but a lake or a dry streambed.

There is a sense, then, in which a river is a remarkable kind of existent,

one that remains what it is by changing what it contains.



Heraclitus “On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow.”

Further, he supplies, via the ambiguity of “those” in the first clause, another reading:

On the same people stepping into rivers, other and other waters flow.

With this reading it is people who remain the same in contrast to changing waters,

as if the encounter with a flowing environment helped to constitute the perceiving subject as the same.

If this interpretation is right, the message of the river fragment is not that all things are changing so that we cannot encounter them twice,

but something much more subtle and profound.

It is that some things stay the same only by changing.



Some things stay the same only by changing – Flux or Process

One kind of long-lasting material reality exists by virtue of a process of constant turnover in its constituent matter.

Here constancy and change are not opposed but inextricably connected.

A human body could be understood in precisely the same way, as living and continuing by virtue of constant metabolism—as Aristotle for instance later understood it.

Organisms and Ecosystems are understood in this same way – a system of processes or cycles.

On this reading, Heraclitus believes in flux, but not as destructive of constancy;

rather it is, paradoxically, a necessary condition of constancy. Understand?



Greek Mythology and Rivers: Styx and Lethe

Styx - The Styx (also meaning "hate" and "detestation" adjectival form: Stygian) is a river in Greek mythology that formed the boundary between Earth and the Underworld (often called Hades which is also the name of this domain's ruler).

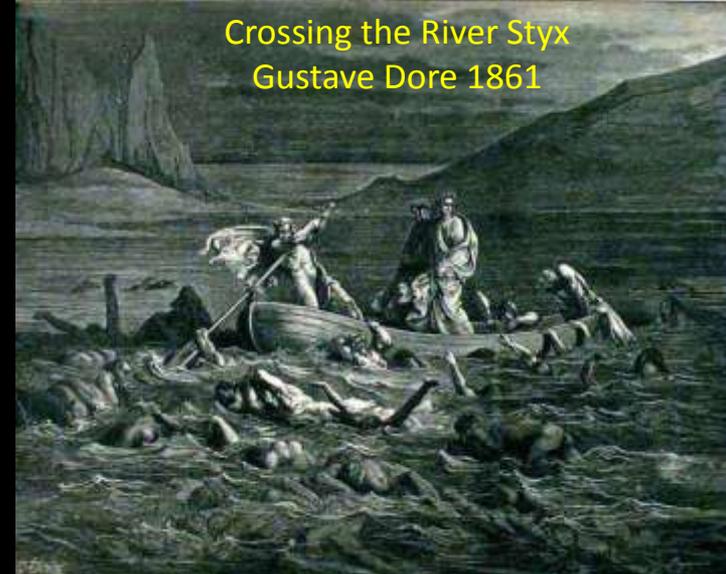
In order to cross the River Styx and reach Hades, a dead person must pay a fee to the ferryman, Charon. If the correct fee is paid, Charon will take the dead across. If the dead cannot afford the fee, however, they will be forced to wander the banks of the River Styx as Wraiths for eternity.

Lethe - In Greek mythology, Lethe was one of the five rivers of Hades. All those who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness. Lethe was also the name of the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion, with whom the river was often identified.

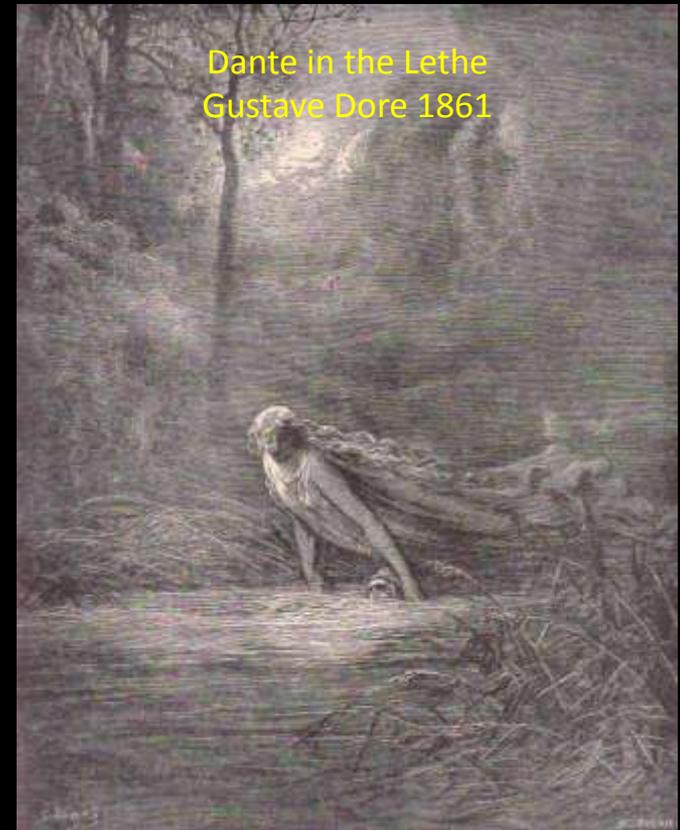
In Classical Greek, the word Lethe literally means "oblivion", "forgetfulness", or "concealment". It is related to the Greek word for "truth", aletheia, meaning "un-forgetfulness" or "un-concealment".

Both rivers are part of the geography of Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Crossing the River Styx
Gustave Dore 1861



Dante in the Lethe
Gustave Dore 1861



Narcissus and Echo

In Greek mythology, the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Leiriope; he was distinguished for his beauty.

The classic version is by Ovid, found in Book 3 of his *Metamorphoses* (completed 8 AD).

There was a day when Narcissus was walking in the woods. Echo, a mountain nymph, saw him and fell deeply in love with him. She followed him.

Narcissus sensed that someone was following him and shouted "Who's there?". Echo repeated "Who's there?". She eventually revealed her identity.

She made an attempt to embrace the boy. He stepped away from her and told her to leave him alone.

She was heartbroken and spent the rest of her life in lonely glens until nothing but an echo sound remained of her.



Echo and Narcissus (1903) - John William Waterhouse

Narcissus and Echo

Narcissus (1597-1599) - Caravaggio

Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, learned of this story and decided to punish Narcissus.

She lured him to a pool where he saw his own reflection.

He was amazed at the beauty of his reflection.

He didn't realize his reflection was only an image and fell in love with it.

Unable to leave the beauty of his reflection, Narcissus died.

The flower that bears his name sprang up where he died.



The Myth of Orpheus

Orpheus was a legendary musician, poet, and prophet in ancient Greek religion and myth.

The major stories about him are centered on his ability to charm all living things with his music.

But the love and loss of Eurydice and the death of Orpheus involves the passage over and into rivers.

Auguste Rodin
Orpheus & Eurydice (1887)



Tree arising! O pure ascendance!
Orpheus Sings! Towering tree within the ear!
Everywhere stillness, yet in this abeyance:
seeds of change and new beginnings near.

The Sonnets to Orpheus Rainer Maria Rilke, February 1922



Orpheus
Roman mosaic

The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus falls in love with the beautiful nymph Eurydice, and the two make plans to wed. But on their wedding day, Eurydice steps on a snake, which bites her.

She is killed, and Orpheus is stricken with terrible and all-consuming grief.

Disconsolate, Orpheus finds a cave which leads to Hades and follows Eurydice to the Underworld.

Armed only with his lyre and his beautiful voice, Orpheus makes his way past every terrifying danger the underworld holds to the crossing of the river Styx.



John Roddam Spencer Stanhope
Orpheus and Eurydice on the Banks of the Styx
1878

The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

Here his musical charms are so persuasive that the King of the Dead permits the minstrel to take his love home with him - on one condition: that as he leads Eurydice up to life again, he not turn to look at her.

Just as they are almost safely away, Orpheus is overcome with doubt about whether she is truly behind him. Without thinking, he turns to look.

Her faithful shade immediately vanishes, and the devastated Orpheus attempts to return to Hades and rescue her again.



Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot 1861



Auguste Rodin
Orpheus & Eurydice (1887)

But this time the boatman Charon refuses to carry him across the river. He sits on the shore starving, hoping for death, so that he may join Eurydice. But the gods will not let him die.

Reluctantly, he returns to the upper world, finding solace only in his music.

He spent the rest of his days scorning women, not willing to love another so to stay true to the memory of Eurydice. He wandered the earth before being torn apart by the women of Thrace, who were angry at him for spurning their love and companionship.

They threw his head into a river, and it kept on singing all the way to the sea.

The Sonnets to Orpheus Rainer Maria Rilke

But you, divine one singing on the brink of destruction
while legions of forsaken maenads tore at your flesh;
you vanquished their shrieks with harmony, oh bright one,
while from utter devastation rebounded your song afresh.

And though you fade from earthly sight,
declare to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water say: I am.



John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)

"Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus"
1900

Divine Geography of Rivers

Okeanos, Earth-Encircling River

Homer, *Iliad*:

"Okeanos, whose stream bends back in a circle."

Hesiod, *Theogony*:

"Okeanos the completely encircling river."

The sun, moon, and stars were all believed to rise and set into its waters. At night, the sun-god sailed around the northern limits of the stream in a golden boat from his setting in the west to his rising in the east.

Okeanos is the font of all the earth's fresh-water: including rivers, wells, springs and rain-clouds.

In a cosmological sense, the river symbolized the eternal flow of time.



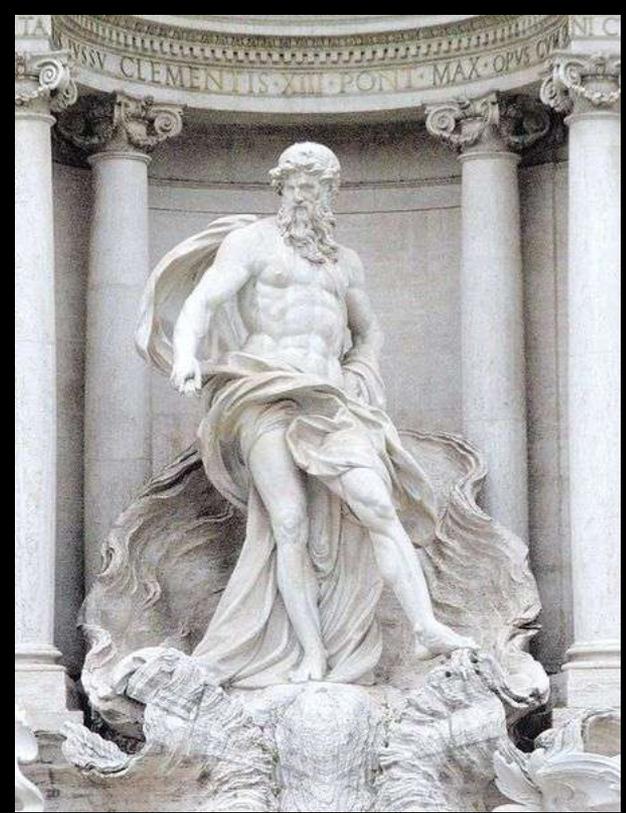
Oceanus and Tethys

Oceanus was the god of the great earth-encircling river Okeanos.

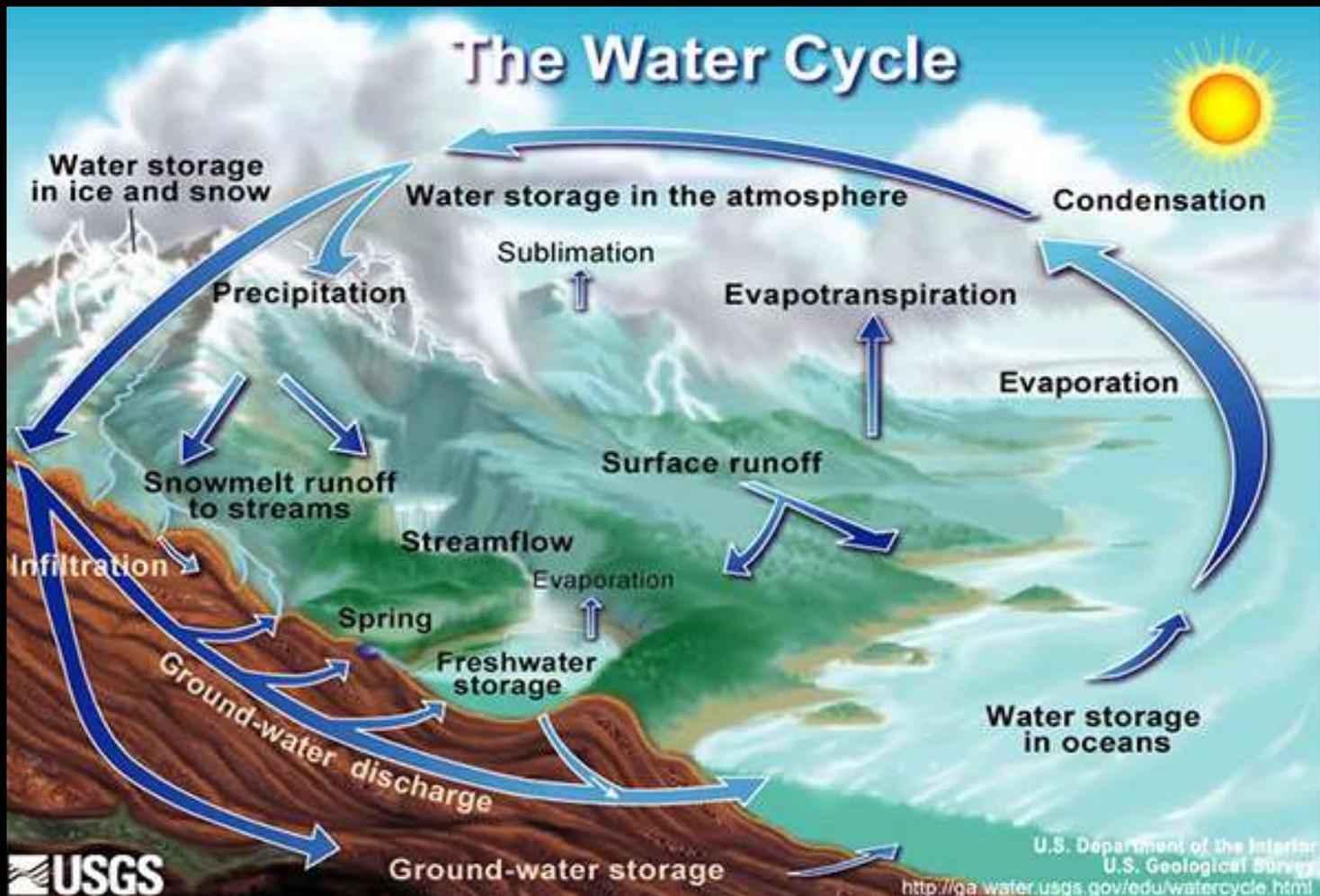
Oceanus was also the god who regulated the rising and setting of the heavenly bodies which were believed to emerge and descend into his watery realm at the ends of the earth.

Oceanus' wife was Tethys, who distributed his water to the earth via subterranean caverns. She was mother of the rivers of the world.

Their children were the Potamoi or River-Gods and Okeanides, nymphs of springs and fountains.



The Round River



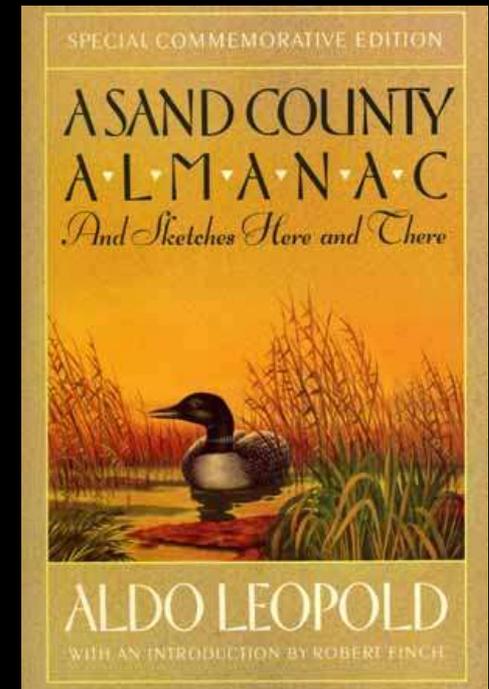
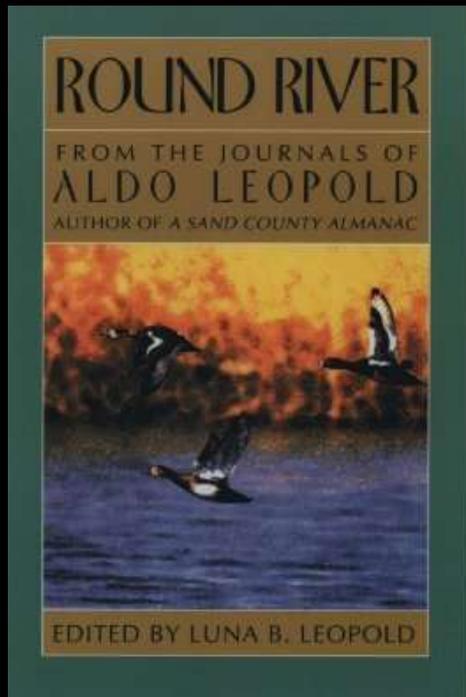
The Round River – Aldo Leopold

"One of the marvels of early Wisconsin was the Round River, a river that flowed into itself, and thus sped around and around in a never-ending circuit.

Paul Bunyan discovered it, and the Bunyan saga tells how he floated many a log down its restless waters."

Metaphor for ecology

Aldo Leopold 1887-1948



Round River

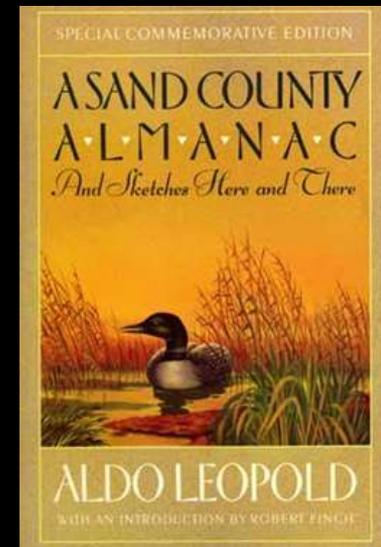
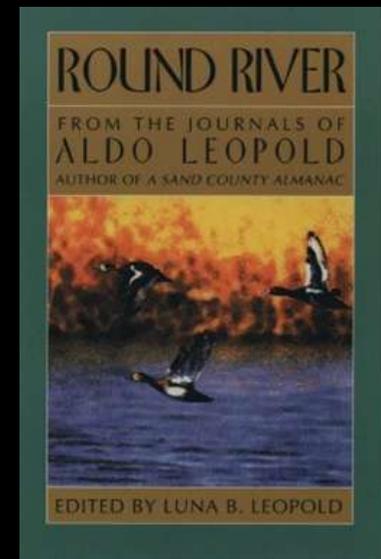
"a river that flows into itself"

Wisconsin not only had a round river, Wisconsin is one. The current is the stream of energy which flows out of the soil into plants, thence into animals, thence back into the soil in a never ending circuit of life.

In our educational system, the biotic continuum is seldom pictured to us as a stream.

From our tenderest years we are fed with facts about the soils, floras, and faunas, that comprise the channel of Round River (biology), about their origins in time (geology and evolution), about the technique of exploiting them (agriculture and engineering).

But the concept of a current with droughts and freshets, backwaters and bars, is left to inference.



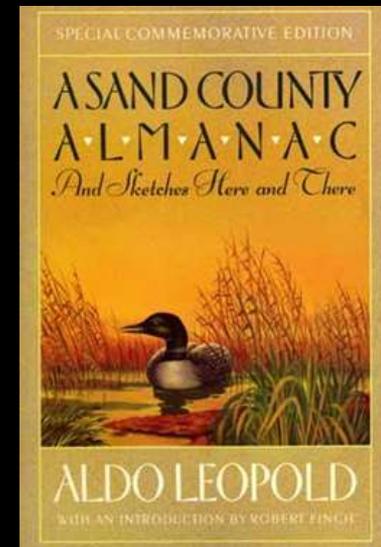
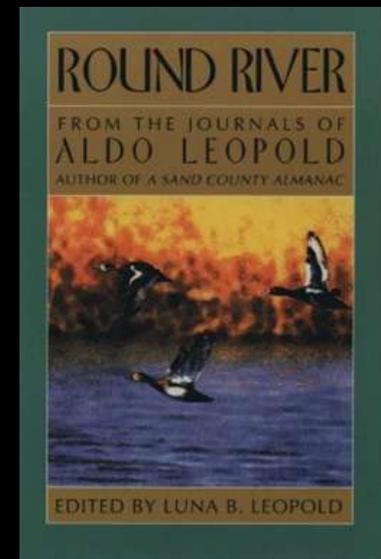
Round River

Ecology is an infant just learning to talk, and, like other infants, is engrossed with its own coinage of big words.

Its working days lie in the future.

Ecology is destined to become the lore of Round River, a belated attempt to convert our collective wisdom of biotic materials into a collective wisdom of biotic navigation.

This, in the last analysis, is conservation.



A World of Wounds

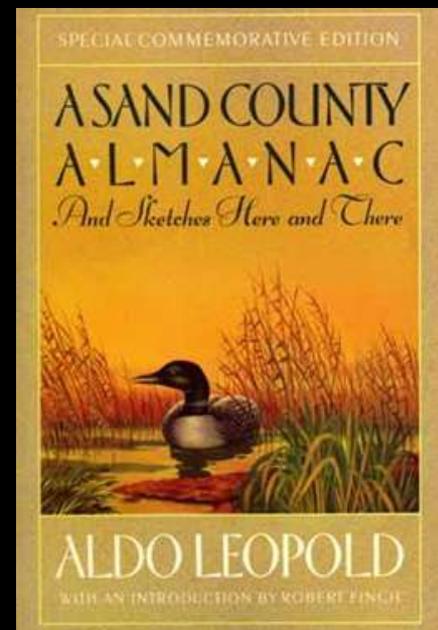
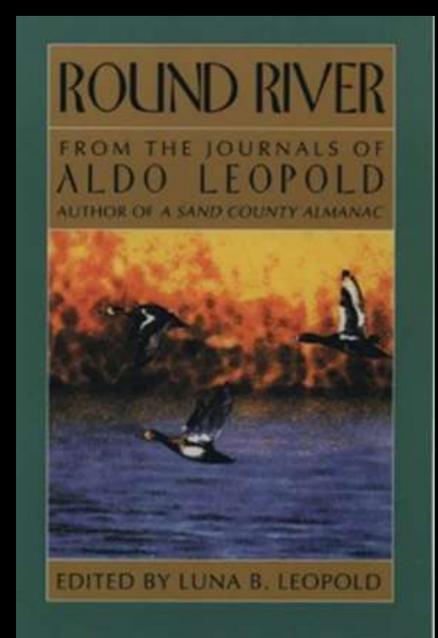
One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.

Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen.

An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.

Some engineers are beginning to have a feeling in their bones that the meanderings of a creek not only improve the landscape but are a necessary part of the hydrologic functioning.

The ecologist sees clearly that for similar reasons we can get along with less channel improvement on Round River.



If the land mechanism as a whole is good then every part is good, whether we understand it or not...

To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.



We need knowledge – public awareness – of the small cogs and wheels, but sometimes I think there is something we need even more. It is the thing that *Forest and Stream*, on its editorial masthead, once called ‘a refined taste in natural objects.’

Have we made any headway in developing ‘a refined taste in natural objects’?





Applause!