

The sustainable development goals and Aldo Leopold's land ethic: A philosophical analysis of ecological sustainability, human well-being, and environmental ethics

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Abstract

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic is one of the seminal works in environmental ethics because he brought the consideration of ethics from human interests to the biotic community. The idea of ecological integrity, stability and beauty, however, suggests a philosophical question about the relationship between ecological responsibilities and human health, justice and democratic choice. This article looks at how the norms of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be applied to Leopold's Land Ethic in a constructive way. The study collates Leopold's original formulation, philosophical understandings of ecological holism, and sustainable development, human rights and environmental justice literature with the use of structured secondary-literature review and reported with reference to the PRISMA 2020 framework. The analysis in particular emphasizes SDG 15 (Life on Land), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The article suggests that the Land Ethic and SDGs can be engaged productively when ecological integrity becomes a state of human long-term flourishing, not an excuse to ignore social justice or human dignity. The SDG framework brings in practical elements such as poverty alleviation, equality, participation, institutional accountability and intergenerational responsibility that could reinforce the modern ethical understanding of Leopold's ecological vision. The article ends by suggesting that a pluralist interpretation of the Land Ethic can be used to establish an integrated vision of ecological and social justice, where ecological conservation and human welfare are seen as interconnected with intergenerational responsibilities.

Keywords: Aldo Leopold, Land Ethic, Ecological Ethics, Human Well-Being, Social Justice, Sustainable Development Goals, Environmental Ethics

JEL Classification: Q57, Q01, Q56

1. Introduction

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic is a significant contribution to twentieth-century environmental philosophy. In the final essay of *A Sand County Almanac*, 'The Land Ethic' Leopold dismantles the notion of human beings as external agents or conquerors of nature, and instead portrays them as 'plain members and citizens of a biotic community' (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). The moral importance of this is that moral concerns are no longer limited to human relationships but are extended to soils, waters, plants and animals, as well as to ecological communities. In his famous statement, Leopold says that an action is right if it tends to preserve the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" and wrong if it tends to the contrary (Leopold, 1949, p. 224–225). It has been a very influential formulation as it relates ethical judgment to ecological relationships, and not only to human uses. Concurrently, the comprehensive nature of the Land Ethic has sparked philosophical discussion on the morality of individual entities, the interdependence of the ecological whole and interests, and the role of human values in conservation ethics. When one looks at Leopold's work, set against the backdrop of contemporary sustainable development, these questions are particularly relevant. The Sustainable Development Goals in the United Nations 2030 Agenda are defined as interconnected and indivisible goals, which embrace the economic, social and environmental aspects of development (United Nations, 2015). The framework thus offers a contemporary setting in which ecological protection can be considered in conjunction with poverty reduction, equality, decent work, climate action, peace, justice and institutional accountability. The philosophical connection is not an easy one. Leopold's Land Ethic is a normative environmental philosophy while the SDGs are an international policy framework with goals, targets and indicators. However, there are significant areas of commonality: the interdependence of people and nature, the need for intergenerational responsibility, the need to protect terrestrial ecosystems, and the understanding that human wellbeing is dependent on ecological health. The present article thus proposes the following questions: How is Leopold's Land Ethic philosophically re-interpreted in the SDG framework without diminishing the value of ecological integrity into a strictly instrumental human one, or omitting the dignity and social justice of the human being? The objectives of the article are to examine the essence of sustainable development, to investigate the conceptual connections between the Land Ethic and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to see if these can provide a way in which the Land Ethic can be interpreted in the current context, including ecological responsibility, human health and well-being, justice, and democracy.

2. Literature Review: Leopold's Land Ethic and Modern Environmental Ethics

2.1 The Core Ideas of the Land Ethic

Leopold's Land Ethic broadens the moral community, moving human beings into, not out of, an ecological community. Land is recognized not only as property or set of resources but also as a community of interdependent relations. The ethical question is then shifted from what man can do

to nature to what kind of behavior promotes the health of the community of life, as expressed in Leopold's ecological language (Leopold, 1949). This is both an ecological and ethical point of view. The idea of integrity, stability and beauty is both descriptive and normative for Leopold. The Land Ethic, then, is not a complete moral system, but it is a principle to be used in the assessment of human actions towards ecological communities. The insight has taken various forms in contemporary philosophical discussions, such as holistic, bio-centric and pluralistic (Callicott, 2014; Taylor, 1986).

2.2 Holism, Individual Moral Standing, and Human Well-being

The relation between ecological wholes and individual beings is one of the major philosophical concerns. Individual-centered environmental ethics focus on the moral significance or intrinsic value of particular living beings. Paul W. Taylor, for instance, has focused his bio-centric perspective on the moral value of individual organisms, creating an ethic of respect for nature that is not based on moral value being derived solely from human interests (Taylor, 1986). The focus of Tom Regan's rights-based approach is the moral rights of individual animals, as well (Regan, 1983). These provide a useful counterpoint to the strong holist interpretation of Leopold. It is important not to conclude that ecological holism is to be dispensed with. Instead, they show that ecological value cannot be understood simply by assuming that the whole is always more important than its individual parts. An updated version of the Land Ethic can thus honor the moral significance of ecological communities and call for a focus on human dignity, individual interests, and the interests of non-human entities. This is especially relevant to Leopold's later work, which places Leopold in an evolutionary-ecological perspective and examines the application of the Land Ethic at various ecological scales (Callicott, 2014). This pluralistic interpretation also makes it easier to establish a link between the Land Ethic and sustainable development. Ecological integrity is not considered an isolated objective; it is related to the social and material conditions under which people live. Ecological values of forests, soils, water systems, and biodiversity and climate stability are vital and contribute to food systems, livelihoods, health, security and opportunities. The moral dilemma is thus how to frame conservation to account for these interdependencies. One of the key insights of Leopold's formulation is that it alters the moral terrain for talking about environmental responsibility. Accession language suggests a relationship and a reliance, not just ownership. Community members are not outside of the conditions that enable the community to thrive. This is particularly relevant to the sustainability of today: ecological damage is not just a matter of "the environment", but has an impact on food security, livelihoods, public health, economic activity and the future generations. Even if Leopold did not use the modern jargon of sustainable development, the Land Ethic can be considered a pre-figuration of this concept. The term "biotic community" must also not be read as a denial of differences between the moral claims. Human communities have specific responsibilities given that humans are able to affect ecological systems on a large scale and to develop institutions where environmental decisions are taken. As a result, responsibility is an integral part of a modern understanding of the Land Ethic. It is not just

a question of whether nature has value, but how to treat its value in the face of competing justice and well-being claims by human agents and institutions.

2.3 Leopold's Land Ethic and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development offers a current 'language' to consider the link between environmental care and human welfare. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987, p. 43) defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The definition introduces an explicit intergenerational dimension, reinforcing Leopold's emphasis on the perpetuity of the state of the biotic community. The 2030 Agenda takes this one step further, integrating the three dimensions of the economy, society and environment. It outlines 17 SDGs and 169 targets and it emphasizes that sustainable development can be achieved through individual solutions to environmental and social issues (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs, then, set a new agenda for considering how an ecological ethic might be implemented in institutional and policy issues while maintaining its normative dimension.

3. UNSDGs (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) and their Ethical Dimensions

The SDGs do not constitute an environmental-ethical theory. They are a global development framework that includes normative commitments, policy objectives, targets and indicators. Philosophically, their importance to Leopold's Land Ethic is that they all consider ecological protection, human welfare, equality, climate responsibility and institutional involvement as interwoven. The Goals in the 2030 Agenda are explicitly referred to as "integrated and indivisible" and are connected with the three dimensions of development, namely the economic, social and environmental (United Nations, 2015). There are six SDGs that are relevant to this article. SDG 15 is the SDG directly related to terrestrial ecosystems, while SDG 13 is about climate action, SDG 1 concerns poverty, SDG 8 concerns decent work and economic growth, SDG 10 concerns inequality, and SDG 16 is about peace, justice, access to justice and accountable and inclusive institutions. They form a framework for questions regarding the possibility of attaining ecological responsibility while also achieving human welfare and social justice. It is especially important to notice the link to SDG 15 because Leopold's ethical vocabulary is linked to the state of land communities. Forest, soil, watershed, grassland and biodiversity are not just a bunch of separate items, but are ecologic relationships, whose functioning relies on complex interactions between numerous items. SDG 15 also tackles terrestrial ecosystems in terms of protecting, restoring, sustainable use, and conserving biodiversity, and mitigating land degradation. The parallel is then stronger than just a coincidence in subject matter; both approaches question the dichotomous perception of land as the backdrop upon which human life is lived. However, unlike Leopold's essay, SDG gives a measurement-based dimension that does not exist in his original essay. Indicators provide governments and institutions with a way of identifying if conditions are improving or declining in the environment. On their own they cannot answer the moral issues as

to what should be protected, or who should be taken into account. A philosophical interpretation is thus still required. Next, Leopold brings in the normative notion that ecological membership involves responsibilities, whereas the SDG system provides a modern framework for some of these responsibilities to be tracked.

3.1 SDG 15: Life on Land

SDG 15 is the most direct point of contact between the SDG framework and Leopold's Land Ethic. It calls for the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable forest management, combating desertification, reversing land degradation, and halting biodiversity loss (United Nations, 2015). The official indicator framework includes measures such as forest area as a proportion of total land area (15.1.1) and the Red List Index (15.5.1) (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026). These indicators do not themselves establish Leopold's ethical criterion. Rather, they implement particular dimensions of ecological condition. The philosophical contribution of the Land Ethic is to ask why such ecological conditions matter and what obligations human communities have toward them. SDG 15 consequently supplies a policy and measurement framework through which ecological responsibilities can be made more concrete, while Leopold supplies an ethical vocabulary for understanding the significance of ecological membership.

3.2 SDG 13: Climate Action

Climate change demonstrates the interdependence between ecological systems and human well-being. SDG 13 calls for urgent action on climate change and its impacts, including strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity. From a Leopoldian perspective, climate stability is not merely a technical or economic issue because changes in ecological systems affect the conditions within which human and nonhuman communities can flourish.

The connection also introduces an intergenerational dimension. Climate-related decisions affect people who are not yet born, making questions of responsibility across generations central to sustainability. Leopold's concern with the long-term health of the land can therefore be placed in dialogue with the SDG emphasis on resilience and long-term sustainability.

3.3 SDG 1 and SDG 8: Poverty, Livelihoods, and Decent Work

Conservation can have direct social consequences where communities depend upon forests, land, water, or other ecological resources for subsistence and employment. A purely ecological assessment may therefore overlook distributive effects. SDG 1 and SDG 8 make poverty reduction, productive employment, and decent work explicit components of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

The ethical implication is not that conservation should be abandoned whenever human interests are affected. Instead, conservation decisions should examine who bears costs, who receives

benefits, and whether affected communities have meaningful opportunities to participate. This approach gives social justice a substantive place within ecological decision-making.

3.4 SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Environmental benefits and burdens are not necessarily distributed equally. Communities with fewer economic or political resources may be more vulnerable to environmental degradation and may also have limited influence over conservation or development decisions. SDG 10 therefore provides a useful lens for examining distributive dimensions of environmental ethics. For the Land Ethic, the relevance of SDG 10 is methodological as well as normative. An ecologically responsible policy should not be evaluated only by aggregate ecological outcomes. It should also be examined in terms of distribution, participation, and the protection of vulnerable groups. This expands the ethical evaluation of conservation beyond the ecological condition of the land itself.

This procedural dimension is important because environmental ethics is ultimately connected to decisions made by particular people and institutions. A conservation objective may be ecologically justified while the process through which it is imposed may nevertheless raise ethical concerns. Questions of representation, transparency, access to information, participation, and accountability therefore become part of the broader ethical evaluation. SDG 16 is relevant because it makes these institutional dimensions visible within the sustainable-development framework. From this perspective, participation should not be understood merely as an administrative technique. It has normative significance because communities affected by environmental decisions have interests, knowledge, and claims that can influence how ecological problems are understood. A participatory approach can also improve the practical legitimacy of conservation by allowing competing values to be openly considered. The Land Ethic thus becomes more adaptable when interpreted alongside a democratic conception of environmental governance.

3.5 SDG 16: Justice, Institutions, and Participation

SDG 16 is important because environmental objectives are implemented through institutions. Its targets include access to justice, effective and accountable institutions, and inclusive and participatory decision-making (United Nations, 2015). These commitments provide a procedural dimension to the Land Ethic. A contemporary ecological ethic therefore requires more than desirable environmental outcomes. It also requires attention to how decisions are made, whose interests are heard, what information is available, and whether affected communities can challenge decisions. Democratic participation and institutional accountability do not replace ecological responsibility; they help determine how ecological responsibility should be pursued in a pluralistic society.

4. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative philosophical analysis based on secondary literature. The literature-review procedure is reported with reference to the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et

al., 2021). PRISMA is used as a reporting guideline for transparency in literature identification and selection; it does not imply that the study constitutes a quantitative systematic review or meta-analysis.

The literature search was conducted between September and October 2025 across Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science. The principal search string combined keywords relating to Leopold's land ethic, sustainable development, and environmental justice: ("Aldo Leopold" OR "Land Ethic") AND ("sustainable development" OR "SDGs" OR "environmental ethics" OR "ecological justice" OR "human rights").

Inclusion criteria were: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, or authoritative institutional reports; (ii) English-language publication; (iii) direct relevance to Leopold's land ethic, ecological holism, sustainable development, environmental justice, or related normative questions; and (iv) publication between 1980 and 2025, with the exception of foundational texts such as Leopold (1949) and the Brundtland Report (1987). Exclusion criteria were: (i) purely empirical studies without material philosophical or normative relevance; (ii) short opinion pieces lacking an identifiable argumentative structure; (iii) duplicate records; and (iv) sources unrelated to the conceptual relationship among ecological integrity, sustainability, justice, and governance. The documented study record identified 150 potentially relevant publications. Of these, 85 proceeded to full-text assessment and 60 sources met the eligibility requirements for inclusion in the final qualitative synthesis. The available research record does not preserve separate counts for duplicate removal, title-and-abstract exclusions, or reason-specific full-text exclusions. The selected literature was analysed thematically. The analysis focused on six interrelated themes: ecological integrity; moral standing and ecological holism; human well-being; distributive and recognitional justice; democratic participation and institutional accountability; and intergenerational responsibility. This thematic approach enabled the study to relate philosophical principles to selected SDGs without treating the SDGs as a substitute for ethical argument.

The PRISMA flow therefore reports 150 records identified, 85 full-text sources assessed for eligibility, and 60 sources included in the qualitative synthesis; intermediate screening and exclusion counts were not recorded in the study record.

5. Objectives, Discussion and Analysis

The article has four objectives: (1) to examine the philosophical meaning of sustainable development; (2) to analyze the conceptual connections between the Land Ethic and sustainable development; (3) to relate selected SDGs and indicators to Leopold's ecological concerns; and (4) to assess whether this relationship can support a contemporary interpretation of the Land Ethic that integrates ecological responsibility, human well-being, justice, and democratic participation.

Objective 1: Philosophical meaning of sustainable development:

This objective will discuss principally in Sections 5.1 and 5.2. Sustainable development is examined as an ethical framework concerned with present needs, future generations, ecological limits, and the conditions required for human flourishing.

Objective 2: Conceptual connection between Leopold's Land Ethic and sustainable development. This objective is addressed through Sections 2.3, 5.1, and 5.4. The paper compares Leopold's emphasis on ecological membership and responsibility with the SDG framework's integrated treatment of environmental, social, and economic concerns.

Objective 3: Selected SDGs and indicators in relation to Leopold's ecological concerns. This objective is developed in Section 3 and extended in Section 5.3. SDG 15 is linked most directly to ecological integrity and biodiversity, while SDG 13, SDGs 1 and 8, SDG 10, and SDG 16 extend the discussion to climate responsibility, livelihoods, inequality, participation, justice, and accountable institutions.

Objective 4: Integrating ecological responsibility, human well-being, justice, and democratic participation. This objective is developed most directly in Sections 5.2, 5.4, and 5.5. The discussion integrates ecological integrity with human dignity, livelihoods, distributive justice, procedural fairness, participation, and institutional accountability.

5.1 Sustainable Development as a Philosophical Framework

Sustainable development can be interpreted philosophically as an attempt to relate environmental limits to human needs across time. The Brundtland formulation emphasizes both present needs and the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The formulation is significant for environmental ethics because it rejects a conception of development that treats future interests as morally irrelevant.

Leopold's Land Ethic and sustainable development nevertheless begin from different emphases. Leopold starts from ecological membership and moral expansion; sustainable development begins from a framework of human development, environmental protection, and intergenerational responsibility. Their relationship is therefore best understood as complementary rather than identical. The SDGs can provide institutional and social dimensions that are less explicit in Leopold's formulation, while the Land Ethic contributes a stronger ethical account of ecological membership.

Human well-being should also be understood in a broad sense. It includes material conditions such as food, water, shelter, employment, and health, but it can also include cultural continuity, security, community relationships, and the ability to participate in decisions that affect one's life. Environmental degradation can threaten several of these dimensions simultaneously. Conversely, environmental policies that ignore social conditions can create new vulnerabilities even when their ecological objectives are legitimate.

This perspective helps clarify why the SDG framework is useful as a contemporary interpretive lens rather than as a replacement for the Land Ethic. Leopold supplies an ecological orientation: human beings should understand themselves as members of a larger community of life. The SDGs add a multidimensional social framework: ecological objectives must be considered alongside poverty, inequality, climate resilience, decent work, justice, and institutions. The resulting approach is neither purely anthropocentric nor purely ecological. It is relational, because it evaluates human and ecological conditions through their interdependence.

5.2 Ecological Integrity and Human Well-being

The central philosophical issue is how ecological integrity and human well-being should be related. Treating ecological integrity as irrelevant to human welfare would neglect the ecological conditions of human life. Treating human welfare as irrelevant to ecological limits would similarly undermine long-term sustainability. A more defensible approach recognizes reciprocal dependence: human communities rely upon ecological systems, while human actions influence the condition of those systems.

This interpretation also avoids reducing the Land Ethic to a purely instrumental environmental policy. Ecological communities matter within Leopold's ethical framework not merely because they are useful to people. At the same time, contemporary sustainability requires attention to the social consequences of environmental policies. The ethical task is therefore one of integration: ecological value should be respected while conservation decisions remain attentive to rights, justice, livelihoods, and participation.

5.3 From Ethical Principles to SDG Indicators

Indicators are useful because they make broad normative commitments observable and assessable. Forest area and the Red List Index, for example, provide empirical information relevant to terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026). However, an indicator should not be confused with the ethical principle that gives it significance. A decline in forest area can be measured, but the ethical question concerns what obligations follow from that decline and how responsibilities should be distributed.

For this reason, ecological indicators should be interpreted together with social and institutional indicators. Poverty, inequality, employment, participation, and access to justice provide information about the human consequences and governance conditions associated with environmental policies. The SDG framework is especially useful here because its architecture is explicitly integrated rather than treating environmental goals as isolated from social and economic goals (United Nations, 2015).

An additional advantage of this interpretive approach is that it avoids presenting the Land Ethic as a finished policy programme. Leopold's text was written in a particular historical context and was primarily concerned with changing the ethical attitude of human beings toward the land. The SDGs

belong to a different historical and institutional context. The philosophical task is therefore one of reconstruction: identifying principles in Leopold's thought that can meaningfully enter contemporary debates without claiming that Leopold himself endorsed later concepts or institutions.

The distinction between interpretation and historical attribution is important for academic accuracy. It is legitimate to argue that Leopold's emphasis on ecological membership has contemporary relevance for sustainable development. It would be less defensible to state that Leopold directly formulated the principles of the SDGs. The present argument makes the former claim. Similarly, the article does not claim that the SDGs resolve the philosophical tensions within environmental ethics. The Goals contain multiple values that can come into tension, including economic development, ecological protection, equality, and institutional priorities. Their usefulness for this study lies in making these tensions explicit. A philosophical analysis can then ask whether particular policies respect both ecological responsibilities and requirements of justice rather than assuming that one dimension automatically overrides the others.

5.4 Philosophical Validity of the Land Ethic–SDG Connection

The connection between Leopold's Land Ethic and the SDGs is philosophically defensible if it is understood as a contemporary reconstruction rather than a claim that Leopold anticipated the SDGs. Leopold did not formulate the 2030 Agenda, and the SDGs should not be read back into his text as though they were implicit policy recommendations. The relationship is interpretive: Leopold's ecological ethics can be brought into dialogue with a contemporary framework that places ecological sustainability, human development, and justice within a common institutional architecture.

The connection is strongest at three points. First, both perspectives recognize ecological interdependence. Second, both have a significant intergenerational dimension. Third, both support an understanding of human flourishing that cannot be detached from environmental conditions. The SDGs add further dimensions—especially poverty, inequality, participation, and institutional accountability—that help address questions not fully developed in Leopold's original formulation.

The connection should nevertheless remain pluralistic. Neither Leopold nor the SDGs provides a single algorithm for resolving every conflict between ecological and social claims. Ethical judgment is still required when conservation, livelihoods, biodiversity, development, and competing interests come into tension. The value of the framework lies in making those dimensions visible rather than pretending that conflicts do not exist.

5.5 Practical Implications for Conservation and Environmental Governance

A Land Ethic informed by sustainable-development principles would evaluate conservation policies through several interconnected questions: Does the policy protect ecological systems? Does it preserve or restore biodiversity? What effects does it have on livelihoods and poverty? Are

environmental costs and benefits distributed fairly? Are affected communities able to participate? Are decisions transparent and accountable? Do policies protect the interests of future generations?

This approach does not require a choice between nature and people. Instead, it treats the quality of environmental governance as part of ecological responsibility. Conservation policies can pursue biodiversity and ecosystem protection while also incorporating livelihood safeguards, participation, and compensation where appropriate, access to information, and institutional accountability. Such safeguards are particularly important where communities depend directly upon land and natural resources.

The practical significance of the Land Ethic therefore lies not in providing a rigid policy formula but in changing the ethical perspective from domination toward membership and responsibility. The SDGs can help translate that perspective into a multidimensional evaluative framework that includes ecological, social, economic, and institutional considerations.

5.6 Limitations and Scope

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is a qualitative philosophical analysis based on secondary literature rather than an empirical assessment of conservation outcomes. The SDG indicators are therefore used as conceptual and evaluative reference points, not as evidence that a particular conservation policy has produced a particular social or ecological result. Second, the literature-selection record available for the study documents the aggregate stages of identification, full-text assessment, and final inclusion, but does not preserve a reason-specific numerical breakdown for every exclusion stage. The PRISMA presentation consequently reports only the documented figures and explicitly identifies the missing intermediate detail rather than reconstructing unsupported categories.

Third, the SDGs themselves are broad policy goals rather than a complete ethical theory. Their use in interpreting Leopold is therefore necessarily selective and does not imply that every element of the 2030 Agenda follows from the Land Ethic. Finally, the article is primarily conceptual; further research could test the proposed framework through case studies involving forests, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, or community-based natural-resource governance.

The philosophical significance of this reconstruction also lies in its rejection of a false separation between ecological and social questions. Environmental problems are experienced through human institutions, economic systems, communities, and patterns of vulnerability, while human well-being depends upon ecological conditions that cannot be treated as infinitely substitutable. The ethical challenge is therefore to develop forms of responsibility capable of recognizing both dimensions at once.

Seen in this way, Leopold's Land Ethic remains relevant not because it provides a ready-made solution to contemporary sustainability problems, but because it changes the starting point of environmental reflection. Instead of asking only how nature can serve present human purposes, it

asks what it means for human beings to belong to an ecological community. The SDGs can extend this question into contemporary concerns about poverty, inequality, climate change, biodiversity, participation, and institutional responsibility.

6. Conclusion

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic remains philosophically significant because it challenges the idea that human beings stand outside the ecological community. Its conception of humans as members and citizens of a biotic community broadens environmental ethics beyond a purely anthropocentric framework (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). The principle of preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community further establishes ecological condition as an object of ethical concern (Leopold, 1949, pp. 224–225). The analysis in this article shows that the Land Ethic can be productively placed in dialogue with the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 15 provides a direct connection with terrestrial ecological protection, while SDGs 13, 1, 8, 10, and 16 extend the analysis to climate responsibility, poverty, livelihoods, inequality, participation, justice, and accountable institutions. These connections do not establish that Leopold's philosophy and the SDGs are identical. Rather, they show how Leopold's ecological insight can be reconstructed within a contemporary framework of sustainable development. The resulting interpretation is pluralistic and relational. Ecological integrity should not be treated as a reason to disregard human dignity, just as human development should not be pursued by ignoring ecological limits. Sustainable development requires attention to both dimensions and to the relationships between them. In this sense, the SDGs provide a useful contemporary vocabulary for extending Leopold's concern for the biotic community into questions of social justice, human well-being, institutional responsibility, and intergenerational ethics.

The principal contribution of the article is therefore conceptual: it proposes that Leopold's Land Ethic can be understood as a resource for an integrated environmental ethic in which ecological responsibility and social justice are mutually considered. Further philosophical work can deepen this interpretation by examining particular conservation conflicts, local community participation, and the relationship between ecological indicators and normative judgments. Such work would strengthen the dialogue between environmental ethics and the practical aspirations of sustainable development.

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