

A Deeper Appreciation

FW101L Reflective Essay & Rajendra Scholarship
Submission

By: Steve Gurney

12/6/2015

Considered by many as the father of wildlife management and father of the United States' wilderness system, Aldo Leopold was a big conservationist and philosopher from an ecological standpoint. He put a great emphasis on human ethics because ethics are viewed as the root to how and why we value certain things; and our actions reflect those values. His philosophy stated that "the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land...a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." This man was way ahead of his time and his words resonate deeply with me and coincide with my personal beliefs. His work is becoming even more relevant in society today with the global population growing exponentially and the negative impacts it's having on the environment. Solving global environmental challenges in the 21st century will require more people to embrace Aldo Leopold's way of thinking and ethics. I believe that Rachana Rajendra was one of those people, and like Aldo Leopold, she is someone that I admire and aspire to be like. She was an intelligent, inspirational leader who was also a nature lover and conservationist; and what a better way to honor and perpetuate her legacy than with a 78-acre natural area and bird sanctuary named in her honor? I cannot think of a more honorable thing than having a nature preserve named after you. The Baker Woodlot & Rachana Rajendra Neotropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary is a beautiful place where I was able to learn, explore, and reflect; it was here on the woodlot's winding trails where I took my first steps towards fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for the natural world.

Last year I worked as a volunteer intern at The Leslie Science and Nature Center of Ann Arbor (LSNC). The nature center is a non-profit organization that provides environmental education for children, families, and other individuals by fostering understanding, appreciation, stewardship, and respect for the natural world. The position I filled was the Wildlife Curator Internship where I worked hand and hand with the very friendly and professional LSNC team. My day to day tasks varied but I often found myself preparing meals for the animals and going groceries shopping when their food supplies ran low. I also did a large amount of handling of the captive animals including, but not limited to, reptiles, native birds of prey, arachnids, insects, amphibians, and small mammals for use in education. My favorite part of my experience at LSNC was when I got to work with the public. It was my job to educate a variety of age groups in topic areas related to Leslie Science & Nature Center's programming and environmental education. I loved the opportunity to interpret the natural history of various species of wildlife and ecosystems at the Leslie Science & Nature Center, Ann Arbor's Hands on Museum, and at the University of Michigan's Natural History Museum; I really enjoyed working at these places and felt privileged to do so. My favorite outreach program we did was "Walking Down a Food Chain" where I was able to work intimately with birds of prey and discuss how everything in nature is connected and teach about the delicate balance between it all. It's like the John Muir quote says at the entrance to the woodlot, "When we try to pick anything out by itself, we find that it is hitched to everything else in the universe." It was while working here at LSNC where I learned that the majority of neotropical migrant birds were songbirds but some of the raptors we worked with, like the broad-winged hawk, were neotropical migrant birds too. Actually, there are 386 bird species defined as neotropical migrants according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; many of which are endangered or threatened (Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation

Act). Birds that migrate across the continent to the tropics of Mexico, West Indies, Central and South America are known as neotropical migrants (Bider, 1998). Whether these birds are birds of prey, consumers of insects, seed dispersers, or flower pollinators, they play a major role in the health and function of the ecosystem and if their numbers decline so will our quality of life. Some of these birds travel thousands of miles and come across many threats along the way. The woodlot is prime real estate for trees, vegetation, food, water and shelter and a stepping stone in the journey south for some of these neotropical migratory birds.

It is my passion and desire to live a fulfilling life dedicated to conservation that landed me here on the beautiful campus of Michigan State University (MSU). The life story of Rachana tells a story of a bird lover who lived a life of passion and its people like her who inspire people like me to live life to the fullest. From the banks of the Red Cedar River to the botanical gardens, Michigan State University's campus is engulfed with the beauty of the natural world. In my opinion there is no comparison to the beauty displayed within the woodlot. Like migratory birds that momentarily stop by, my fisheries and wildlife class stopped by the woodlot one morning for an outdoor lab experience. We were able to connect classroom learning with a hands-on experience. Actually it was better than a hands-on experience; we encompassed all five senses in our studies. We visually examined leaves and their modes of attachment, venation, and structure in order to identify the trees that they fell from. We picked wild ginger, smelt the spicy scent produced by the root and some of us even tasted it! We dove our hands into the soil and identified soil types by texture and made the connection that the soil is the foundation of life here. Finally we took a couple minutes standing under a giant cottonwood tree where the whole class sat in complete silence and just took a moment to listen to all the birds; we could hear the sound of warblers singing their songs, a crow caw echoing through the landscape, some curious

chickadees chirping overhead, and a woodpecker pecking off in the distance. Living in an era where people are becoming more and more connected to electronics and less connected to the environment, I find this “five senses” style of teaching by Dr. Hayes crucial to personal development because how can someone truly respect something if they haven’t truly had a personal connection with it? I learned so many cool things that day and I truly felt one with the earth and all it has to offer. This experience set the stage for a really amazing semester here and throughout the semester I witnessed my classmates and myself grow more environmentally conscious.

The university has students from all over the world with different ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and religions. Like the diverse birds that flock here, students are bonded by a common interest. Nature has a profound effect on people; it seems to unify them with one another and with themselves. It is this particular effect that drives man’s ageless urge to explore the world. Upon entering the woodlot we are able to step out of our world and into another world full of life. I found myself exploring here one afternoon to recap on everything my field lab learned and to discover some new things for myself. With eyes on the forest’s floor you can spot some Virginia creeper, doll’s eye, jack in the pulpit, or maybe even some jewelweed growing amongst the vegetation. Walking down the winding trails you find yourself looking up at sugar maples, elm, ash, witch hazel, basswood, and tulip trees. Over Thanksgiving dinner my father shared these wise words from Nobel Prize winner Hermann Hess, “Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.” While out here in the woods, this designated natural area reminds me who I am in the scheme of things. Nature has, and always will be my place of sanctuary; it is the home to many plants and

animals yet I feel at home here as well. Many animals like migratory birds find this speck of green on a map in seek of refuge and sanctuary from the human world and from predators. Here they can find plenty of food and water as well as find shelter from their dangerous world and rest up. The woodlot sanctuary embodies the true essence of nature and of birds, both of which Rachana loved deeply. Humans and animals alike are very fortunate to have a place like this in East Lansing. My mother always referred to our back porch as her sanctuary where she always kept it decked it out with palms, flowers, a fire pit, and bird feeders in the distance. She always told me that it was important to have a place of sanctuary, a peaceful place where life sits still- a place where we can escape from our hectic lifestyles. While exploring this sanctuary it allows me to get closer to nature and it allows me to take a moment to meditate and reflect on my own life.

My interest in nature and wildlife started at a very early age and my passion for the outdoors continues to drive who I am today. I grew up way out in the countryside down a dirt road lined with cornfields and I spent most of my free time exploring the forests and the fields that surrounded me; nature was my place of sanctuary. Unfortunately somewhere along the way in my isolated small-town upbringing I developed a biased and negative opinion that nature is virtually nonexistent in the urban landscape and I've always overlooked it until the day my fisheries and wildlife had a field lab at the woodlot. Going to college I found myself distanced from the countryside which I've grown to love so much and I was spending more time in an urban landscape. I found myself missing that interconnectedness I had with nature and feeling overwhelmed with my workload at school and cornered in the big city. That morning I spent with my class in woodlot a larger picture was beautifully painted before my very eyes, what I was missing so much was right in front of me all along. That day I grew a much deeper appreciation for biodiversity in urban landscapes. Nature has a remarkable ability to thrive no

matter what the circumstance. The woodlot's history shows that it has gone through minor clearcutting, mature tree removals, and even fire but it still continues to persevere today and provide life support for many species. Like the woodlot that continues to grow in time, so does my appreciation and respect for the natural world. I really came to understand how fragile animals and ecosystems really are and how sensitive they are to human interactions. It is our responsibility to respect the fact that each species, whether plants or animals, is here on Earth for a reason and each species serves a purpose in balancing the ecosystem. Rachana in Sanskrit language means "creation" and I walked away from the woodlot with the creation of a new outlook on the natural world. When I returned to the Woodlot alone I reflected on my new perspective on biodiversity in urban landscapes and decided that natural areas like this serve as a reminder why we fight for the conservation and management of natural resources.

As a society, we are just now beginning to realize the depth of Aldo Leopold's work and thinking and as a society we must work to protect and preserve the health of Leopold's expanded definition of a community- collectively the soils, waters, plants, and animals. The woodlot is a great sanctuary for humans and animals alike. In my recent visits here I found myself learning, exploring, and reflecting which in return resulted in my personal growth. It was here where I grew closer with nature and with myself. The woodlot also greatly benefits neotropical migratory birds serving as a refuge and life support along their journey. Whether it's the diverse peoples passing through or the species who inhabit the woodlot, we are all very lucky to have a place like this. Rachana's character represents who I strive to be as a person and her values coincide with why I am pursuing a career in conservation. Her character is embodied in the principles that the wooded sanctuary represent. Her values continue to manifest those who step foot here and those values continue to impact whoever takes a stroll through the trails as it did for me. While

working at the nature center I taught and promoted the appreciation for the natural world and I thought I knew all there was to understanding this concept. However, I walked away from the woodlot with a better head on my shoulders and deeper appreciation for the environment that proves to be ever-growing. Take a stroll for yourself and you will see that everything in this woodlot is connected to nature...and to you.

Work Cited

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