



White Mountain Conservation League

Proposed “Fierce Green Fire” Trail

Background

In 1909 Aldo Leopold started his career here on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. Leopold would go on to be one of the most influential voices in the 20th century environmental movement. His collection of essays *A Sand County Almanac* has inspired generations of conservationists. One of the most moving essays in the *Almanac* is “Thinking Like a Mountain.” In this essay Leopold recounts the killing of a wolf and how the death became a transformational moment in his life. Despite being published over 60 years ago, the essay remains influential. A Google search using the term “fierce green fire” yields over 600,000 internet hits. Despite the incident’s influence, until recently, questions remained about whether or not it ever took place.

This fall, a team of Leopold scholars and filmmakers, with former wilderness ranger Don Hoffman as their guide, used letters, descriptions from the essay, and other documents to locate where the incident took place. This historic discovery developed as a series of previously missing letters were found earlier in the year. We now believe that the shooting of the wolf occurred in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest along the Black River, just above where Bear Creek enters the river.

In his essay Leopold portrayed the event as being a transformational moment in his life. However we know that the transformation actually occurred over a longer period of time. The incident itself is almost an aside in the 1909 letter. Over 15 years after the incident, Leopold was still calling for the eradication of all “varmints,” including wolves. Leopold was raised believing that predators needed to be eradicated because they reduced the number of game species such as deer. After years of observation, Leopold the scientist abandoned this belief realizing that top predators act as a critical balancing force in ecosystems. Over the years, Leopold observed what happened when wolves were removed from the environment. He saw that the removal of predators resulted in the explosive growth in deer populations in the Gila Mountains, the North Kaibab plateau, and northern Wisconsin. These periods of growth were followed by over browsing and eventual mass starvation of deer populations. In trips that Leopold took in 1934 and 1935 to the Rio Gavilan in northern Mexico, he observed that predators and deer lived in a balance that was missing from places where wolves had been exterminated. His “Thinking Like a Mountain” essay is actually an apology for the hand he had in exterminating wolves from the wild.

Proposal

The White Mountain Conservation League proposes to partner with the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest to create an interpretive trail that would commemorate Aldo Leopold and the reintroduction of wolves into the environment. Using Leopold's own words, the trail will help educate the public into the true history of Leopold's transformation as well as the reason why wolf reintroduction is important to the health of the environment. We also propose an interpretive overlook on the east rim rock just north of the junction of FR 26 and FR 24 (see blue route on map). This would provide an easily accessible interpretive opportunity for non-hikers.

The White Mountain Conservation League will work with the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest to design, create, and maintain the trail and overlook. We will help to secure funding for the project and publicize the trail once it is created.

Examples of Interpretive Signage

Below are some examples of the types of interpretive signage that might be used along the trail. These signs are being used along the Aldo Leopold Forest Trail in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Similar signs would be placed along the proposed Fierce Green Fire trail. The signs used along the trail would tell the story of Leopold's transformation from predator killer to protector as well as why predators are important component of a healthy environment.



Trail Description

The proposed trail will use existing trails along with new additions to take hikers on a trip that explores where the Fierce Green Fire died. The trail will start from the existing Bear Creek Trailhead (See map on following page. Existing trail appears in black while new trail sections appear in green. The red oval marks the location where shooting took place.) We propose expanding the existing trailhead kiosk to include information on Leopold, the “Thinking Like a Mountain” essay, and the reintroduction of wolves into the Southwest. Using the existing trail the route will descend to the Black River where it will meet with an existing trail that follows the Black. From here, a new trail will climb to the top of the rim rock on the north side of the river using a drainage just downstream from Bear Creek. The new trail will follow along the edge of the rim rock where Leopold stood shooting at the wolves on the river bank below. The trail will then descend to the river along a ridge to the east. Once at the river, the route will follow the existing trail along the river, past the point where the Leopold stood watching the “fierce green fire dying” in the wolf’s eyes, then back to the junction with the Bear Creek trail.

Trail Map

