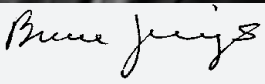
FROM THE
EDITOR



THE WISDOM OF CONSERVATION

TO BRING TOGETHER A DIVERSE GROUP of reflective, articulate thinkers and focus their vision and voices on an enduring theme is a fascinating publication project. Such a venture is not without risk; some attempts have been dreadful—how many compilations are there that might be entitled *Banalities of the Rich and Famous*? Occasionally, however, such collections succeed spectacularly. One nice example of this genre, a volume entitled *Living a Life of Value*, edited by Jason A. Merchley, came to my attention a few years ago. Recently, I have been immersed in the splendid new book, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, edited by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson. Run, don't walk, to your bookstore and read it, wrestle with it, take it to heart. If enough people do that, some dark times looming on the horizon of 2011 and beyond could be transformed. For despite the emphasis on ethics in its title and the monumental seriousness of its subject, much written in the essays of this book calls us to joy as well as to duty.

Moral Ground is one item in a set of resources that enables us to search for and recapture what may be called "the wisdom of conservation." I like to unpack that phrase in the following way: Wisdom is knowledge tempered with judgment, expertise chastened and humbled by experience. And conservation is the practice of world making and world tending, turning spaces into places. Temporally, conservation is a bridge between past, present, and future. It is a remembering of what has come before, a will to act in order to protect, preserve, and care in the here and now, and an imagining of the human and natural values to be realized by those who live after us.

The philosophy of nature and biology, the history of conservation science, policy, and practice, environmental theology, ethics, and aesthetics—together these fields comprise an intellectual tradition of profound importance. And in this tradition resides the wisdom of conservation, the moral ground that we seek. This issue of *Minding Nature* offers a number of perspectives and modes of exploring that tradition, using it meaningfully, perpetuating it.

Begin with our cover image, the logo for the new documentary film *Green Fire*. Despite Aldo Leopold's importance as a central figure in twentieth century conservationism and environmental ethics, there has not been a full-length documentary film exploring his life, philosophy, and legacy. That will change next year with the release of *Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and the Land Ethic in the 21st Century*, which is co-produced by the Center for Humans and Nature, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Aldo Leopold Foundation. Curt Meine, Director of Conservation Biology and History at the Center, serves as the on-screen "guide" and narrator for the film. *Green Fire* seeks to provide viewers with a basic historical biography of Aldo Leopold while simultaneously surveying the contemporary relevance and creative evolution of the conservation ethic that Leopold defined. The film is scheduled to premiere on February 5, 2011 at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. *Green Fire* will allow thousands of viewers to become ac-

BRUCE JENNINGS

FROM THE
EDITOR

quainted with the origins, evolution, and contemporary expressions of the land ethic, and to engage in the work of advancing it for the next generation.

While *Green Fire* was in production, The Center for Humans and Nature, in collaboration with the University of South Carolina and other groups, was also making a documentary film on the success of land trusts and conservation in the South Carolina lowcountry, entitled *Common Ground*. A leader of that effort, William Bailey, reflects on the adventures of making this film, the story it tells, and the extraordinary landscape and people that it celebrates.

In their essay, the co-editors of *Moral Ground*, Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, pose the unsettling question of whether another tradition of discourse, the Western tradition of moral philosophy, is serviceable at this present moment of peril. It may not be if it does not contain a sufficiently robust way of grounding the tremendous ethical obligations and imperatives that we now face. If a challenge is unprecedented, so, too, our conceptual understanding and motivation may have to be revised in order to meet it. Here the tradition and wisdom of conservation may provide the supplement and corrective that ethics needs.

Much the same theme was discussed at the recent Ethics of Sustainability forum that was inspired by *Moral Ground*. Gavin Van Horn discusses the highlights and themes of that conference and so returns to the series of questions raised by Moore and Nelson.

Writing on the occasion of the publication of the second edition of his classic biographical study of Aldo Leopold, Curt Meine reflects on the dynamism of the American conservation field since Leopold's time and during his own thirty-year career in the field. The tradition and wisdom of conservation are dynamic, not dogmatic. Conserving is not the same thing as conservatism; respecting tradition does not entail traditionalism.

In his essay on bioethics, Peter Whitehouse recalls Leopold's legacy in his own life and work and in his collaboration with Van Rensselaer Potter. The intersection between conservation and medicine-between environmental ethics and bioethics-illustrates another way in which the wisdom of conservation permeates the artificial boundaries between disciplines and professions.

Finally, Julianne Lutz Warren reminds us of the literary and utopian registers that have nourished the wisdom and ethics of conservation. In particular, she brings the inquiry into the domain of economic ideas, myths, and desires. Among other things that it does, economics is fundamentally about debt, what we borrow from the earth, and time. This is the time of reckoning, when debts come due.

Debts are coming due. How difficult it is to face up to this and to adjust to it in the American human economy of financial crisis and tenacious, outrageous, and dangerous unemployment? But consider how much more difficult it is going to be to face up to it in the natural economy of the planet. If ever our economics and our politics needed the wisdom of conservation, surely that time is now.

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