

Looking Foreword

If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering. – Aldo Leopold, Round River: From the Journals of Leo Aldopold



Looking out, a wide swath of the White River watershed pours out from a view atop the ridge. Buttery shades of Maple, deep-hues of Hemlock and Cedar, turrets of spruce all frame the river in countless forms and colors of photosynthesis – forming a picturesque postcard. Bear, wolves, bobcat, good diversity of birds have been observed down below, and ample trout and deer harvested on these 60 acres. Today, this view is up for sale.

Pictured above, looking down into the sparkling, green river valley, stands Warren Kehn. At 77, a veteran, retired engineer, and the one putting it up for sale. For 32 years he has hunted and fished, cut, split and heated his house with his woods, gardened and kept horses above the ridge. With grace and good humor, Kehn explained he is getting older and it is getting harder to live out here by himself. His property is located at the literal end of the road, as he describes “not far out of town, but by the river it feels like the wilderness”. Warren admits to me that he will miss this place. I can attest to his claim. In the valley’s silence, standing at the small clearing from the trail that snakes down from his house, it feels like you could be staring anywhere at any time.

Briskly walking, he tells me that gradually over time, he observed more and more unique flora and fauna, and became mesmerized by the muddy river and the wild characteristic of the land—that prompted him to explore protecting his land through a conservation easement. By restricting subdividing, and accessing parts of the property with motorized vehicles, the wild characteristic will persist for perpetuity through the land deed's legal prescription. In this time of transition, Kehn finds comfort in the easement's protection. He informed me he feels confident that the successor that purchases his land will appreciate it, because the easement “almost guarantees it”, working to filter-out buyers that would change the land dramatically.

Every deer season while living on the White River, the homemade deer stand would be erected facing the river from the scenic lookout. Every year, Warren has filled his freezer with venison off his own land from that spot. When waiting for a deer, he would watch the cool, sparkling river and enjoy last of the fall colors. After dressing the deer, he would carry it out on a Toboggan, up the hill, back home through the snow. By the time we had traversed back to his home, he had shared with me many stories of wolves, building, and listening—how he established a deep relationship with his land—looking forward, he hopes to gift his successor this relationship.

The thought of another person beginning a relationship with his woods and waters excites him. He sees the transition as an opportunity for another person, not a loss for him. Kehn tells me he is worried by the lacking of deep relationships between landowners and their property. As our conversation gains excitement, he shared a vision: one that where ecological issues such as climate change and unsustainable resource use are rooted in the absence of these relationships with private land, and without them, “these issues will not be addressed.” Together, sitting in the house he and his late-wife built with their hands, he waxes poetic “people need to learn from the land, and every new relationship makes a difference”. The solemn and somewhat prophetic message was honest and struck a chord.

The transfer of a land deed to a successor is a critical focus for land trusts and especially a difficult process for landowner with private easements. Warren Kehn's grace and vision is an excellent example of the role that landowners play in conservation, and his experience might be helpful to others easement holders in his position or asking similar questions about the future. The web of stories he shared with me illustrates the resolve and forethought that comes with long term conservation, and perhaps how Aldo Leopold's “Land Ethic” lives on today in Wisconsin.

In 100 years, Kehn hopes the land remains similar as it is today, teeming with wildflowers, still a place where bear and deer roam the trails he cuts, and for it to remain as a resilient habitat for the unknown changes of climate change. Stressed in our conversation, was that humans to continue living on this land in the future, for people to continue to enrich this land with their own memories and experiences – and to not forget that living and observing a back forty is an act of conservation.

In particular, he has a hope that someone will sit and gaze out at the river on the bench at the lookout, or on one November after the first snow, someone will be in in a stand, along the river, listening to the Rivr watching for animals.

Sometimes conversations on the topic of stuffy file cabinets filled with notarized documents will provoke dire questions of the future environment, our legacy, and the profound consequences of not asking oneself the value of a simple view. The easement that exists on this land gives Warren Kehn's vision a probable chance.



As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.

- William Cronon