UNIT SUMMARY
This unit has been developed to guide students and instructors in a close reading of Aldo Leopold’s *Thinking like a Mountain*, an excerpt from his 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*. The text can be broken down into four sections of instruction and reflection on the part of students and their teachers.

Discussion of this piece could take 1-2 days. The extensive list of text-based questions is not meant to exhaustive nor mandatory. Obviously, each teacher will use the text and supplemental material as it fits her classroom and students.

SECTION 1  Narrative introduction to the wolf and the mountain (Paragraphs 1-2)

— Students silently read, then the teacher reads aloud the text of the first two paragraphs while students follow along
— Students translate into their own words the first and second paragraphs
— Students answer guiding questions regarding the first two paragraphs

SECTION 2  Leopold’s Personal, Youthful Encounter with the wolf (Paragraphs 3-5)

— Students are re-acquainted with the first two paragraphs of the essay
— Students rewrite selected text into their own words
— Students answer guiding questions regarding the paragraphs 3-5

SECTION 3  Leopold’s mature reflection on necessity of wolves (Paragraphs 6-7)

— Students translate selected text into their own words
— Students answer guiding questions regarding paragraphs 6-7

SECTION 4  Leopold’s broad claim about the wisdom of nature (Paragraph 8)

— Students trace the development of Leopold’s argument to its conclusion
— Students write a brief response to Leopold’s essay.
WRITING RESPONSES/DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Respond to a portion of Leopold’s text from the perspective of someone who sees the role of wolves differently than Leopold did. How might a rancher or more radical environmentalist characterize wolves or human obligation to the natural world?

2. Compare and contrast Leopold’s characterization of wolf management with today’s treatment of wolves in the West.

3. Leopold uses a powerful personal anecdote to establish his ethos and connect to his audience in this piece. Write your own powerful personal anecdote, something you might use as an introduction or evidence for an argument.

4. Identify 2-3 specific sensory images and write a brief piece describing how Leopold uses each to enhance his argument.

5. This essay identifies many different perspectives, that of the wolf, the hunter, the rancher, and ultimately the mountain. Leopold is challenging the reader to read landscape from the mountain’s perspective. What does that mean to you?

6. Based on the text, how would Aldo Leopold characterize the role of humans in the natural world?

7. Does the piece justify Leopold’s use of the Thoreau quote that “in wildness is the salvation of the world”?

8. Consider Leopold’s characterization of the hunter its contrast with the wolves. How does the specific text describing each shape the reader’s view of the encounter between them?

9. How does Leopold’s repeated use of lists help advance his argument?

10. Identify elements of Leopold’s argument that are not as well-supported as the rest of the text. Does he make any logical leaps or unfair claims in the piece?

11. At the end of the essay Leopold seems to be asking if complacency, or “safety,” will ultimately result in danger and that “wildness” is a type of reminder that people cannot, or perhaps even should not, try to control everything. Do you agree?

SUGGESTED SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS

Teachers may want to pair this excerpt with additional texts to generate more discussion and/or provide opportunities for writing and debate.

- A collection of excerpts about Leopold’s changing ideas on predators (attached).
- A.E. Houseman’s Loveliest of Trees and Mary TallMountain’s The Last Wolf (poems)
- Excerpts from Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring
LEOPOLD’S CHANGING IDEAS ON PREDATORS
(Excerpted from A Discussion Guide for A Sand County Almanac, a document produced by The Aldo Leopold Foundation in 2008)

The way Leopold thought about the role of predators on the landscape changed 180 degrees over the course of his career. Looking back at his writing, we can see that shift occurring:

1919
“The advisability of controlling vermin is plain common sense, which nobody will seriously question.”

1920
“It is going to take patience and money to catch the last wolf or lion in New Mexico. But the last one must be caught before the job can be called fully successful.”

1930
“No predatory species should be subjected to control. …Rare predatory species, or species of narrow distribution and exceptional biological interest or aesthetic value should not be subjected to control.”

1934
 “[In Germany] the culling function of predators seems to be universally recognized as a biotic necessity. Will this happy day come to America before, or after, our magnificent predators are gone?”

1939
“The fight over predator control is no mere conflict of interest between field-glass hunters and gun-hunters. It is a fight between those who see utility and beauty in the biota as a whole, and those who see utility and beauty only in pheasants and trout.”

-- A Discussion Guide for A Sand County Almanac

VOCABULARY FROM THE PIECE

gleaning  torrent  molder
contempt     wretched    dustbowl
adversities  meele     supple
objectively  score      requisite
bawl         impassable  dictum
decipher     extirpate  statesman
implicit     anaemic    perceived
tyro         desuetude
fording

10th Grade Close Reading Exemplar Document, HSD1
Thinking Like a Mountain

By Aldo Leopold (1949)

[1] A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world. Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings 1 to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.

[2] Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day. Even without sight or sound of wolf, it is implicit in a hundred small events: the midnight whinny of a pack horse, the rattle of rolling rocks, the bound of a fleeing deer, the way shadows lie under the spruces. Only the ineducable tyro 2 can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

[3] My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

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1 Gleanings: Grain or other produce that is gathered after a harvest
2 Tyro: A beginner or novice.

Section 1: Narrative Introduction
- Why does Leopold describe the call of the wolf as a “bawl” and an “outburst of wild defiant sorrow”?
- What is the rhetorical technique used in sentence 4 (to the deer...)? What does this list show about the nature of the wolf? Why does Leopold choose to have it progress from the natural to human world?
- Rewrite the last sentence of the paragraph, from the point of view of someone/thing other than the mountain.
- Identify places where Leopold uses alliteration in this paragraph and describe its function.
- What is the function of the term “wolf country”? What does it suggest about Leopold and his audience?
- Leopold uses the pronoun “it” throughout the paragraph. Why? And what does “it” refer to?

Section 2: Leopold’s Youthful Encounter
- Why does Leopold shift to a first person anecdote in this paragraph?
- Why does he say the river “elbowed” its way?
- Describe the impact of “it was a wolf.”
- How does Leopold characterize the wolf and her young? How do his language choices affect your perception of the animals?
In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic\(^3\) desuetude\(^4\), and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades. So also with cows. The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.

We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen.

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\(^3\) Anaemic: pale and sickly looking  
\(^4\) Desuetude: A state of disuse

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Section 3: Leopold's Mature Reflection

- Rewrite paragraph six in your own words.
- One of the most powerful elements of paragraph six is Leopold’s God and pruning shears metaphor. Write your own metaphor expressing the same idea.
- How and why does Leopold personify the mountain here?
- How does Leopold’s imagery generate an emotional response? What do mountains without wolves look like?
- Explain the cause and effect relationship Leopold describes between the absence of wolves and the health of the mountain.
- Leopold uses analogy to make his argument in paragraph seven. Identify these analogies and explain their purpose.
- Is the cause and effect relationship between the cowman and the dustbowl well-developed? Why or why not?
- Analyze Leopold’s metaphor of the future “washing” into the sea.”
- Why does Leopold repeatedly use the word “its” in paragraph seven?

Section 4: Broad Claim About Natural World
the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps is a requisite\(^5\) to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau’s dictum\(^6\): In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men.

- **Rewrite the third sentence of the paragraph in your own words.**
- **Leopold returns to his use of lists in the second sentence. Explain the way he uses the deer, the cowman, the statesman, and most of us?**
- **Why does Leopold argue that we all strive for “dullness”? What does that specific word suggest?**
- **What does Leopold mean when he refers to machines?**
- **Explain Leopold’s use of the saying by Thoreau. What does it mean and why does he include it?**
- **What does this last paragraph argue about the disconnect humans feel from nature? What does Leopold want his audience to understand at the close of the piece?**

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\(^5\) Requisite: A thing that is necessary for the achievement of a specified end

\(^6\) Dictum: A short statement that expresses a general truth or principle