



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Toward a *Food Ethic***

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**A**ldo Leopold’s *Land Ethic* is credited with defining a new relationship between people and nature and setting the stage for the modern conservation movement (Aldo Leopold Foundation, n.d.). Most simply stated: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong

when it tends otherwise” (Partridge, 1993, *The Land Ethic*, para. 10). Again, in the words of Leopold, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Aldo Leopold Foundation, n.d., para. 1). I believe we need a similar *Food Ethic* to guide the

**John Ikerd** is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri and received his BS, MS, and Ph.D. degrees in agricultural economics from the University of Missouri. He worked in private industry for a time and spent 30 years in various professorial positions at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri before retiring in 2000. Since retiring, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues related to sustainability with an emphasis on economics and agriculture. Ikerd is author of *Sustainable Capitalism; A Return to Common Sense; Small Farms Are Real Farms; Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture; A Revolution of the Middle; and The Essentials of Economic Sustainability*. More background and selected writings are at <http://johnikerd.com> and <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj>

Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 30 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.

modern sustainable agriculture movement.

Some may question the need for a new food ethic. There is already an interdisciplinary field of study called “food ethics” that “provides ethical analysis and guidance for human conduct in the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food” (Peeler, 2015, para. 2). The Catholic Rural Life program has long reminded us that “Eating is a Moral Act,” noting that, “We say this simply because food sustains life. But the world of agriculture is extremely complex and there are many moral dimensions to it” (Catholic Rural Life, 2012, para. 1). The idea of a food ethic also is a common sentiment among Native Peoples. Ethical eating certainly is not new idea.

Perhaps somewhere in all that has been written about the intersection of food and ethics there is a statement similar to Leopold’s Land Ethic. In response to those who might ask, “Why try and reinvent the wheel?” I suspect the person who invented the wheel was criticized for trying to reinvent the sled. A new Food Ethic is needed to guide the sustainable agriculture movement in the way Leopold’s Land Ethic has guided the conservation movement.

In the style of Leopold, I propose a Food Ethic that says: *Food is good when it nourishes the life and health of the eater, honors the sacrifice of life embodied in the eaten, and respects the purpose and inherent worth of all beings.* Food is bad when it does otherwise. I believe the ultimate success of the sustainability movement depends on our willingness to begin labeling intentional acts as either “good” or “bad,” as Leopold labeled acts as “right” or “wrong” in his land ethic.

“Good food” nourishes the life and health of those who eat it. Again in the style of Leopold, I would put forth, *That food is life’s energy, is a basic concept of sustainability, but that food is to be respected, honored, and loved is an extension of ethics.* Since life is sacred, food is sacred; but good food is about more

than just sustaining life. If food sustains life without promoting good health and quality of life, it is not “good food.”

A food ethic must also respect, honor, and love the eaten as well as the eater. Eating inevitably involves the act of killing or at least eating something that was once living or could have sustained the life of some other being. All biological beings, including humans, get their life’s energy from other

biological beings, typically from the dead carcasses of other once-living beings. Carnivores, vegetarian, and vegans all participate in acts of killing.

We are more sensitive to the sacrifice of life and suffering by the eaten when we kill and eat things that are more like us—particularly sentient animals. Thus the phrase “eating is murder” is more commonly associated with eating meat. However, most vegetables were alive when they were “harvested.” Most fruits, grains, and seeds

were embryos with the potential for new life until they were eaten. The milk of a cow could have nourished a calf. Anything we eat deprives some other living thing of a potential source of food and thus life.

The deprivation of life is an essential aspect of sustaining life. A food ethic must accept and respect this fact by honoring the sacrifice of life embodied in the eaten. This sacrifice includes not only the life represented by the food itself, but the sacrifice of everyone and every living thing involved in the process of producing the food. The sacrifice includes the exploitation or mistreatment of farmers and food industry workers, the degradation and destruction of natural ecosystems, and the deprivation of future generations of their basic human right to good food. A food ethic must respect and honor the goodness of all life—it must reflect a love of life.

Following once more from Leopold, *A food ethic, then, reflects the existence of an integral consciousness,*

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and this in turn inspires the conviction of individuals to treat eating as an ethical act. A food ethic ultimately connects the act of eating with the health and well-being of all other living and nonliving aspects of the integral, universal whole. It goes beyond an ecological consciousness to include the social, economic, and spiritual dimension of the universal whole.

The food ethic acknowledges our common sense of the existence of purpose in life. Without purpose there is no way to distinguish *right* from *wrong* in our relationship with the land or *good* from *bad* in our relationship with food. Ethics presume purpose. The new food ethic accepts that life, including human life, has some purpose to fulfill within the integral whole of reality. Obviously, the purpose for all living things includes the purpose of providing food for other living things. I suspect dead human bodies were meant to provide food for decomposers rather than dry out in sealed vaults or be cremated.

Since there is no possible means of determining that some beings are of greater or lesser inherent worth than others, the new food ethic accepts that all beings are of equal inherent worth. The purpose of no individual being, human or otherwise, is no more or less important than any other being in contributing to the purpose of the universal whole. Thus, ethical eating is not a matter of avoiding foods that involve the sacrifice of life but instead of honoring the purpose and inherent worth of the eaten as well as the eater.

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Both unnecessary cruelty to food animals and a failure to respect the life of vegetative foods violate the food ethic. Killing or harvesting beings whose purpose is to provide food for other beings, including humans, does not. The key to ethical eating is to choose foods that allow every entity involved in the process—living and nonliving—to fulfill its unique purposes within the universal whole. Some part of the inherent worth of each living being is its ability to provide food for other living beings. When my purpose for living has been fulfilled, I personally would prefer to enhance my remaining worth by being *composted*.

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