Tiffany Mountain is a panoramic setting for unfolding change. Glaciers shaped this landscape over 10,000 years ago, carving the north-facing cirques, and hollowing out the depression now filled by Tiffany Lake. Ice flowed around, between, and over many of the surrounding peaks, but Tiffany may be a nunatak, a geological term describing a mountain peak that protruded above an ice sheet.

The climate warmed and the glaciers receded. Plants colonized the newly exposed earth, eventually leading to the diverse communities on the mountain today. Tiffany hosts uncommon plants and animals that are typically found in forests far to the north, including boreal owls, boreal chickadees, Canada lynx, and Kotzebue's grass-of-Parnassus.

In the deep, moist soils by Tiffany Lake, riotous wildflowers thrive under canopies of Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and Douglas-fir. Higher up the slope, whitebark pine and subalpine larch survive harsher conditions, while at the top, thin soils drain water quickly, and trees are left behind. Plants in this alpine zone hug the rocky soil, grow in clusters, or cloak their leaves with hairs to survive cold, desiccating winds.

At this moment, Tiffany and the surrounding peaks are alpine islands in a sea of coniferous forest, but change is ever present. Spruce beetle and mountain pine beetle are killing vast stands of Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine. Fire, as natural to this landscape as the trees themselves, could come with a lightning strike.

What will happen over the ages? If the climate cools, the treeline could slip down the mountain; if it grows warm, the forest could replace the alpine community. Time will tell, and for eons to come, Tiffany Mountain will be listening.













Aldo Leopold





