

Conservation

Alienated from nature we flock to it in such numbers that it is trampled in the process. Then again if we define nature as everything alien to us, how can we feel anything but alienated?
(Out of Eden: An Odyssey of Ecological invasion by Alan Burdick.)

In many cases we literally do not know how good a performance to expect of healthy land unless we have a wild area for comparison with sick ones.
(Aldo Leopold: Sand County Almanac.)

John Muir and Gifford Pinchot are well known names in the history of American forests and public lands. Each stands as an icon for a particular frame of thought about landscapes and the environment, their management and use. Looking through their eyes we gain insight into conservation and environmental protection as it stands today.

John Muir was a naturalist/writer who became known as a preservationist during the American Conservation Period (1850-1920). He and others helped establish not only Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and Yosemite National Park in 1890, but also the concept that one could and should afford a public natural area, the highest level of protection.

Having made a fortune through lumber and land speculation (parcels were purchased, the trees cut down and sold, and the land turned to agriculture), Gifford Pinchot's parents both witnessed and later mourned the awful destruction of forests in the East. In a sense they then dedicated their son to restoration of these landscapes, also endowing the Yale School of Forestry in 1900.

Pinchot, just graduated from Yale, devoted himself to developing a national forest policy. The term 'conservation' later came to the fore on his watch as first Chief of the United States Forest Service. Producing significant life achievements in terms of landscape protection, Muir and Pinchot however had what many believe to be very different values. Author Brian Norton suggests that it was simply their approach to science that was different ...

Pinchot thought science should be value-free; a utilitarian process aimed at production, while Muir saw science as a grand enterprise – the understanding of Man, Nature, and God. Muir resented the commercialization of nature while Pinchot put all his effort into forest management for profit. Pinchot professionalized the forestry industry, sought to conserve the core forests, selling off marginal stands to small companies for timber production while resisting the efforts of large powerful companies to gain control of the forests. In this sense he stood between private enterprise and preservationists.

Muir was a scientist not in the rising tradition of resource management, as Pinchot was, but rather in the older tradition of naturalists, writers and painters. These were a less specialized tradition; one traced back to the relationships between field naturalists and nature artists in the nineteenth century. But they combined to create an ethic based upon scientific and aesthetic attitudes.

Muir's science valued species and landscapes as links in a great chain, while Pinchot's science valued individual specimens for production. Muir's outlook rested in a rich unsystematic worldview, one that embraced all of human-utilitarian, spiritual and

human-independent moral values in nature (Norton, 35). Pinchot thought science should be without values. This is not to say that he did not enjoy a strong sense of natural aesthetics and outdoor values. He loved hunting, fishing and camping and deeply resented the destruction of Giant Sequoias for little more than vine stake production. He was not opposed to the moral concerns of Muir, but it seems these were his personal values, not to be applied in the broader ethic of a professional science. On this point he was at great odds with Muir.

Muir by his willingness to mix religion, aesthetics, and science, represented a dying tradition, one that was swept away by a reductionist, value-free approach. Pinchot embraced the latter more fully. Production goals were important to Pinchot and he saw his role as one of developing both resources and a market for people.

These two worldviews remain at the heart of much of today's environmental conflict.

Although Pinchot was opposed to preservationists, later developments revealed where his heart lay. When his Region 1 Forester (in charge of 41 million acres across four western states) began clear-cut removal of large swathes of forest in the name of fire suppression, selling the timber off to powerful corporations, Pinchot wrote that it "Tore his heart out," entering in his diary, "So this is what saving the trees is all about."

As Norton says, Pinchot could have been Minister of Wise Use while Muir could have been Minister of Aesthetic Appreciation.

Conservation to this day requires a continual balance of these two approaches. One man working in the Forest Service was destined to travel a path from Pinchot's line of thought to Muir's, in the process perhaps exemplifying union of the two. His name was Aldo Leopold.

Born to a comfortable life, Leopold's interests in hunting and ornithology led him toward an outdoor profession in the US Forest Service. He started out as a Forest Manager in 1908 in the utilitarianism of Pinchot and associated conservationism. But in time he began to connect with the emerging import of the ecological sciences. Leopold then writes about an incident in which he was impacted by the life fading from the eyes of a mother wolf he had shot. The realization that predators are not worthless, but of value, grew in him and he began to see them as an important and equal part of the whole.

By 1933 Leopold was a Wildlife Management Professor, telling students that the idea of "good" or "bad" species was the product of a human-focused, utilitarian bias. He came to share a more organic concept, seeing species functioning like organs in a body. He realized that in his predator-extermination days he had not taken what he came to know as "the wider view." A paper only published in 1979 but written in 1923 reveals that by then he was beginning to refer to conservation as a moral issue.

When Leopold wrote again, it was mostly about the ethical dimension of conservation, now more as an ecologist than a philosopher and theologian. (Leopold briefly wrote in terms such as Muir used: "It is just barely possible that God himself likes to hear birds sing and see flowers grow.") But he never strayed from the border between science and philosophy, using them to reinforce each other, the latter providing a touch of focus when the former lost sight of the broader picture.

Leopold therefore became known proposing the extension of ethics to that which did not yet benefit from them. When he wrote the well-known Sand County Almanac, he sought to develop a Land Ethic in which humans change from conqueror of the land-community to citizen of it.

At its core, Leopold's Land Ethic held that:

1. While humans are part of the "biotic team", they are also more technologically able to affect nature – thus also being set apart from nature.
2. As it became more powerful, human civilization increasingly needed a land ethic.
3. As concept of right and wrong exists between humans, so it should exist between mankind and the earth.
4. The land needed a hand to survive the increasing impact of mechanized man.

The conservation/preservation/utilitarian/science struggles described above were not unique to America. Twice the size of Yellowstone, when South Africa's Kruger National Park was established early in the twentieth century, its Warden wrote to Yellowstone's Superintendent, asking for brochures of the park. Tourism was an untested concept in South Africa and the Warden had heard about tourism development in Yellowstone. But when the brochures arrived and the Warden read, "Yellowstone—Playground for the People," he wrote in his diary that Kruger would not become that, but would be "A preserve for wildlife to which people were admitted."

Forty years later, US National Parks were still struggling to introduce scientific research as a priority, but Kruger was leading the field. This it seems had its own downside – it was noted that the wonder experienced by early rangers was lost in the quest for information. No longer was the footprint of a rhino compared in awe to the size of a man's boot—it had simply been reduced to another check mark on a data sheet.

Where does conservation stand today? The national parks still afford the highest protection to public lands and they provide an outstanding array of education, research and protection, but over the years the agency has come under criticism for its damaging development policies, much related to accommodation and tourism. The Forest Service in turn has developed educational, scientific and conservation programs, yet accepts land degradation and abuse, or excessive and unprofitable resource extraction in many areas.

These can be the result of budget challenges. Responsible for fire protection along hundreds of miles of borders with densely populated Southern California suburbs, Los Padres Forest managers are sometimes forced into a tight corner when balancing options. It's easy to discuss what should be done, but an entirely different matter if you are the one who has to do it with limited finances.

The solution is to focus on what can be done, and to be sure that the necessary outcomes are achieved. Los Padres National Forest for example cannot patrol all areas in which OHV recreation is practiced, so it makes sense that they should not increase roads leading into the forests for OHV recreation.

Answers to the challenge of competing worldviews and limited budget are developing. Through trial and error, growth of both technology and understanding, and by adaptive management, a best-case scenario has begun to take shape in parts of the world. In the process has come quite by accident to combine the views of Muir, Pinchot and Leopold, applying each in the best way, as opportunity allows, while working toward a common good.

Read more in the [Three Types of Conservation link](#).