Pinchot's political sophistication and networking skills helped him establish a powerful coalition in support of the emerging conservation movement that pushed for federal management of natural resources and attendant social problems. That Theodore Roosevelt was president didn't hurt, either, for he spearheaded a host of legislative initiatives to expand federal management of forests, parks, refuges and grasslands. One of Roosevelt's decisions that firmly rooted conservation in public policy was the 1905 creation of the U.S. Forest Service, with Pinchot as its first chief.

The new Chief's impassioned enthusiasm boosted the President's conservation agenda even as it increased the reliance upon an elite corps of experts. Although Pinchot and other Progressives believed that national regulation of resources would ensure their equitable distribution, corporate control of land, water, and forests increased during this age of reform.

These were not the outcomes Pinchot desired and he lost his job in part because he fought against them. In 1910, President Taft dismissed Pinchot for insubordination when the chief forester called out the administration during the Ballinger-Pinchot affair, which revolved around differing interpretations of the executive branch's management of natural resources. Pinchot was convinced that Taft sided with "every predatory interest seeking to gobble up natural resources or otherwise oppress the people" while the forester sought to construct a nation "with equal opportunity for all and special privilege for none."

Beginning in the late 1910s, Pinchot began to examine alternative responses to the problems confronting the conservation movement. This examination, which his wife, feminist Cornelia Bryce Pinchot encouraged, led him to enlarge the scope of his beliefs, ushering in something he began to call the "new conservationism."

What made it new was its emphasis on the protection and preservation of human life, a focus that emerged in his strict enforcement of prohibition during his first term as Governor of Pennsylvania (1913-1917) and his stout defense of workers' political rights. With his wife's fervent support—he touted her as his "administration's best contribution to the cause of workers on farm or factory, mill or mine"—Pinchot expanded his gubernatorial agenda to include equal pay for women, regulation of sweatshops and child labor, and the defense of unions.

The Depression accelerated his political experimentation. In an attempt to relieve unemployment during his second term (1935-37), Governor Pinchot set up emergency work relief camps throughout the Keystone State. Not only were hundreds of miles of roads laid down, but the workers themselves were reportedly transformed by their labor and the money they earned from it. This initiative served as an example to Franklin Roosevelt, whose Civilian Conservation Corps was based in part on the Pennsylvania model. That Pinchot seemed a step ahead of the New Deal led his friend and fellow forester Bob Marshall to hope he might go even further. "What a splendid service he might do if during the final two years of public life he would step out completely and heedlessly as a thoroughgoing socialist."

Pinchot never did, but perspectives had evolved beyond the utilitarian principles of forestry most closely associated with his name. A forest, he acknowledged in 1925, is "a living society of living beings, with many of the qualities of societies of men." This ecological image compelled him to reassess the forester's job, proudly reporting that the Pennsylvania Forest Commission he once headed had stopped the sale of the "last large body of hardwoods in the possession of the state," and had done so because the "State's money should be used to protect and not destroy the State Forests." This syban space would have a remarkable impact on the human psyche: "The spiritual value of loving them and being with them is beyond counting."

Gifford Pinchot was reasserting a reverence for Nature that many years before had compelled him to slip out of camp in the morning "to guard the integrity of these public lands and was vigilant to every detail of their defense—as we should be. Through the institutions he founded and his extensive contributions to the science, policy, and ethics of forest management, Gifford Pinchot's legacy is written into these very woods he loved.