



Gifford Pinchot

1865-1946

He was the founding Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, launched the Society of American Foresters, and, with his parents, underwrote the establishment of the Yale Forest School, America's first graduate-level forestry program. He is called the "Father of American Forestry" for good reason: few others have had as profound an impact on forestry and conservation as Gifford Pinchot.

Born in 1865 to James and Mary Eno Pinchot, Gifford grew up in one of the elite mercantile families of New York City. His future occupation as a public servant was not typical of this moneyed environment. But his parents were determined that their first son not continue the family's traditional pursuit of mammon.

This was especially true of James Pinchot, whose family was involved in the northeastern Pennsylvania timber industry. There, the Pinchots clear cut forests, formed the logs into rafts, and shipped them down snow-melt rivers in the spring to market. The family reinvested their profits in other timber stands, and the cycle was repeated.

The environmental consequences of this form of lumbering were considerable, yet it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that James Pinchot recognized the connection between his family's economic behavior and an ecosystem devoid of passenger pigeons, deer, and bear. The practice of forestry—as a science and an aesthetic—would restore the cut-over landscape, he believed, and he strongly advised his son Gifford to take up the profession just before he entered Yale in 1885.

Gifford took his father's advice, and in 1889 traveled to Europe, met with several eminent European foresters, and enrolled at L'Ecole Nationale Forestiere in Nancy, France where he gained a "concrete understanding of the forest as a crop" and forestry's emphasis on efficiency, rational planning, and scientific management. That Nature could be controlled through human stricture would feed easily into the Progressive ethos with which Pinchot would be so closely associated.

Achieving equity was also central to Pinchot's convictions. "For whose benefit shall [natural resources] be conserved," he argued, "for the benefit of the many, or for the use and profit of the few?" He was less insistent about the answer to this question when, upon his return to the United States in 1890, he became the forester on George W. Vanderbilt's lavish North Carolina estate, Biltmore. Although not a paragon of democratic virtue, Vanderbilt nonetheless gave Pinchot a remarkable opportunity to practice his craft and turn Biltmore into "the cradle of forestry."

Yet the profession really came of age under the federal government's auspices. The tiny Bureau of Forestry initially only gathered statistics and answered citizens' queries about harvesting private woodlots. Its third chief, Bernard E. Fernow, doubted the efficacy of wide-scale federal management and questioned the value of Pinchot's micro-level experiments at Biltmore. However, its focus changed when Pinchot became its head in 1898. The young forester immediately increased the bureau's budget, rapidly expanded its workforce, and generated reams of positive publicity.

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 irrepressible 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 (1923-1927) 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 (1931-35), 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 fearlessly 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 1920, 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 sylvan 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 with his friend John Muir to spend a star-filled night marveling at the grandeur of the Grand Canyon.

Pinchot's expansive concept of conservation caused consternation among his Forest Service colleagues in the Forest Service. In 1919, he publicly lambasted their increasingly tight links to the lumber industry. Six years later he blasted a 1926 grazing bill that then-Chief William B. Greeley had proposed, arguing that it was "obviously written from the point of view of protecting the special interests of a special group instead of protecting the interests of the general public."

His criticism intensified in the early 1930s. Distressed that the Society of American Foresters (SAF), which he had founded in 1900, was ignoring the devastation of the nation's forests, he rebuked it for its "spiritual decay." This critical commentary caught the eye of president-elect Franklin Roosevelt, who suggested Pinchot craft a memorandum for a new national forest policy. Drafted with the aid of fellow critics Bob Marshall and Raphael Zon, Pinchot's memo promoted a radical new approach to the forest management: predicated on the "large scale public acquisition of private forest lands."

Championing the cause of world peace became yet another crucial element of what Pinchot called "new conservationism." Certain that a third world war would result from the industrialized nations' hunger for natural resources, in 1940 he urged the creation of a United Nations-like agency to control resource exploitation, protect threatened species, and secure an enduring prosperity for all people. His vision of an international organization, founded on conservation principles, and devoted to the establishment of a just and permanent peace, has yet to be realized.

Much has been gained, though, as Pinchot's evolving career reveals. Thanks largely to Pinchot and his contemporaries, the United States has a national forest system encompassing 193 million acres. Equally impressive was his insight that these were public lands to be managed "for the greatest good, for the greatest number, in the long run." Pinchot was determined to guard the integrity of these public lands and was vigilant in 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.