

## Forestry and The Source

By Marianne Patinelli-Dubay

Mr. PINCHOT: [...] I think that the men who assert that it is better to leave a piece of natural scenery in its natural condition have rather the better of the argument, and I believe if we had nothing else to consider than the delight of a few men and women who would yearly go into Hetch Hetchy Valley, then it should be left in its natural condition. But the considerations on the other side of the question to my mind are simply overwhelming; and so much so that I have never been able to see that there was any reasonable argument against the use of this water supply by the city of San Francisco.

Mr. RAKER: Have you seen Mr. John Muir's criticism of the bill? You know him?

Mr. PINCHOT: Yes, sir; I know him very well. He is an old and a very good friend of mine. I have never been able to agree with him in his attitude toward the Sierras for the reason that my point of view has never appealed to him at all.

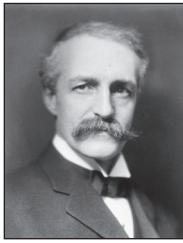
—From testimony on the Hetch Hetchy Dam to the House Committee on Public Lands, 1913.

Our cultural and personal origin stories are the authors of our lives. Each of us occupies a world animated by the traditions and beliefs that have been handed down, or that we over time have taken up. Whether by birth or by pilgrimage, our creed guides not just our interior life, but how we think about what we decide to do. Since forestry is in the doing, we are mostly, and correctly, concerned with how decisions land. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider, too, how the profession has been shaped by one ideology that shifted over time, leaving some tension in its wake.

A forester operates according to the established and emerging wisdom of the trade, and this knowledge is improved through insight into how wisdom traditions have both shaped the profession and given rise to its internal disagreements. We talk about this rift in secular language and, by failing to trace this schism back to its source, we remain like Sisyphus, condemned by Zeus to roll a boulder uphill for all eternity. It would be better to own that we are having a religious argument that has more to do with origins and emphasis than best practices.

### For the Good of the Land

Gifford Pinchot was a man of religious convictions dedicated to social welfare and reform, the common good, and self-reliance. His approach to forestry was informed by an interpretation of the relationship between man and world that puts responsibility for the earth in the hands of humankind. Stewardship, in this view, demands responsible, knowledgeable management that prioritizes the future health of the system for the bene-



Gifford Pinchot in 1909 during his service as the first Chief of the US Forest Service. Pirie MacDonald/Public Domain.

fit of civilization. The system is given in service to humanity, and humanity is obligated in service to the system. The relationship is reciprocal, hierarchical, ordered, and its origin is Christian.

Aldo Leopold eschewed an anthropocentric approach to the land and held that natural systems were deserving of ethical and aesthetic considerations equal to those granted to and between people. The natural world is alive for him much the way it was understood from First Nations to the ancient Greeks. For Leopold, forestry's highest purpose was the care and guardianship of the environment for its own sake first, and secondarily for the good of humankind. Here, the relationship is custodial, rhizomatic, egalitarian, and its emphasis is naturalistic.

Taken together, Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold represent the best of forest and ecosystems science, the high arc of philosophical ideals. Holding them in opposition, as we sometimes do, undermines the greatest good that both foresters sought to achieve. Understanding the evolution of any disharmony is a little like knowing a landscape, of being drawn into relationship and into sympathy with it in order to know how to treat it.

### Establishing the Holy Land

Ralph Waldo Emerson's early writing interpreted nature as the fingerprint of God: the divine was the source of the organic world. Over time he became disenchanted with what he saw as the material and clerical limits of his Christian religion, culminating in an 1838 address to the Harvard Divinity School that articulates his frustration and foreshadows his eventual turn away from the church. Around this time a subtle shift can be read in his writing that is consistent with his religious frustration; nature becomes animated with, rather than simply endowed by the divine spirit. Overemphasis on this way of reading Emerson overshadows his more complex philosophical approach to the subject of nature that includes commodity, beauty, and discipline. Yet despite the presence of these other themes, nature as ideal is emphasized by authors that follow him. As a result, the natural world in American literature that sets the stage for the wilderness movement is imagined as Godly rather than as given by God for human use. American philosophers and poets from Henry Thoreau to Walt Whitman to John Muir follow in this charismatic style.

The modern American environmental movement owes its success to a 19th century Wilderness ideal that grew up under the influence of philosophers like Emerson. Wilderness became a cultural touchstone in contrast with resource management and wise use in the tradition of Pinchot. Muir, too, is at the forefront of this artistic, philosophic, literary, and poetic composition evoking a heavenly wilderness that became a national ideal. This classical aesthetic was written into the popular imagination of the American west even as it had a practical

impact on legislation as far reaching as the New York State Constitutional Convention (1894) to create the six million-acre Adirondack Park. In one long gesture, the popularity of Nature with a capital "N" strategically enfolded the mood depicted by Hudson River School artists reaching from Emerson's *New England Nature* (1836) to Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911).

### Moving Management to the Fringes

This emphasis on sacred land began to influence how society would ultimately vote on environmental protections to repair denuded landscapes, a result of lumbering and deforestation in the time before Pinchot established forestry as the corrective standard. Grounded in the principles of national security and the need for thriving forests as standing reserves to ensure social welfare, Pinchot's approach ran consistently alongside this new cultural narrative of conservation as a moral imperative. Yet while the Wilderness aspirations of truth, beauty, abundance and spirituality dovetailed with the practical implications of Pinchot's new science; it nevertheless set the stage for a wild American dream that cast forest management out to the fringes as it moved pristine Nature to the center of moral concern.

Virgin nature as a national standard shares a historical moment with the advent of forestry advanced by Pinchot, yet despite a correspondence between the environmental movement and Pinchot's new forest science, a split occurred and a compelling story like the one we tell about American Wilderness to leverage conservation, has been set in opposition with wise-use and resource management forestry. What's worse, conservation as understood by Pinchot became the counterpoint to a later Leopoldian understanding that is often considered alongside the writing of Muir and his contemporaries. This occurred despite the fact that Pinchot and Leopold together are responsible for every good end that the profession has brought forth.

### The Rift and the Reconciliation

Pinchot's vision for American forestry is grounded in his commitment to Protestant social reform. He saw healthy forests and human flourishing as interdependent and in service to the public good, while Leopold advocated for a land ethic that uplifts the natural world declaring it valuable apart from human benefit. He eschewed the Christian worldview for its emphasis on societal drivers and resource extraction at the expense of the natural system. Leopold, like Muir and Emerson, maintained God as creator while shifting away from a personal God and a traditionally anthropocentric view, to an eco-centric one that enlarged the God concept beyond Christianity.

If all the elements of the natural world are imbued with value such that they have the status of being, it is a delicate matter to treat it in a functional or transactional way as Pinchot is known to have done. If the natural world is part and parcel of God,

rather than given by God for human use, then managing, altering, or killing it takes on moral significance. If, on the other hand, the environment is given as a material good, then wise use and management for the purpose of shared flourishing of the whole system is a sufficient calculation in order for thoughtful people to proceed.

These beliefs are fundamentally different and imperceptibly slippery as we travel out to the edge of one and find ourselves in the territory of the other. Practically speaking, no deep agreement among foresters between the world as a resource and the world as a resource with the status of being is necessary, provided agreement holds that our goal is biotic integrity and sustainability. Our move ought to be towards greater understanding and integration of the two stories into one complex whole: the establishment of forestry and forest science that takes social welfare through sound science as its guiding principle, and the preservation of a spiritual worldview that takes the natural world as its emanation.

*The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. The bird hastens to lay her egg; the egg hastens to be a bird. The wholeness we admire in the order of the world, is the result of infinite distribution. Its smoothness is the smoothness of the pitch of the cataract. Its permanence is a perpetual inchoation. Every natural fact is an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation.*

—From an oration delivered before the Society of the Adelphi by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Waterville College, Maine, 1841. **FS**

Marianne Patinelli-Dubay ([mpatinelli@esf.edu](mailto:mpatinelli@esf.edu)) leads the environmental philosophy program at the 15,000-acre Huntington Wildlife Forest, a property of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. In addition to teaching and writing, Patinelli-Dubay chairs the Adirondack Chapter of the Society of American Foresters and is a professional member of the Forest Stewards Guild; she serves on the Guild's Membership and Policy committee.

### Acknowledgements

This essay is dedicated to Steve Wilent with gratitude for his kindness towards a philosopher among foresters, for his willingness to enlarge the conversation accordingly and for his exceptional work as editor of *The Forestry Source*.

### Literature Cited

*Gifford Pinchot: Selected Writings*, edited by Char Miller, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.  
*The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, Modern Library, 2000.