

Another 100th anniversary, closely tied to ESF's Centennial

2011 provides the opportunity to recognize several natural resources conservation Centenaries. Coming from me, you will not be surprised to hear they apply to water. Viewed broadly, these milestones connect us to many individuals, the practice of forestry, the conservation movement, and the appearance of forestry schools all around the United States.

In addition to the 100th anniversary of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, about which we are hearing from others, 2011 is the anniversary of the passage by the United States Congress of the Weeks Forest Purchase Act (36 Stat 961, 1911). The primary purpose of the Weeks Act was to enable recovery of abandoned and cutover forest lands that were affected by the nation's accelerated forest usage in the 1800s.

The wording that validates the law's constitutionality is contained in its purpose, namely, "the purchase of forest lands necessary to the protection of the flow of navigable streams." Thus, the law's constitutionality was ensured by tying the management of forest land to the control of interstate commerce and, therefore, to interstate waters, clearly establishing federal responsibility for forests and, obviously, solid recognition of the importance of control over watersheds to ensure desirable stream conditions. Thus, legal and educational support of forestry was intimately linked to the water resource.

The act provided funds and a commission to carry out its primary provisions and it started an urgently needed cooperative fire prevention program that was to be expanded to the western states by the Clark McNary Act (43 Stat 653) in 1924. Another important provision of the Weeks Act was that it authorized – but did not create – enactment of interstate compacts for the conservation of forests and water supplies. That history is contained in a wonderful biography of Delphus E. Carpenter, the attorney who resolved the problem of never-ending – insoluble – litigation in favor of mediation resulting in interstate river basin compacts in the middle of the 20th century (*Silver Fox of the Rockies* by Daniel Tyler 2003).

Forests and water were further connected a century ago in the first major confrontation over concepts of the meaning of the word "conservation" between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Muir, the naturalist, sought to preserve a portion of the High Sierras known as Hetch-Hetchy, a valley adjacent to and every bit as spectacular as the Yosemite Valley, then preserved as a park. Pinchot sided with those who wished to see the valley dammed for a water supply for the city of San Francisco. That city had just suffered a disastrous earthquake and fire, and needed to reassure new and old settlers alike that theirs was a fire-safe city with ample water for domestic, municipal, and fire-fighting purposes, a handy – and appropriate – diversion¹.

Both resource champions claimed to be "conservationists." Pinchot, indeed, had coined the word "conservation" in 1907 to apply to the use of natural resources (Coyle 1957). Two interpretations were available: "preservation" and "wise use," the latter a short version of "a constant and sufficient supply of natural resources for human use" (Pinchot 1947). As an advisor to President Theodore Roosevelt and first head of the U.S. Forest Service, Pinchot commanded considerable political clout and, with the impetus of San Francisco's recent disaster and the favorable view of the exploitation that accompanied industrialization, the "wise use" conservationists prevailed. The Hetch-Hetchy was inundated.

The reaction was, in part, to create an organization that could accumulate and control the nation's treasured natural resources. Consequently, Congress created the National Park Service in the Department of the Interior in 1916. The whole concept of conservation is thus attributed to Theodore Roosevelt's administration and leadership. It is noteworthy that the word *conservation* has the same root as "conservative" which, in the 19th Century, has been associated with the Republican Party to which Roosevelt belonged. The word "conservation" is also associated with the Democratic Administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt who furthered – and exploited – the concept of conservation by creating federal conservation agencies and programs to help pull the nation out of the Great Depression. By then, the meaning of the word had changed, leaning more toward the concept of saving. It has changed and that will likely continue. Both political parties have legitimately laid claim to concepts of conservation!

I believe that in 1934 Harold G. Wilm (commissioner of the New York state Conservation Department, 1959-66) offered the first formal soil and water conservation course here. Called *Soil and Water Conservation*, it focused on types of soil erosion and how to control them, information now relegated to heavy-equipment operating standards and training. ESF's water resources courses grew into numerous state-of-the-art courses of study embracing subjects in biology, entomology, ecology, engineering, management, manufacturing, policy, and advanced computer sciences in both on-campus and outreach programs. Wilm returned and offered some courses briefly in the late 1960s.

I am fortunate to have played an active role in that development here since 1965 and I am delighted to help celebrate this landmark year with you. I am grateful, too, and wish all a Happy Anniversary and pleasant memories!

– *Peter E. Black*, Professor of Water and Related Land Resources, Emeritus (2010)

¹ While the fire was caused by the uncontrollable earthquake hazard, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce sought to focus attention on the fire, for which a first-class water supply would allay the concerns of jittery residents and businesses alike.