On September 14, 2001, I was to give a plenary address to the Society of American Foresters called “What History Can Teach Foresters.” The convention schedule would be dramatically altered, and I would not give the speech. But to prepare for it, to get a feeling for what was going on in the profession, I had read several years’ worth of The Forestry Source. The March 2001 issue ran several fevered responses to a column that had appeared in January. When I read the column that had triggered them, I was astonished to see how mild-mannered and seemingly noninflammatory it was.

SAF President John Heisenbuttel’s column was titled “Ending the Cold War between Environmentalists and Foresters.” The tenor of those members who responded was, We do not want to end this war—we want to win it. “The environmentalists are dedicated and determined to win the war,” one letter writer said. “We should be, too.” Another SAF member wrote, “ending the cold war between foresters and environmentalists sounds a whole lot like capitulation or compromise with the enemy to me” (SAF 2001, p. 2–3).

It is an exercise in imagination to think what the “ending the cold war” might mean in this analogy. The breakup of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society into contentious and feuding local chapters? The collapse of the environmentalists’ Berlin Wall—perhaps repeal of the Endangered Species Act? But the disintegration of the enemy does not seem to have been Heisenbuttel’s goal. He seemed to be thinking of peace negotiations, arms limitations, disarmament treaties. And that is where forestry’s Hawks begged to differ.

Origins of the Cold War

It was the domestic conditions of the geopolitical Cold War—the post–World War II baby boom and the increase in homebuilding, the ideology that justified unrestrained US economic development as a battleground between communism and capitalism, the political climate that gave dissent an aura of sedition—that, beginning in the 1940s, provided the context for increased timber harvesting on the national forests. That increased cut fractured the alliance between the Forest Service and the emerging environmental movement. As Hirt (1994, p. xxxvii) summarized it, by the 1960s, leaders of the Forest Service had “de-
decided their fortunes lay with the resource development interests rather than the ‘new wave’ of conservationists who came to be known as environmentalists in the 1970s. A reversal of alliances occurred. Many groups friendly to the Agency prior to the 1960s became antagonists."

The literal Cold War thus sparked the metaphorical cold war between foresters and environmentalists. And yet the contrast in outcomes is striking: The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union is over, but the cold war between foresters and environmentalists intensifies. Some environmentalists feel that filing a lawsuit is the only way that they can be heard; Forest Service employees feel that defending their agency in court has become a major part of their jobs. And observers to this fray are wondering, Is this really the best way we can conduct ourselves?

Utilitarians and Preservationists

The profession of forestry involved a paradigm shift at its point of origin, and if you originate in a paradigm shift, it seems it will be your fate to be exhorted to keep shifting. If you are in first gear, some critic will declare that you should be in second, and if you shift to second, someone is sure to say that your shifting is incomplete and you should be in third.

One of my students once wrote, “When shifting paradigms, it is important to remember to put in the clutch.” Some of our paradigm shifting has involved a terrible shrieking and grinding of the gears, and I have found it useful to ask, “Rather than pushing harder on the gear shift, why don’t we first try using the clutch?”

But now the standard transmission is far from standard, and soon that quotable and helpful line, about clutches and paradigm shifting, will mystify anyone younger than age 40. The irony is almost too obvious: My best effort at finding a metaphor for helping us adjust to new conditions is itself being rendered obsolete.

Nevertheless, let me propose yet another paradigm shift, this time involving the way we tell the story of the origin of the split between foresters and environmentalists. In the familiar story, this split—often characterized as the division between utilitarians and preservationists—has a long history. Usually Gifford Pinchot and John Muir represent the opposing camps. The history of the past century then becomes the history of the struggle between the ideological descendants of Pinchot and the ideological descendants of Muir, with the third great protagonist, Aldo Leopold, beginning on Pinchot’s side and defecting to Muir’s.

There is a kind of fatalism in this story, partly because it seems that the Olympians are clashing, and when the gods aim blows at each other, it is the path of wisdom for ordinary mortals to duck for cover. At the very least, the story suggests that we must resign ourselves to two clearly defined sides to the issue of forest management—sides that have always been and will always be in conflict.

And so it would be good news if we found reasons to reject the accuracy of this historical curriculum. Miller’s (2001) *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* is an important step. He argued that Pinchot was considerably more complex than the categories in which we have tried to confine him. A more realistic picture of Pinchot reveals his “ability to maintain what might seem to be contradictory impulses—the desire to live simultaneously within and on nature, to exult in its splendors while exploiting its resources.” Similarly, his activities as governor of Pennsylvania and his commitment to democratic reform undermine the characterizations of him as an advocate of stodgy elitism. Pinchot’s “conviction that the power of politics and government … must be employed to expand the benefits of democracy to those often excluded from civic life remains an article of faith among contemporary progressives” (Miller 2001, p. 5).

Pinchot and Muir hardly represent the full spectrum of opinion on resource use c. 1900. To cast Pinchot as the utilitarian is to ignore individuals who felt entitled to unlimited access to the reserves and companies that resisted any regulation of their timbering ambitions. Any environmentalist who is tempted to cast Pinchot as the Dark Prince of the Utilitarians should become reacquainted with the scale and intensity of opposition Pinchot faced from the *real* utilitarians. Pinchot, said one critic, was a “rapacious, venal, petty aristocrat maliciously bent on destroying everybody.” Said another, “if your ancestors had come to America with mine over 300 years ago; …if you had breathed the spirit of liberty for thirty years on Colorado mountain tops, you would understand and hate ‘Pinchotism’ as I do. It is diametrically opposed to all true Americanism” (McCarthy 1977, p. 85, 87). If we see Pinchot and Muir as representing the opposite poles of attitudes toward the use of natural resources, we have a very distorted vision.
of natural resources, we have a very distorted vision. Yet that inadequate narrative has been widely adopted. Given its pernicious side effects, there seems to be good reason to experiment with more realistic, and considerably less simple, ways of conceiving the past.

A Broader Historical Category

What would happen if we stepped away from our paired categories of opposition—the rise of conservation and the rise of preservation; the emergence of the profession of forestry and the appearance of the environmental movement—and instead tried to open a larger umbrella over all those episodes and events? The broader historical category would be the emergence, in various sectors of society, of the recognition that westward expansion had produced undesirable consequences, and that those consequences required efforts to develop better practices. This broader category would then be the history of efforts to correct injuries and losses. Instead of pitting conservation against preservation, we would tell the more inclusive history of a range of efforts at remedy, repair, remediation, and restoration. Instead of sworn enemies, conservation and preservation would be two differing versions of the recognition of injury and loss and of the search for remedy and better practice.

Perhaps it’s just human to take a complicated situation and reduce it to two positions. In attitudes toward nature, we see a bad case of this need to divide by two. Either we are utilitarian, or we are preservationists. Either we assess the natural world as a source of commodities, or we value it as an inclusive history of a range of efforts at remedy, repair, remediation, and restoration. Instead of pitting conservation against preservation, we would tell the more inclusive history of a range of efforts at remedy, repair, remediation, and restoration.

The Historical Rotary

So a paradigm shift for telling the story of the past might be unexpectedly fruitful. Our focus would still be the events of a century ago, but we would try to escape the duality of conservation versus preservation. A Washington, DC, traffic circle makes a better model for the actual workings of history than a conventional intersection, where two roads converge at right angles. In the rotary, roads come in from various directions, and you neither go straight nor make sharp turns. Moreover, given the traffic, your progress likely involves negotiation and compromise. If you attempt a solitary exercise of individual will, chances are good that a collision will cause you to spend more time in the rotary than you intended.

At the turn of the 19th century, many people had second thoughts about the resource use that had characterized the preceding three centuries. As Williams (1989) and others have noted, timber harvesting in the upper Midwest left many alarmed at the rate of the depletion of the forests. The prospect of a “timber famine” made an urgent case for rethinking old practices, and the emergence of American forestry was unquestionably crucial. But according to our paradigm shift, it was only part of a larger project that had many dimensions: the effort to prevent the extinction of game animals and fish, the struggle for public control and efficiency in electric power generation, the attempt to maintain watersheds and avoid wasting water resources, and the campaign to remind Americans that the outdoors could replenish their emotional and spiritual energies. Advocates embraced a variety of methods, some of which were soon at odds with each other. Here is the rotary: All these causes were steering around the same center, but by that very act, they were heightening their chances of colliding with each other.

Americans throughout the 19th century worried about the costs, injuries, and losses incurred by westward expansion (Mitchell 1981). Most of those earnest souls had no positive, practical plans for remedy. That a few individuals who did rose to power should astonish us, given how much of a reversal of influential habits of mind it represented. We must remember how remarkable the emergence of remedies really was. It is nothing to take for granted. And foresters were one of the groups who broke the pattern and figured out how we could deal productively with the dilemmas history had produced.

Thinking of forestry in these terms explains why today’s foresters respond with such thin-skinned prickliness and defensiveness to today’s criticisms. To be accused of making environmental messes when your profession originated as part of an effort to rectify previous messes—well, that indeed makes the world seem treacherous.

But if we return to that origin point, rather than taking the oppositions of our time for granted and projecting them back in time, our rotary positions us to see the rise of forestry as related to the rise, for instance, of the wildlife preservation movement: Both were efforts to find better practices. With hindsight, we know that the wildlife preservation advocates began a process that eventually produced the Endangered Species Act, which turned out to be an excellent stick for environmentalists to use in whacking the Forest Service.

Assert a kinship among the various projects, launched a century ago, to find better ways of shaping the relationship of humans to nature, and we might be able to catalogue the various strategies and evaluate their effectiveness over the succeeding century. Rather than saying “My ideology, past and present, is better than yours,” we could engage in a thoughtful appraisal of efficacy: What outcomes have the various strategies produced? Putting together this inventory of means and outcomes will, I suspect, bring some rather ironic findings. The rhetorical
persuasion used by preservationist, nonutilitarian advocates of a century ago has proven effective; many Americans now accept the premise that outdoor recreation is good for them and that vistas of an undeveloped landscape improve the soul. The outcomes include political support for national parks and wilderness areas and an ever-growing desire for outdoor recreation that puts a tremendous burden on public lands and an enthusiasm for building private homes in the midst of wildlife habitat and in forests subject to fire cycles.

Is that what Muir and his allies had in mind? Probably not.

The Historical Legacy of Foresters

Evaluating the outcomes of our original intents can also bring our attention to elements in foresters’ heritage that have been marginalized. I think, especially, of Pinchot’s condemnations of waste. Perhaps forestry lost its commitment to speak to Americans about profligacy during the Cold War’s production and harvesting boom. But opposition to waste still occupies a central place in the legacy and heritage of forestry—a heritage foresters could beneficially repossess. “Conservation stands for the prevention of waste,” wrote Pinchot (1967 [1910], p. 44); “…the attack on waste is an industrial necessity.” Having foresters regain their identity as the resource professionals who won’t tolerate waste would certainly disorient those who think they have everyone’s positions on natural resources figured out. Why not put Pinchot’s declaration—“Conservation stands for the prevention of waste”—on bumper stickers and distribute them to members of the Sierra Club who drive SUVs?

One other dimension of the historical legacy calls for a reckoning. Movements and professions and organizations that originated in the Progressive Era will, regardless of how conditions change around them, carry with them one particular legacy—faith in expertise. Historian Samuel Hays put this proposition forward convincingly. Driving Progressive reform was a faith in the expert—a natural scientist or social scientist who was imagined to be above and beyond politics. Unlike nearly everyone else, this expert would be guided by detachment and knowledge and provide an unparalleled steadiness and solidity in leadership.

Over the 20th century, that ideal encountered various obstacles. One involved democratic resentment of the experts’ power, especially those affiliated with the federal government. Another arose from nature’s ability to deliver situations that were so complicated, so oversupplied with variables, that asking experts to find a clear path of action made no sense. There is a world of difference between the controlled experiments scientists can do in laboratories and the open-ended conditions for research that “outdoor science” must confront. Environmental science strains the usual practices of scientists, forcing them to deal with dimensions of uncertainty that make it difficult to deliver clear policy prescriptions.

Promising to serve society, Progressive reformers asked society, in return, to give experts the authority to make decisions—clearly a case study in the proposition “Be careful what you wish for.” Society agreed to the deal. And then society turned out to be a very tough client. Foresters got society the wood products it asked for, and society, instead of saying “Thank you,” said “Now look what you’ve done! You’ve treated the forest as a commodity and completely destroyed the biodiversity we now value!”

Examination of Common Ground

Perhaps one way to reduce the strife between environmentalists and foresters would be to point out some of the common ground in their frustrations. A basic paradox of the trajectory of foresters’ careers is that they are ambushed by, ironically enough, a forest product. By the time a forester’s career is moving forward, she or he is sitting in an office, pushing paper. These are people who once hoped for day-to-day engagement with nature—and that surely could be the basis of a camaraderie and fellow feeling with many environmentalists.

Let me evoke a comparison for what I am envisioning. In Through the Looking Glass, Alice takes a walk in a great forest. As she enters, with a little fear she says, “This must be the wood where things have no names.” And indeed it is. A step or two into the forest and she cannot remember her own name. She encounters a pleasant-looking creature. They try to give each other the appropriate names, but they can’t. So they walk along together, enjoying each other’s company, until they reach the edge of the forest. As they leave, the creature says, “I’m a fawn! And dear me, you’re a human child!” A sudden look of alarm came into its brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.”

Wouldn’t it be great if we could send environmentalists and foresters out for a walk in Lewis Carroll’s forest? The categories in which we place ourselves and each other have developed enormous power, and that moment when the fawn catches on to Alice’s category and leaps away in alarm is a moment enacted regularly when we encounter those we have cast as our opponents in environmental issues.

Recall the Seventh American Forest Congress meeting in Washington, DC, in 1996. In the roundtable process, eight to 10 people representing a wide spectrum of positions, including environmentalists and foresters, sat at a table, and each appraised statements by casting one of three votes:

Green: I am very comfortable with this part of this vision or principle.

Yellow: I am uncomfortable, but I can live with this point or idea.

Red: I am uncomfortable and cannot live with this.

The green category of agreement was huge, over 80 percent, for many of the visions and principles of forest management. Consensus started to shrink, for instance, to 68 percent on the vision “In the future, our forests will maintain their essential role in protecting watersheds and aquatic systems.” But the steepsed dropoff occurred with vision 12, with only 54 percent agreement, 19 percent “I am uncomfortable,” and 27 percent “I cannot live with this.” And what vision fractured the consensus? “In the future, our forests will be managed on the basis of a stewardship ethic with respect, reverence, and humility.” The
foresters and the environmentalists leapt apart as surely as the fawn fled from Alice.

To an outsider, vision 12 might seem so general, even vacuous, as to be the last item to arouse such disagreement, with the particular charm that you could say, “Yes, indeed. I’m for that” without having to commit yourself to any real action. But the foresters at the Seventh American Forest Congress recognized words—stewardship ethic, respect, reverence, and humility—that belong to the environmental movement. Endorsing those words would be, to them, like surrender in the cold war. And yet, if you could wash the fingerprints of the environmental movement off vision 12, would it really be so repellent?

Reverence, Respect, and Humility

Here is my thesis: From the smallest scale to the largest scale, from the tiniest organisms in the soil to the biggest patterns of the earth’s atmosphere, foresters are getting constant invitations to experience humility, if not also respect and reverence.

Look at soil organisms. Discussing efforts at reforestation in the interior Northwest, Langston (1995) noted the important role of arthropods and bacteria in creating the soil conditions required by particular tree species. These creatures are the opposite of charismatic megafauna; they are noncharismatic minifauna. And yet soil organisms can make or break a reforestation project.

Now if there is any experience that would produce a sense of humility, it would be having your forest management plans derailed by a consortium of minifauna. In the same way, the influence of weather and climate change on forest health surely evokes humility and respect. The wetness or dryness of the preceding season can be of the greatest consequence for forest fires. Meteorology and climatology are their own complicated disciplines, and even the best experts are often wrong in their predictions. Thus, foresters and their plans are at the mercy of, at one end of the scale, soil organisms, and at the other end, climatologists.

But soil organisms and climate change can stymie environmentalists, too. They offer a persistent reminder that nature operates with its own maddening chain of causes and effects, and much of this chain is distinctly nonlinear. In fact, if we look back to the Progressive Era promise that experts could master the complexities of nature and that trees could be grown like crops, the first question that comes to mind is, Did anyone run this proposition by a farmer? Farming in 1900 was a precarious enterprise, subject to every sort of misadventure of precipitation, soil quality, insect activity, and market. It is one of the puzzles of American intellectual history that “crop” came to stand for stability, reliability, and predictability, when the practice of agriculture seems to demonstrate an entirely different set of properties. If trees are a crop, then they give foresters the same abundant opportunities to experience humility and respect for nature’s intractability.

History and Forestry

Humans have not always been receptive to the value of looking back. An awareness of history has, more often than not, been considered a past-time or hobby. But looking back could serve a much more beneficial purpose than filling up leisure time.

History and forestry cannot escape each other. Forestry is a profession that is powerfully and persistently shaped by its moment of origin. Anyone who wants to understand contemporary, 21st-century forestry must begin with a return to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the world of 2002, a world in which people often seem unmoored and unanchored, bereft of tradition, foresters have a distinctive position; they have a relationship to their past; they are connected through time with their founders. Forestry and history are also tied together because any effort at remediation or restoration of a forest landscape involves historical questions. If society wants a place restored, the first question is, “Restored to what it was when?” Through their strong ties to their origins and through the restoration projects they are often asked to undertake, foresters find themselves sharing the enterprise of historians, asking questions about the past and about how that past shapes our world.

And we can use history to cope with our present dilemmas. A reconfigured history of the last century—not the story of opposition between utilitarianism and environmentalism, but the story of finding alternatives to rapacious extraction—would provide a much more promising historical foundation for ending the cold war between foresters and environmentalists.

Even though that war is well under way, there may be some benefit in trying to reduce the intensity of battle and ask the principals to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. For certain kinds of dilemmas, rethinking what we take for granted in our historical narratives and shifting our paradigms for explaining our past can, in practical and down-to-earth ways, give us the opportunity to rethink and revise our own habits of mind. The cold war between environmentalists and foresters is one of those dilemmas in which history can help.

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