Gifford Pinchot's conservation principles evolved throughout his life. Born into a lumbering and mercantile family, he was trained in traditional European methods of forest management, a perspective central to his work as first chief of the USDA Forest Service. When, as Pennsylvania's governor, he protected old-growth forests and later urged Franklin Delano Roosevelt to buy up private timberlands, he broke ranks with many foresters. Always controversial, he acted as the Forest Service's conscience until his death in 1946.

By Char Miller and V. Alaric Sample

"Friday, July 1, 1898 was a red-letter day for me," Gifford Pinchot wrote in his autobiography, Breaking New Ground. "On that day I became chief of the little old Forestry Division" (Pinchot 1998, p. 136). Always the optimist, he "was highly enthusiastic and deeply pleased" with his new job in the Department of Agriculture, in good measure because the secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson, had given the young man a free hand. "I could appoint my own assistants," Pinchot scribbled in his diary after interviewing for the position, "do what kind of work I chose, and not fear any interference from him."

Yet even as Pinchot cherished the opportunity to run the Forestry Division "to suit myself," he recognized that the work's prospects were "something less than brilliant" (Pinchot 1998, p. 135-36). Congress then was so skeptical about the agency's purpose it had demanded that it account for its continued existence; this demand was one of the reasons that Pinchot's predecessor, the eminent forester Bernard E. Fernow, had decided to resign in spring 1898. The public also was indifferent to the Forestry Division's fate, so rarely had its activities come to people's attention. There was, in short, ample reason for Pinchot, who would become the division's fourth chief, to question whether accepting Secretary Wilson's job offer was a shrewd career move.

In retrospect, it turned out to have been a stroke of genius. Driven and ambitious, Pinchot proved a skillful leader who was able to generate considerable support within Congress and among the American people. Suggestive of his deft handling of the nation's politicians was the rapid expansion of the agency's budget and staff: in 1898, with 11 members, the division's budget...
was a mere $28,520; one year later, with 61 employees, the appropriation was increased to $48,520; by 1901 both sets of figures had swelled further—179 employees worked within a budget of $185,440. These numbers also reflected changes in the agency’s rank: in 1901 it was transformed into the Bureau of Forestry, and four years later it was elevated yet again, becoming the USDA Forest Service, with Pinchot as its first chief. By 1905 there were few in Washington or the body politic unfamiliar with the Forest Service or its gregarious leader.

Yet, as Pinchot acknowledged, “success does not always make friends.” From the start, “there was contention galore,” and as “our work became known it raised up friends at least as fast as foes, in Congress and out” (Pinchot 1998, p. 160–61). Fortunately, he enjoyed the thrust and parry of political life and understood that controversies were integral to the development of public opinion. Capturing a mass audience, he well knew, was essential to success in democratic politics. This was an insight that governed the whole of his long career in public service, one reason why in fact he was, and remains, such a controversial figure.

**Family Matters**

Born in 1865 to James and Mary Eno Pinchot, Gifford grew up in one of the elite mercantile families of New York City. His maternal grandfather, Amos Eno, had amassed a fortune in good measure because of his evolving reactions to the American lumber industry. From his father, Cyril C.D. Pinchot, James Pinchot had learned how to profit from the family’s timber holdings. To maximize their gains, the Pinchots had clearcut forests, collected the logs into rafts, and shipped them in spring down rain-swollen rivers to market in the ports of Trenton and Philadelphia. Once the rafts were sold, the financial returns would be reinvested in other timber stands, and the cycle would be repeated.

The environmental consequences of this form of lumbering were considerable, yet it was not until the latter part of the 19th century that James Pinchot recognized the connection between his family’s economic behavior and an ecosystem devoid of passenger pigeons, deer, and bear, of free-flowing streams and leafy verdure. The practice of forestry, he believed, would restore this cutover landscape, and just before Gifford entered Yale in 1885, James strongly advised his son to take up the profession.

College was more social than academically significant for Gifford, however; it was only after his graduation in 1889 that Pinchot began his serious education as a forester. That fall, he traveled to Europe, met several eminent European foresters, including Sir William Schlich and Sir Dietrich Brandis, and then enrolled at L’Ecole Nationale Forestière at Nancy, France. There, through his studies in silviculture, and on his extended explorations of the French national forest system, he gained his “first concrete understanding of the forest as a crop.” He readily absorbed this guiding principle, plus forestry’s emphasis on efficiency, rational planning, and scientific management. That nature could be controlled through human stricture would in time feed easily into the Progressive ethos with which Pinchot would be so closely associated in the United States.

But with the important exception of democratic Switzerland, for whose foresters Pinchot felt an immediate affinity, most European methods of forestry seemed too emblematic of the monarchal states in which they were practiced. Convinced that such a rigidly hierarchical profession would never take root in republican soil, certain that the “elaborate” method of German forestry would wilt “under the pioneer conditions in America,” he sought in subsequent years to construct a form of forestry that would flourish in the “ingenious land of the Yankee” (Pinchot 1998, p. 134).

**Home Front**

The pursuit of democratic equity would become central to Pinchot’s ideological concerns. As he frequently declared: “For whose benefit shall [natural resources] be conserved—for the benefit of the many, or for the use and profit of the few?” Yet after he returned to the United States in 1890, he was not above pulling family strings to gain his first job as forester on George W. Vanderbilt’s lavish North Carolina estate, Biltmore; his parents were good friends of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vanderbilt’s landscape architect, and it was through him that Pinchot came to Vanderbilt’s notice. Although not exactly a poster boy for social reform, Vanderbilt nonetheless gave Pinchot a remarkable opportunity to practice his craft, an experience that would lead Pinchot to proclaim Biltmore “the cradle of forestry.”

That may have been true, but it was under the auspices of the federal government the forestry profession really came of age; few contemporaries would have predicted this flowering, however, given the relatively dreary state of governmental forestry in the late 19th century. Founded in 1880 in reaction to worries that the nation’s natural resources were rapidly being liquidated, and that there was no clearinghouse for information on the American forested estate, the tiny Bureau of Forestry gathered statistics and answered citizens’ queries about harvesting private woodlots. It did not formulate policy governing the vast forests on public lands, in part because it was located in the Department of Agriculture, and the publicly owned forests fell under the purview of the Department of the Interior. The bureau did not advocate regulation of the lands for another reason—its third chief, Bernhard E. Fernow, a German-born forester, not only doubted the efficacy of widescale federal manage-
ment, but even questioned the value of such microlevel experiments as Pinchot was conducting at Biltmore (Miller 1992).

Pinchot also had his moments of doubt. The lands around the Vanderbilt estate had been badly burned or heavily logged, and his first task as a forester was simply to replant and restore the landscape (Pinchot 1893). Where he could, he began to cut timber to demonstrate the efficacy of his profession. Convinced after several years that he had shown forestry’s profitability, he left to open an office as a consulting forester in New York City. It was only after 1898, when he had replaced Fernow at the Division of Forestry, that he was able to test his ideas about his profession’s place in the American polity and, in the process, expand beyond the European conception of forestry that he had studied.

Politically sophisticated, he early on joined with other like-minded federal scientists and government experts, such as Frederick Newell and WJ McGee, to establish support for the conservation of natural resources on public lands. This collective attempt to manage the landscapes and the uses to which they were put, and to address a broad array of attendant social problems, received great impetus when Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901. He granted legitimacy to, through his political support of, a host of legislative initiatives designed to expand federal control over public lands and forests, waterways and irrigation projects; one of his decisions that firmly rooted conservation in public policy was the establishment of the Forest Service. What distinguished this new agency from its predecessors, the
Division of Forestry and the Bureau of Forestry, was that the nation's forest reserves were now moved to the Department of Agriculture, uniting the woods with their stewards. Pinchot had been instrumental in securing this bureaucratic transfer, and once it was completed, he threw himself into his work with undisguised zeal, giving the president's conservation agenda a tremendous boost.

His mission received additional impetus when the Supreme Court sanctioned the assertion of the executive branch's regulatory power over the newly named national forests, through a pair of decisions rendered in response to Forest Service directives governing grazing, lumbering, mining, and occupancy of the lands under its control. That these initiatives had generated considerable publicity and sparked their fair share of legal challenges and regional animosity—Pinchot was a much-hated man in the American West—only reinforced his perception that he was acting to expand economic opportunity and democratic possibilities in communities he thought too-long dominated by corporate oligarchies (Klyza 1996; Miller 1998).

He became increasingly concerned about the problem of equity following President Roosevelt's decision to leave the White House in 1908. Worried that Roosevelt's hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, was not a staunch conservationist, he kept a close eye on the new president's political actions. It was not long before they clashed over their differing interpretations of the appropriate role the executive branch played in the conservation of the nation's resource base (Penick 1968).

Pinchot was convinced that Taft sided with "every predatory interest seeking to gobble up natural resources or otherwise oppress the people." He had become the "accomplice and the refuge of land grabbers, water-power grabbers, grabbers of timber and oil—all the swarm of big and little thieves and near-thieves" who sought to steal resources that "should have been conserved in the public interest." This interest must remain paramount, Pinchot concluded: that was the only way to make "the people strong and well, able and wise" and to build a nation "with equal opportunity for all and special privilege for none" (Pinchot 1998, p. 510).

Taft did not share Pinchot's belief in an activist government; unlike his predecessor in the White House, he was a strict constructionist on matters of the executive branch's constitutional authority. Taft moreover disliked what he perceived as Pinchot's zealousness as manifest in his repeated squabbles with the secretary of the Interior, Richard A. Ballinger. These degenerated into a debilitating series of bureaucratic turf wars, the most significant of which revolved around the lease of federal coal lands in Alaska, in what became known as the Ballinger-Pinchot affair. In 1910 Taft had had enough and dismissed Pinchot for insubordination.

During his 12 years in Washington, from 1898 to 1910, Gifford Pinchot's perspectives had evolved considerably. His was no longer the scientific language nor the technical perspective of the young forester fresh from his European training. In its stead had emerged that of an American conservationist, one fully wedded to the Progressive world view in which the state would help set the contours of modern society. This view permeates Breaking New Ground, whose narration ends in 1910. But Pinchot continued a very active public career for another 36 years, during which time he founded the National Conservation Association and served two tumultuous terms as governor of Pennsylvania, experiences that deeply influenced his perspectives on the conservationist ideal. So complicated did this evolution become that occasionally he would find himself at odds with the very profession he had done so much to establish.

His work through the National Conservation Association reflects some of the shifts in his attitudes. Born of the controversy that would end with his

President Taft's 1910 firing of Pinchot as chief of the Forest Service culminated a long-standing dispute between the two over the role of the executive branch in conservation of natural resources.
dismissal as chief of the Forest Service—in 1909 Pinchot had started the organization as a way for "public-spirited citizens" to voice their concern over the Taft administration's drift away from Rooseveltian conservationism—the association enabled him to remain engaged in the fight over congressional legislation concerning natural resources. That it also kept him in the public eye was not incidental. The organization accomplished both ends through its regular release of press bulletins analyzing the contents of bills then before Congress, its vigilant vote-tracking, and its "constant watch on senators and representatives" (McGeary 1960, p. 202). It also established close working relationships with leading newspaper editors. Of the association's lobbying activities, perhaps its most successful action was also its most contentious: determined by "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" (Pinchot 1926).

His criticism of the forestry profession intensified in the early 1930s. "[T]horoughly disgusted" that the Society of American Foresters, which he had founded in 1900, ignored the devastation of the nation's forests, the now 65-year-old forester, along with fellow critics, rebuked SAF for its policy failures and "spiritual decay" (Pinchot 1932, 1933). This critical commentary caught the eye of President-elect Franklin Roosevelt, who suggested Pinchot craft a memorandum for a new national forest policy. With the aid of fellow critics Robert Marshall and Raphael Zon, he did, predicting a gloomy future for American forests and the people who depended on them. To reverse this deplorable situation required a forceful new approach to the management of privately owned timberlands. Arguing that "private forestry in America, as a solution, is no longer even a hope," Pinchot believed it was time to shelve his Progressive faith in the efficacy of regulation and admit that only "large scale public acquisition of private forest lands" would solve America's woes (Nixon 1972, p. 129–32).

Championing the cause of world peace became yet another crucial element of what Pinchot called "new conservationism." Well aware that a second world war would result from the industrialized nations' hunger for natural resources, in 1940 he appealed for the creation of a United Nations–like agency to regulate resource exploitation, protect threatened species, and secure an enduring prosperity for all people (Pinchot 1940).
Politician-Idealist

Pinchot's career reminds us of some important milestones for the conservation movement. We are approaching, for instance, the centenary of many of the early ideas, events, and institutions that we associate with him, among them the establishment of the Yale School of Forestry (1900) and its experiment station at the Pinchot family estate in Milford, Pennsylvania, the founding of the Society of American Foresters (1900), and the creation of the Forest Service (1905). These accomplishments, impressive unto themselves, are all the more so when one realizes that the very idea of reserving millions of acres of land in perpetuity for conservation purposes was a radical proposal in the early years of this century.

Defending the continued existence of the national forests was just as crucial. While chief, Pinchot had provided the insight and leadership to ensure that they were retained in public ownership, "for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time" (Pinchot 1998, p. 505). And he was among the first to recognize that for the "greatest good" to remain the governing focus on the national forests, political vigilance was essential; toward the end of his life, he thought it necessary periodically to act as the "public conscience" of the agency he had helped establish, confronting it whenever it seemed to advance special interests over those of the general public, or strayed from its original mission.

The evolution of Pinchot's conservationist beliefs has proved a harbinger, moreover, of some of the ideas and tactics that characterize late 20th-century environmental activism. His assertion that international accords could restrain resource exploitation and environmental destruction are reflected most recently in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro and in the subsequent Santiago Declaration on international criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management. Long before the environmental justice movement called attention to the links between politics, class, and the environment, Pinchot had argued that political equity and economic rights went hand in hand. All of which is another way of saying that his energetic effort to reach an ever more complex understanding of the tangled relationship between humanity and the natural world represents the struggle many 19th- and 20th-century Americans have undergone to maintain a healthy planet. One hundred years after Gifford Pinchot entered public service therefore seems a perfect time to recall his impassioned embrace of conservation's central ideals.

Literature Cited


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