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Preserve or Conserve: The Fight for the Public Resources of America

Officially put in to use in 1934, the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and O’Shaughnessy Dam boast themselves as modern marvels, delivering fresh water to millions of people living 150 miles away from Yosemite National Park. The O’Shaughnessy Dam, named for the man who oversaw construction, creates the reservoir which, at its capacity, holds about 117 billion gallons of water to ultimately end up in the city of San Francisco, or a neighboring environ. In a testament to the technological impressiveness of the dam, “more than 660,000 cubic yards of concrete were used to create the original arch-gravity dam...it now towers 312 feet above the riverbed, the original structure having been raised 85 feet in 1938 to provide more storage.”¹ Standing on top of the dam gazing back towards Hetch Hetchy Valley, the landscape is breathtaking, and listening to the dam release thousands of gallons of water back into the Tuolumne below deafens. The approval to build this massive concrete structure and create the reservoir, in some people’s eyes, killed John Muir, but up until the end of his storied life he fought with all his might to stop the project and preserve the valley. The battle over the fate of Yosemite National Park and the construction of the Hetch Hetchy Dam highlighted the technological advancements America had achieved since industrialization, but it also created the modern environmental movement to protect the natural beauty of the American landscape.

1. Salcedo, Tracy. *Historic Yosemite National Park: the stories behind one of America’s great treasures* (Guilford: Lyons, 2016) 115.

American industry began in earnest in the 1850s and continued to grow throughout the remainder of the century at an unprecedented rate. The United States, while not fully connected from coast to coast by road or rail, held all the necessary components to mimic the industrial boom that was occurring in Europe in the early nineteenth century. The mountains of the east held vast amounts of coal needed to fire industrial growth, and the center of the nation was able to produce enough food to feed the growing population. As well, the influx of European immigrants, and Chinese and Mexican immigrants in the west, looking to make their fortune in the developing economy of the United States helped to spur economic growth. However these immigrants were thrust into the unskilled labor positions needed to keep the factories running. While the steel, oil, meat packing, and shipping industries receive most of the acclaim for America's economic development, the most important industry in uniting the coasts and economies of the United States is the railroads. As it was needed, a 68 mile rail line was built to send supplies and men up the Tuolumne River to build the dam creating the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

Expansion to the western half of the United States would not have occurred at the rate it did without vast rail expansion during the late 1800s. Industrial expansion was rapid in the east, but slow in the west. The Civil War, unfortunately, helped to invigorate the growth of the American rail system, and in 1862 the Pacific Railway Act was signed giving birth to the Transcontinental Railroad. The proponents of Manifest Destiny were busy in Washington far before the bill was signed, but the Civil War increased the need for supplies, weapons, and clothes, with the untapped resources of the plains and west coast eyed for exploitation. Development of a connected web of track across the country was no easy undertaking "because laying tracks across 2,000 miles of rugged wilderness was immediately recognized as beyond of

private enterprise, almost all plans called for government subsidies.”² Although these subsidies were slow to materialize prior to the Civil War, the conflict brought rail expansion to the forefront of the movement west. Railroads made life in the west possible because they brought the goods needed to support life beyond the plains, and allowed westerners to stay connected in the industrial age.

Lying the furthest west in the contiguous United States, the economy of California struggled to sustain itself. The discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills in the 1840s sparked a mass movement of people attempting to strike it rich, however once the rush was over “California’s population growth and economic development had settled down to a sluggish pace.”³ As rail connected the state together, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 connected the industrial east to the unindustrialized west, and ensured the economy of the United States would continue to grow. Goods, services, and, more importantly, people would be able to settle themselves in the open lands of the west. The western frontier offered Americans the ability to start fresh and possibly create wealth for themselves. However, all industrial, and population expansion comes at a cost. Industrialization began the destruction of the environment for personal gain and California’s lush redwood and sequoia forests were being stripped down to nothing by the logging industry, and with little government oversight of the newly tapped resources of the state, the natural beauty of the land was facing the same exploitation industrial workers faced in the late nineteenth century.

2. Orsi, Richard J. *Sunset Limited : The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850-1930*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2005. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 6, 2017) 5.

3. Ibid, 3.

Prior to the rise of industry, capitalism, and consumption of the late 1800's, people living in the United States completed daily tasks much of the same way their ancestors had hundreds, even thousands, of years ago. If a shirt was needed, cotton would have to be picked, spun into yarn, woven into a pattern, and finally sewn together, all by hand. Mechanization of the cotton industry, and most industries for that matter, changed the way humans interacted with the world around them. By the turn of the century, upwards of 70 percent of the workers in the United States had moved from the farm to the factory. Work no longer meant autonomy for employees, as workers were constantly supervised on the factory floor and unskilled labor became the desired trait of factory owners. It was not uncommon for the unskilled laborer force, which by the turn of the century was made up mostly of recent European immigrants to America, to toil for more than 60 hours per week for less than two dollars a day, in deplorable working conditions with the United States holding the torch for highest number of on-the-job injuries with an average of 35,000 per year. The Progressive movement sought to solve societal issues affecting the lower classes stemming from the effects of industrial capitalism in America. Progressives believed in human rationality and its ability to make wise and informed decisions that would promote the public good. Assuming that the best and brightest of the social-scientific community would pinpoint, and ultimately, lay the groundwork for solutions to the nation's ills, progressive thought "stroved to ensure abundance and security for American capital, labor and government in the public sphere."⁴ Progressives in the east focused their attention on social ills affecting the population of the large urban areas, but in the west, the progressive movement sought to halt the destruction of the natural environment.

4. Watts, Steven. *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (New York: Vintage, 2006) 221.

The two men at the forefront of the progressive environmental movement were John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. As the thirst for industrial growth became insatiable and railroads connected the coasts, both men observed the dangers that the unchecked destruction of the nation's resources would amount to, and sought to remedy to the situation. While both men understood the value of the natural resources of the nation, each man approached the problem through a different lens, Muir fighting for preservation, and Pinchot in favor of conservation. Although these terms, in today's language, are used interchangeably in public discourse, they spoke to very differing ideas between Muir and Pinchot:

Gifford Pinchot embodied the conservation philosophy of Roosevelt Progressivism, tirelessly promoting the efficient management of natural resources by trained professionals for the long-term economic benefit of society. John Muir, the archetypal preservationist, found intrinsic value in nature. He sought protection of the wilderness and resources not to serve economic ends but as a buttress against the pathologies—material and psychological—of modern society.⁵

It is this very ideological difference that produced the well-documented debates between these two men. Pinchot sought to constantly maintain natural resources in order to continue to fuel America's economic engines, while Muir sought to set America's greatest natural treasures aside to let nature support itself without human interference.

Like other progressive attempts to fix the problems of industrial society, Muir and Pinchot published their thoughts and pleas in mass-produced publications. Magazines and newspapers around the country realized that producing "muckraking" stories in their pages was a great way to make money and prompt the growing "urban and suburban middle class who expressed grave doubts about industrial capitalism"⁶ into public action. Works by Jacob Riis,

5. Smith, Michael B. "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot." *The Historian* 60, no. 4 (1998): 757-78.
<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.csudh.edu/stable/24452183>

6. Ibid.

Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and others, helped to transform the public's view on a variety of social issues and ended up creating legislation to reform the meat packing industry, worker's rights, and eventually the environment. While Muir and Pinchot were not raking muck, per say, they were using the same techniques as other progressives in attempting to reshape the public outlook on the environment. The two men aimed their written addresses to the rapidly expanding middle class, and "as urbanized Americans moved further and further away...from their rural origins...there evolved...a desire to shepherd more carefully the natural bounty of the American landscape. Yet they also wanted to continue...to support a high standard of living."⁷ This internal conflict within the psyche of the middle class America is represented almost identically in the conflict over the fate of the environment between Muir and Pinchot.

Born on April 21, 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, John Muir displayed an avid appreciation and fondness for the outdoors early in his youth. His opening line to his reflections on his upbringing and youth manifest itself by saying, "when I was a boy in Scotland I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I've been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures."⁸ At the age of 10, his father moved himself and a few members of the Muir family to Wisconsin, where they settled on a farm and began to set roots in America. "His overly strict Calvinist childhood"⁹ (Meyer 275) taught Muir "grim self-denial, in season and out of season, to mortify the flesh, keep our bodies in subjection with Bible laws, and mercilessly

7. Smith, Michael B. "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," 758.

8. Muir, John. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 7, 2017): 3.

9. Meyer, John M. "Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought." *Polity*30, no. 2 (1997): 275. doi:10.2307/3235219.

punish ourselves for every fault imagined or committed.”¹⁰ The belief and reverence in God bespoke itself in his descriptions of Yosemite and other locations to which he ventured.

Luckily for Muir, his ingenuity and intelligence allowed him to depart the family farm for higher education. After entering the University of Wisconsin, he “established lifelong friendships with Professor Ezra Carr and his wife Jeanne...who mentored the young inventor and naturalist, encouraging...his preservation efforts.”¹¹ Following a few years of study “I bade my blessed University farewell. But I was only leaving one University for another. The Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness.”¹² In 1868 Muir would venture into Yosemite for the first time, and the following year he took a job as a sheep herder in the Yosemite Valley because, he explained, “I was in the mood to accept work of any kind that would take me into the mountains whose treasures I had tasted last summer in the Yosemite region.”¹³ It is from this simple desire that Muir would make a name for himself as an ardent preservationist for Yosemite because, “no temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite. Every rock in its walls seems to glow with life.”¹⁴ Until the end of his life, Muir fought to preserve the natural beauty of the landscape with which he fell in love, but on the opposite side of the battle to save the environment would be Gifford Pinchot promoting the theory of conservation.

10. Muir, John. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 105.

11. Salcedo, Tracy. *Historic Yosemite National Park: the stories behind one of America's great treasures*, 91.

12. Muir, John. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 228.

13. Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. (1911) 1. Accessed August 7, 2017. http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/my_first_summer_in_the_sierra/chapter_1.aspx.

14. Muir, John. *The Yosemite*, (New York, 1912) 3.

Gifford Pinchot is considered by most to be America's first forester, and it is with the forests that Muir and Pinchot's visions and political lobbying splits. Muir sought "to preserve the American wilderness as a sanctuary for spiritual renewal...Pinchot to conserve resources once thought limitless for the continued prosperity of the American nation and the continued growth of American industry."¹⁵ Pinchot grew up in a wealthy family, and attended the most prestigious of schools in his youth, but it was quickly found that "outdoor recreation was the only boyhood activity that Pinchot pursued assiduously and without prompting from his parents."¹⁶ Upon entering Yale in 1885, Pinchot was questioned about his desire to get involved with forestry, which matched up with his love of the outdoors, as well as Pinchot's "hard work toward practical, productive social endeavors."¹⁷ Seeing as how Yale did not have a concrete curriculum for forestry, nor many qualified instructors, Pinchot set out to mold the school as he saw fit. Pinchot looked out across the land of the nation and saw "the greatest, the swiftest, the most efficient, and the most appalling wave of forest destruction in human history...and the American people were glad of it...More than 99% of our people regarded forest perpetuation...as needless and even ridiculous."¹⁸

Muir and Pinchot took their individual cases directly to the American people, in true Progressive style. They directed their individual crusades about the state of the American

15. Smith, Michael B. "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," 759.

16. Balogh, Brian. "Scientific Forestry and the Roots of the Modern American State: Gifford Pinchot's Path to Progressive Reform." *Environmental History* 7, no. 2 (2002): 201. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.csudh.edu/stable/3985682>.

17. Ibid.

18. Pinchot, Gifford, V. Alaric Sample, and Char Miller. *Breaking New Ground*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 8, 2017) 1.

wilderness to the middle and upper classes of America, as this group was in position to make the necessary political changes to save the natural resources of the nation. In 1897, *The Atlantic* published an article by Muir in which he pleads to the public and government officials to put most of the West's forests under the control of the government. Muir states in the article, "Only the forests of the West are significant in size and value, and these...are rapidly vanishing. Last summer...redwood forests of the Pacific Coast Range the United States Forestry Commission could not find a single quarter-section that remained in the hands of the government."¹⁹ He laments earlier attempts to control the destruction of the forests by Congress, such as "the timber and stone act of 1878, which might well have been called the 'dust and ashes act,' any citizen of the United States could take up one hundred and sixty acres of timber land, and by paying two dollars and a half an acre for it," in which he underscores to the reader, "nevertheless, under this act wealthy corporations have fraudulently obtained title to from ten thousand to twenty thousand acres or more."²⁰ Throughout his writings, Muir appeals to the heart and emotional core of his readers in hopes that they will understand the forests are suffering the same fate as middle class workers, exploitation from greedy, monopolistic corporations in search of profit for the few at the expense of the many.

Again, in 1901, Muir focuses on relating the beauty of the Sierras, particularly Yosemite, to the public in his continued quest for the preservation of such natural scenery, untouched from the hand of man. By creating the mental imagery within the reader of pristine nature that needs to be protected, Muir brought the Sierras to the reader by stating, "it is a curious fact that the waters of some of the Sierra lakes and streams are invisible, or nearly so, under certain weather

19. Muir, John. "The American Forests." *The Atlantic*, August 1897. Accessed August 7, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/the-american-forests/305017/>.

20. Ibid.

conditions,”²¹ going on to describe how “the waters of Illilouette Creek are nearly invisible in the autumn; so that, in following the channel, jumping from boulder to boulder after a shower, you will frequently drag your feet in the apparently surfaceless pools.”²² In his writings and correspondences, John Muir “expressed faith in an enlightened citizenry”²³ in hopes they would band together “extolling the virtues of America’s wild places from the heart of the wilderness itself.”²⁴ Muir was not alone in his preservationist mentality, the more he wrote, the more notoriety and followers he gained.

The crusade Muir embarked on preserved as much of America’s natural resources as he could. His altruistic actions, in the name of preservation, led to the formation of the Sierra Club in 1892 whose mission at the formation was to “to explore, enjoy and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast; to publish authentic information concerning them; to enlist the support and cooperation of the people and government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.”²⁵ While the Sierra Club began as the wardens of the Sierras, their reach has become global as they seek to protect natural resources and landscapes from the threat of economic exploitation, just a Muir attempted to do over 100

21. Muir, John. “The Fountains and Streams of Yosemite.” *The Atlantic*, April 1901. Accessed August 7, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1901/04/the-fountains-and-streams-of-the-yosemite/304562/>.

22. Ibid.

23. Meyer, John M. "Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought," 279.

24. Smith, Michael B. "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," 759.

25. “Articles of Incorporation: Original Version June 4, 1892,” Sierra Club, accessed August 10, 2017. <http://www.sierraclub.org/articles-incorporation>.

years ago. Although Muir was known nationwide, “he adopted the...style of the prophet, alternatively forecasting doom and salvation.”²⁶ Statements such as the one he makes in *The Yosemite* that: “temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have perfect contempt for nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar,”²⁷ make readers fall in love with the bearded mountain man, sympathize with his love for the outdoors and the Sierra Nevada mountains, which the Sierra Club helped to defend. His messages of preservation tended to call for individual action rather than large group unification to his cause. This was not entirely helped by Muir’s propensity to explore and be among nature, rather than be among the politicians and government officials who created the regulations Muir sought to achieve.

While John Muir crusaded for preservation, Gifford Pinchot sought to unify a collective nation in his fight for conservation. Pinchot saw the resources of the nation, particularly forests, lacking the infrastructure to properly manage them. According to Brian Balogh’s essay, “Scientific Forestry and the Roots of the Modern American State: Gifford Pinchot’s Path to Progressive Reform,” “Expertise was required to properly manage forests and state authority was required to ensure the integrity of long-term planning.”²⁸ Both Pinchot and Muir sought government intervention and control of the forests, but to different ends. Where Muir saw sanctuary from the trappings of industrial life, Pinchot asked the question: “What will happen when the forests fail? In the first place, the business of lumbering will disappear...the fourth

26. Smith, Michael B. "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," 761.

27. Muir, John. *The Yosemite*, 261.

28. Balogh, Brian. "Scientific Forestry and the Roots of the Modern American State: Gifford Pinchot's Path to Progressive Reform," 209

greatest industry in the United States...when the forests fail, the daily life of the average citizen will inevitably feel the pinch on every side.”²⁹ Pinchot’s efforts for conservation did not merely attempt to hit at the heartstrings of Americans. He focused his attention toward the economic effects of unmitigated logging. Pinchot saw the forests in a utilitarian light, seeing economic value that would help the greatest number of people, but always aware of the importance of nature as a place of refuge. He stated, “In dealing with our natural resources, we have come to a place at last where every consideration of patriotism...of love of country, of gratitude for things that the land and the institutions of the Nation have given us, call upon us for a return.”³⁰ Pinchot called upon not just the love of nature to spark action from the public, but that the devotion to the United States, and its survival, should rise above all else.

Pinchot’s appeals to the ideals of America, democracy, capitalism, and individualism, resonated with the mentality of the Progressive era. In his book, *Breaking New Ground*, he lays this ideology out succinctly:

Conservation is at the heart of the Progressive movement. You ask why? Because, for one thing, Conservation is the most effective weapon against the monopoly of natural resources, and monopoly of resources is the basis for the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. In a democracy that is a fundamental evil. That is what Progressives fight.³¹

Pinchot’s vision of well-maintained forests and waterways matched those of Muir (as quoted above by Muir), but as the conservation movement outlined by Pinchot began to take hold in both government and the public, Muir’s agreement with conservation would be short-lived. The winner in the battle between Pinchot’s belief in conservation and Muir’s fight for preservation

29. Pinchot, Gifford. *The Fight for Conservation*, (New York, Doubleday, 1910) 16.

30. *Ibid.*, 77.

31. Pinchot, Gifford, V. Alaric Sample, and Char Miller. *Breaking New Ground*, 464.

would ultimately be decided by a factor outside of their control, the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906.

The city of San Francisco had for years used the water and timber from the Sierras to turn itself into a bustling metropolis, and in 1901 applied for the water rights of the Tuolumne River flowing through the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park. The application was denied, and again denied in 1905, “but then circumstances were horribly and abruptly altered.”³² The city was struck by a massive earthquake on April 18th, 1906 and quickly dissolved into rubble and flame, as a fire ripped through the crumbled city unable to be extinguished. The city smoldered for days, and once the dust and ashes settled, city leaders again made their claim for Hetch Hetchy and a continuous supply of pristine mountain water. Those in Washington, including Pinchot, were sympathetic to the citizens of San Francisco with his message taking hold: “Without natural resources life itself is impossible. From birth, to death, natural resources, transformed for human use, feed, clothe, shelter, and transport us. Upon them we depend for every material necessity, comfort, convenience, and protection in our lives. Without abundant resources prosperity is out of reach.”³³ Constructing the dam and creating the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir would save San Francisco, providing the natural resource, water, which could sustain the city and protect them against nature’s fury.

In opposition John Muir wrote directly to the president in an effort to save the valley, giving up his preservationist mentality, in hopes to save the valley: “I am heartily in favor of a Sierra or even a Tuolumne water supply for San Francisco, but all the water required can be

32. Salcedo, Tracy. *Historic Yosemite National Park: the stories behind one of America’s great treasures*, 111.

33. Pinchot, Gifford, V. Alaric Sample, and Char Miller. *Breaking New Ground*, 508.

obtained from sources outside the Park, leaving the twin Valleys, Hetch Hetchy & Yosemite, to the use they were intended for when the Park was established.”³⁴ At the end of the letter, Muir references the time in 1903 when he and Roosevelt toured the park, “O for a tranquil camp hour with you like those beneath the Sequoias in memorable 1903,”³⁵ hoping to sway the President’s mind toward preservation of the valley. After years of political wrangling and the passage of two presidents, the Raker Act was passed by Congress in 1913, giving the city of San Francisco the government backing and environmental ideology, thanks to Pinchot, it needed to construct the O’Shaughnessy Dam. Muir, fighting until the end, gave one last plea to the American people in *The Yosemite*, “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks, the people’s cathedrals, and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”³⁶

The ideological battle between Muir and Pinchot spoke directly to the attitudes of the American public. The spiritual connection to nature Muir professed to the masses was not powerful enough to overcome Americans’ desire for the goods and quality of life that industrialization was bringing. While conservation eventually became the method by which the public lands of America are cared for, the fight for preservation of national parks as a refuge from modernity continues in earnest. For better or worse, John Muir died a few months after the Raker Act was passed which sealed the fate of Hetch Hetchy Valley. San Francisco drinks the fresh waters of the Tuolumne River whenever they turn their taps thanks to men like Pinchot, who believed that natural resources should be shared by the public. On the other hand, if one wanted to take a metaphoric leap, it would not be a stretch to equate the drops of water from the

34. “Letter from John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt, 1908 Apr 21,” University of the Pacific. <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/ref/collection/muirletters/id/5681>.

35. Ibid.

36. Muir, John. *The Yosemite*, 261

taps to the tears John Muir may have shed when his beloved little valley was walled up and drowned under 200 feet of pristine mountain water.

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