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THE VALUE OF A TREE: PUBLIC DEBATES OF JOHN MUIR AND GIFFORD PINCHOT

MICHAEL B. SMITH

Let everyone read [Sargent's] book, travel, and see [the redwoods] for himself, and while fire and the axe still threaten destruction, make haste to come to the help of these trees, our country's pride and glory.¹

John Muir, 1903

It is almost impossible to bring home to the average man the economic importance of this great national resource. But without cheap lumber our industrial development would have been seriously retarded.²

Gifford Pinchot, 1901

These pronouncements in the popular press of turn-of-the-century America illustrate the very different perceptions John Muir and Gifford Pinchot had of the century's natural resources. The adversarial relationship between the two men has been well documented, especially the role each played in the debate over the construction of a dam in the Hetch-Hetchy Valley of the Yosemite in the first decade of this century. 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 the protection of the wilderness and resources not to serve economic ends but as a buttress against the pathologies—material and psychological—of modern society.³

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¹John Muir, "Sargent's Silva," *Atlantic Monthly* 92 (July 1903): 147.

²Gifford Pinchot, "Trees and Civilization," *World's Work* 2 (July 1901): 986.

³Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1973), 161-81; Elmo R. Richardson, *The Politics of Conservation: Crusades and Controversies, 1897-1913* (Berkeley, 1962), 44-46 and passim; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (San Francisco, 1977; reprint, New York, 1985); see also Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, 1959), 141-46, 189-98.

Although the political conflict between conservationists and preservationists during the Progressive Era will be an important component of this study, its primary focus will be not the politics of conservation but rather Muir and Pinchot as public intellectuals who helped shape the public consciousness, and their public debate over the direction of conservation policy. Despite numerous studies of Muir and Pinchot's roles in the political debate over conservation, no one has examined the way Muir and Pinchot brought their respective cases before the American public.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, Muir and Pinchot took their causes directly to the reading public of the United States using books and popular magazines such as *Overland Monthly* ("Devoted to the development of the country"), *Century*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *World's Work* (later *Review of Reviews*), *Harper's Weekly*, and *National Geographic* as their vehicles. Dominating the readership of these magazines was the rapidly burgeoning urban and suburban middle class who expressed grave doubts about industrial capitalism even as this system swept them to ever greater levels of material prosperity.⁴

The "dis-ease" of the middle class profoundly shaped the way they perceived the natural world and what nature's role in human society should be. As urbanized Americans moved further and further away, physically and psychologically, from their mostly rural origins there evolved both a sentimental view of nature and wilderness as the locus of a simpler Arcadian past and a desire to control nature, to shepherd more carefully the natural bounty of the American landscape. Yet they also wanted to continue utilizing this natural bounty to support a high standard of living. As a consequence of this tension between sentimentality and pragmatism, middle and upper class Americans embraced both anti-modernism and progressivism. On the one hand, they sought refuge in the folkways and perceived simplicity of America's agrarian and frontier past, an impulse that drove the Arts and Crafts Movement, sparked the popularity of the Boy Scouts of America, and underlay the agrarian reform effort known as the Country Life Movement. On the other hand, the privileged classes of America determined that too much sentimentality about the inefficient past and naiveté about perpetual abundance would reverse the march of material progress.⁵

⁴Christopher P. Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Consumption: Mass Market Magazines and the Demise of the Gentle Reader, 1880-1920," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard W. Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York, 1983), 40-64.

⁵Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York, 1969); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, 1981); David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York, 1985), 195-215.

The Boy Scouts epitomized this dualism present in American thinking about nature in the early twentieth century. Ernest Thompson Seton, founder of the Boy Scouts, attributed the moral and physical decline of the American boy to his disconnection from agricultural life and nature. He urged the emulation of the Indians, who for him represented the “heroic ideal” of a life of self-reliance and courage. Yet he also celebrated the imperial ecological view that man needed to control nature: “[O]ur enemies are not ‘the other fellows,’” he wrote, “but time and space, the forces of Nature.”⁶ The Country Life Movement also embodied overlapping if not conflicting motives. Billed by its supporters as a crusade to keep people on the farm, improve their lives there, and reverse chaotic urbanization, the movement served more to allay the fears of the urban middle class by maximizing agricultural efficiency through technology and keeping food prices low. To insure continued prosperity as well as the survival of sanctuaries in nature for spiritual therapy and wild places for making men, the middle and upper classes supported the reform and reorganization of wilderness and countryside alike.⁷

It was to this middle and upper class audience Muir and Pinchot pitched their respective crusades: Muir’s to preserve the American wilderness as a sanctuary for spiritual renewal, a great garden free from machines in perpetuity; Pinchot’s to conserve resources once thought limitless for the continued prosperity of the American nation and the continued growth of American industry. Both men excoriated the sin of profligacy, but each proposed different routes to and methods for redemption. Muir pitched his public voice to resonate with middle class sentimentalism, extolling the virtues of America’s wild places from the heart of the wilderness itself. He adopted the timbre and slightly eccentric discursive style of the prophet, a mystical leader alternately forecasting doom and salvation—yet almost always he aimed his message at the individual reader, not a group.

Pinchot, on the other hand, was intent on building an institution, a “church of conservation.” He was concerned not with the spiritual renewal of the individual but with the salvation of the nation, and his crusade was for the common good, organized and directed by experts, the high priests of the forest service. But Pinchot was more than a scientist. He well understood the potential of the growing mass communication industry and its large middle class audience. As skilled a rhetori-

⁶*Boy Scouts of America: A Handbook of Woodcraft, Scouting, and Life-Craft* (New York, 1910), 4 and passim.

⁷William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900-1920* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1974); David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA, 1979).

cian as a forester, Pinchot realized he could win popular support for his mission by exploiting the insecurities of the reading public.

John Muir established his reputation as a nature writer shortly after the Civil War, observing the alarming depletion of the nation's resources long before the conservation movement became institutionalized during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. Indeed, until Roosevelt and Pinchot expropriated the word "conservation" to describe an anthropocentric view of nature and natural resource use, Muir himself qualified as a conservationist; that is, one of a burgeoning group of naturalists whose wilderness advocacy stemmed as much from affection as science. During the 1870s and 1880s Muir filed numerous dispatches from his new home in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, both developing his reputation as a first-rate naturalist and seeking to convince his mostly East Coast readers of the restorative power of nature, of its wild grandeur and rhythms. But perhaps most importantly Muir—like the transcendentalists a quarter century before him—began to assert the interconnectedness of the human and natural spheres, a theme that would have particular resonance 25 years later when fin de siècle urbanites began to examine the consequences of industrialization and urbanization, especially the degree to which these developments had severed them from the natural world.⁸

Representative of these early Muir articles is an 1878 piece published in *Scribner's* magazine in which Muir wrote:

We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not very extensive ones, it is true; but our own little comes and goes are only little more than tree-wavings—many of them not so much.⁹

This and other articles of this period place Muir firmly within the tradition of Thoreau—evocative of the dynamics of nature, reverential and mystical, and slightly misanthropic. Like Thoreau, Muir spoke to the public from the heart of nature, hoping to instill a new nature ethic through both example and exhortation. His wanderings in the Sierra Nevada took him far from civilization to places where his companions were birds and beasts. He found kinship with the water ouzel,

⁸Edward Way Teale, *The Wilderness World of John Muir* (Boston, 1976), xi-xx; Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston, 1981), 3-103; Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison, 1984); Dennis Christopher Williams, "The Range of Light: John Muir, Christianity, and Nature in the Post-Darwinian World" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1992); Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy*, 107-9, 56-7.

⁹John Muir, "A Wind Storm in the Forests of the Yaba," *Scribner's* 17 (November 1878): 59.

which he observed “never sings in chorus with other birds, nor with his kind but only with the streams,” and which “[seemed] to live a charmed life beyond the reach of every influence that makes endurance necessary.”¹⁰ Muir experimented with his public voice, sometimes simply describing the world around him, sometimes waxing metaphysical about the divine sublimity of nature, but always he understood that the natural world had more to offer humankind than lumber and precious metals. Through his magazine articles Muir tried to impart his sense of nature’s true worth to a civilization consuming nature’s bounty at an alarming rate.

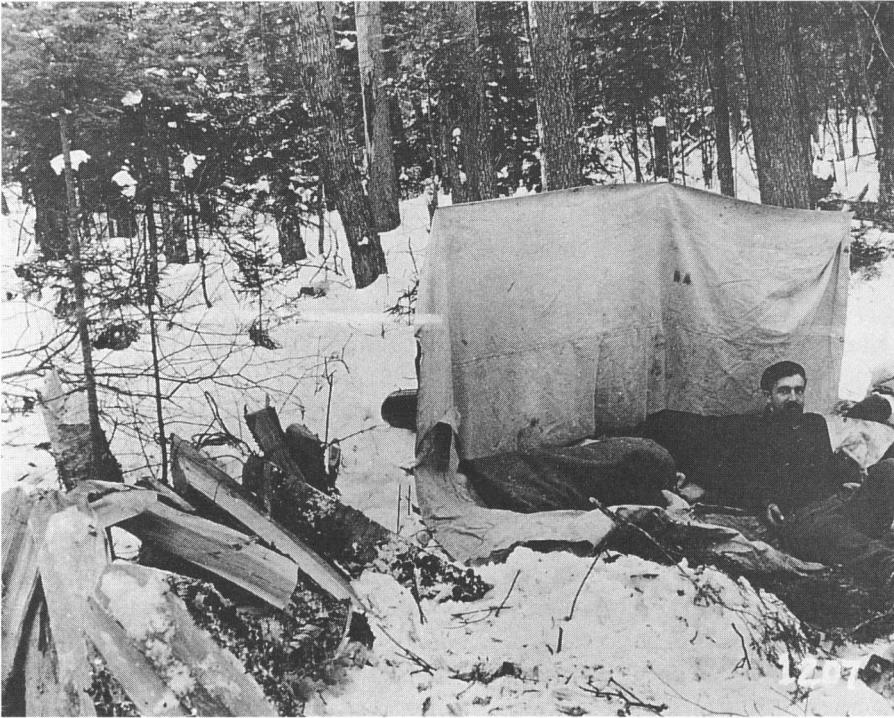
Though Muir’s trappings in the wilderness provided interaction with nature unsullied by the presence of other human beings, his return to civilization brought into ever sharper relief the intrusion of human technology into once pristine natural areas. The exploitation of California’s resources in the 1870s and 1880s was emblematic of the entrepreneurial spirit’s destruction of vast tracts of forest and fields. In the West, unscrupulous speculators were making fortunes at the expense of entire ecosystems. Grasslands were being plowed under for wheat cultivation or stripped bare by voracious cattle. Loggers and hydraulic miners denuded and washed away entire mountainsides. The denizens of Eastern cities had full stomachs, warm hearths, and wood for their paneled parlors, but the land had taken a terrible beating. The San Joaquin Valley, wrote Muir in 1874, “wears a weary, dusty aspect,” the result of agricultural development and timber harvesting.¹¹ And in an observation as prescient as it was timely, Muir lamented that “to obtain a hearing on behalf of nature from any other standpoint than that of human use is almost impossible.”¹² For it was this philosophy that defined nature in terms of its utility to man that suffused the conservation movement and shaped Muir and the preservationists’ reaction to it.

Gifford Pinchot embodied this utilitarian philosophy of conservation during his years as Chief U.S. Forester from 1898 to 1910. The son of a successful timber magnate, Pinchot was probably steered into forestry by his father as propitiation for his own sins in the lumbering industry. The highly profitable but environmentally devastating method of clear-cutting that had made the elder Pinchot his fortune was clearly an irresponsible way to manage forests. In 1890, Pinchot returned

¹⁰Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 58-76; “John Muir, “The Humming-Bird of the California Water-Falls,” *Scribner’s* 17 (February 1878): 547-48.

¹¹Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York, 1992), 3-18, 34-93, and passim; Harold T. Pinkett, *Gifford Pinchot: Private and Public Forester* (Urbana, 1970), 6-14; John Muir, “By ways of Yosemite Travel,” *Overland Monthly* 13 (September 1874): 267.

¹²John Muir, “Wild Wool,” *Overland Monthly* 14 (April 1875): 363.



Gifford Pinchot camping in the Adirondacks, 1898

from several years of schooling in the forestry techniques of Europe to a United States bereft of any coherent forestry policy. He arrived with the fire of an evangelist eager to inspire a conservation great awakening with the principles of forest management he had learned in Germany and France. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Breaking New Ground*,

[W]hen I came home not a single acre of Government, state, or private timberland was under systematic forest management anywhere on the most richly timbered of all continents. The American people had no understanding either of what Forestry was or of the bitter need for it.¹³

¹³Char Miller, "The Greening of Gifford Pinchot," *Environmental History Review* 13 (Fall 1992): 1-20; Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (Seattle, 1947), 69-70; Pinckett, *Gifford Pinchot*, 15-16; M. Nelson McGeary, *Gifford Pinchot: Forester, Politician* (Princeton, 1960), 14; Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 27.

The supply of timber seemed inexhaustible to most lumbermen, who had evolved little in the 20 years since Pinchot's father had denuded the mountainsides of northern Pennsylvania. "They regarded forest devastation as normal and second growth as a delusion of fools," Pinchot wrote. "And as for sustained yield, no such idea had ever entered their heads."¹⁴ Yet Pinchot understood that no regulatory dictum succeeded without the assent of public opinion; to control the loggers he would have to reach beyond government and enlist the support of the public. To this end, he used the media to explain how the current methods of resource exploitation jeopardized the nation's soul and to show the way to salvation through conservation.

Both Muir and Pinchot were by the late nineteenth century observing the changes wrought in the land by the profligate exploitation of the nation's resources. Both believed the situation had to be remedied for the future health of the nation and its people. And both assumed an activist role in prescribing a remedy the American public would find palatable. The convergence of Muir and Pinchot's public personas, however, ends with these generalities, at least for the period under consideration. Pinchot couched his reform in terms of economics: at stake in the fight for conservation was the continued ascendancy of American industry, indeed, of America itself. Muir and his preservationist allies appealed to the heart and spirit of the American public: if erosion of wilderness areas continued, there would be no way to palliate the anxiety born of increasingly mechanistic and unnatural lives.

Pinchot became Theodore Roosevelt's evangelist in his conversion of the public to the gospel of efficiency, especially as it applied to conservation. He had to convince the public of his expertise in conservation, to convince them that in turning the management of natural resources into a public trust they would be bringing the nation back from the brink of perdition. He hoped that the careful, democratic management of the nation's resources by trained professionals would result in continued material prosperity for the American people for generations to come. As control of the nation's resources and land became concentrated in the hands of monopolists, not only did the environment suffer but the foundation of Jeffersonian democracy began to crumble. Pinchot was determined to reassert federal control over Western lands and oversee a more equitable administration of them.

Muir, who had begun his career as a public intellectual as a supporter of conservation, served as the mystical dissenter to Pinchot's crusade. He shared many of the principles of conservation, but ultimately rejected many of its ends. Muir's worldview could not accept the desire to control nature that underlay conservation or accept progress at the expense of beauty. He hoped by explicating nature to

¹⁴Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 27.

demonstrate humanity's place within, not above, the rest of the natural world. Muir's church was the most catholic of all, welcoming all life into its fold. During the first decade of the twentieth century his public campaign for wild things reflected his desire, above all others, to reform the anthropocentric conception of nature that became the essence of the conservation movement.

Though Pinchot's public campaign for conservation did not really begin until Roosevelt became president, Muir's own writings in the second half of the 1890s prefigured many of Pinchot's later exhortations. During the summer of 1896 Muir and Pinchot had even served together amicably on a commission to survey the wild lands of the West, determine the value of the wilderness, and recommend which lands should be protected through removal from the private domain. Shortly before leaving office President Grover Cleveland, acting on the recommendations of the commission, placed 21 million acres of western forests on federal reserve. The hue and cry from timber, mining, and railroad interests was deafening, and the public battle for conservation began.¹⁵

Muir, still allied with the political advocates of conservation, sharply rebuked the monopolists who would plunder the land without restraint. In a *Harper's Weekly* article in the summer of 1897, Muir compared the frenzied opponents of the forest reservations to an insensible horse with a yellow jacket in its ear, the yellow jacket of gold:

Gold stings worse than [wasps] . . . and gives rise to far more unreasonable and unexplainable behavior. "All our precious mountains," they screamed. . . . "[A]ll the natural resources of our great growing States are set aside from use, smothered up in mere pleasure grounds for wild beasts. . . . Will our people stand for this? No-o-o!" Which in plain English means, "Let us steal and destroy in peace."¹⁶

Muir advocated instead "permanent, practical, rational forest management" that would eliminate waste and insure a permanent supply of timber. In the interest of forest reservations—something he promoted for 20 years without success—Muir had adopted, if only temporarily, the utilitarian philosophy of Pinchot conservationism. Even so, this article reflected a good deal of ambivalence about a conservation ethic that subordinated trees to human use. Muir wondered if he had compromised his soul in supporting any scheme that saved trees now to send them

¹⁵Pinckett, *Gifford Pinchot*, 40-46; Richardson, *Politics of Conservation*, 3-6; Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy*, 111-13.

¹⁶John Muir, "The National Parks and Forest Reservations," *Harper's Weekly* 41 (June 5, 1897): 563.

to the mills later. He questioned the very foundations of a relationship to nature that took human superiority as an article of faith and attacked the narrow definition of community that rendered trees so vulnerable. "God began the reservation system in Eden," Muir wrote in conclusion, "and this first reserve included only one tree. Yet even so moderate a reserve was attacked. . . . There are trees in heaven that are safe from politicians and fire but there are none here."¹⁷

Soon Muir would be condemning the conservation movement as it became ever more preoccupied with making trees safe for managed harvesting. Muir saw trees and all of nature as more than resources for human prosperity; plants, animals, rocks, and humans together formed an organic whole, each component of which needed to cooperate with the others to survive. Guiding conservation politics and policies was an assumption as old as the Book of Genesis, that man was above nature; the rest of the Creation was valuable in its service to human needs. Though himself a Christian, Muir could not abide such a separation of spheres. In *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, a posthumously published memoir of his 1867 trek from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, he wrote:

The world we are told was made for man—a presumption that is totally unsupported by facts. . . . Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why ought man to value himself as more than an infinitely small composing unit of one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit?¹⁸

Muir's belief that all living things are equally sacred insured that his alliance with the conservationists would be unsteady and brief. His appeals for wilderness protection were directed to the hearts and souls of his readers rather than their minds, wallets, and patriotic spirit, the targets of the materialist Pinchot.

In 1898, only a few months after he had seemingly embraced the utilitarian recommendations of the commission, Muir declared that the most important role of protected wilderness was as a refuge from modernity. Sounding the theme that was to be his trademark as a public advocate of preservation, Muir wrote of the "thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people" who were discovering the therapeutic value of nature as their real "home," that "mountain parks and reservation

¹⁷Ibid., 566-67.

¹⁸John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, reprinted in Teale, *Wilderness World*, 316-17.

[were] useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as fountains of life."¹⁹

In extolling the virtues of nature, Muir asserted that we must preserve our wilderness to preserve our sanity. To an urban readership increasingly concerned about quality of life issues in America's cities, especially the perceived moral and cultural decay, Muir's articles sounded a clarion call. He rejected "the stupefying effects of the vice of over-industry" and argued that the "deadly apathy of luxury" had spread like a disease through the prospering middle class.²⁰ Muir's readers were threatened not only by the morally degenerative effects of the city, which could be blamed on strange and inassimilable immigrants and their cultural values, but by their own materially rich but spiritually empty lifestyles. Muir's message was designed to awaken a primal calling within his readers to the imperative of wild nature, not merely managed nature. "Touch nerves with Mother Earth," he exhorted. Learn from her by "jumping from rock to rock, feeling the life of them, learning the songs of them, panting in whole-souled exercise and rejoicing in the long-drawn breaths of pure wildness."²¹

This vision of the western forest reserves was not shared by Gifford Pinchot and his boss from 1901-8, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt proclaimed the gospel of utilitarian conservation in his first State of the Union in 1901:

The fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of the forests by use. Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend upon them. The preservation of our forests is an imperative *business* necessity.²²

Roosevelt pleaded his case before the Congress, and to Pinchot fell the task of addressing the middle class ensconced in their urban environments far from Muir's "nerves of Mother Earth." Their anxiety, he told them, was not the result of an existence detached from nature, though carefully managed natural settings could

¹⁹John Muir, "The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West," *Atlantic Monthly* 81 (January 1898): 15.

²⁰Muir, "Wild Parks and Forest Reservations," 15-16; see also T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xii-xvi and *passim*.

²¹Muir, "Wild Parks and Forest Reservations," 16.

²²*The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790-1966*, vol. 2 (1861-1904), ed. Fred L. Israel (New York, 1967), 2026-29, emphasis author's; but see Roosevelt's "Annual Message" of 1908, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, 1897-1916), 7604.



Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir at Yosemite, 1903. Courtesy Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Harvard College Library.

indeed be objects of love. The greater problem was the threat of diminished prosperity resulting from the irresponsible profiteering of selfish private interests. Moreover, nature herself was wasting the country's future. The loss of timber to "largely preventable" forest fires was costing the country tens of millions of dollars each year, Pinchot wrote in *World's Work* in 1901. Americans, Pinchot believed, must manage and master nature. In stark contrast to Muir's holistic view of nature, Pinchot held that man should and must see himself as more valuable than the rest of creation.²³

Following the division within the conservation community, Muir and the preservationists faced a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, they, like the conservationists, believed that the private mismanagement of land called for urgent regulatory action on the part of the federal government. To Muir, however, trees were not simply raw materials for industrial expansion; they were a living community. Trees exuded dignity and nobility and taken together comprised a society worthy of human observation and emulation. American society was declining because cities lacked the model for social order that nature provided. In a 1901 *Atlantic Monthly* article on California's redwoods, Muir remarked on the "ease and strength and comfortable independence in which trees occupy their place in the general forest. Seedlings, saplings, young and middle-aged trees, are grouped promisingly around the old patriarchs."²⁴ But it was the trees' understanding of their fundamental connection to the rhythms of nature, and God, that impressed Muir most:

The trees, with rosy glowing countenances, seemed to be hushed and thoughtful, as if waiting in conscious religious dependence on the sun, and one naturally walked softly and awestricken among them. I wandered on, meeting nobler trees where all are noble, subdued in the general calm, as if in some vast hall pervaded by the deepest sanctities and solemnities that sway human souls.

Perfection of the Creation lay in these woods, Muir wrote, showing how far humankind had strayed from perfection.²⁵

At the height of Muir's reverie, when "every tree seemed religious and conscious of the presence of God," another human intruded upon the scene, and though rider and horse "seemed sadly out of place," Muir was nonetheless pleased to have human

²³Pinchot, "Trees and Civilization," *World's Work* 2 (July 1901): 986-95; see also Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 30-55, 266-69.

²⁴John Muir, "Hunting Big Redwoods," *Atlantic Monthly* 88 (September 1901): 311.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 318.

companionship. The more practical side of Muir, the side he knew his *Atlantic Monthly* readers would be most able to understand, conceded that man is incomplete without the companionship of his fellows. In this respect he resembled another Romantic, Walt Whitman: "Give me the silent, splendid sun," wrote Whitman, "but give me people too."²⁶ The collision between the natural sphere and the artificial sphere of man was unavoidable, though for Muir the two spheres should be one.

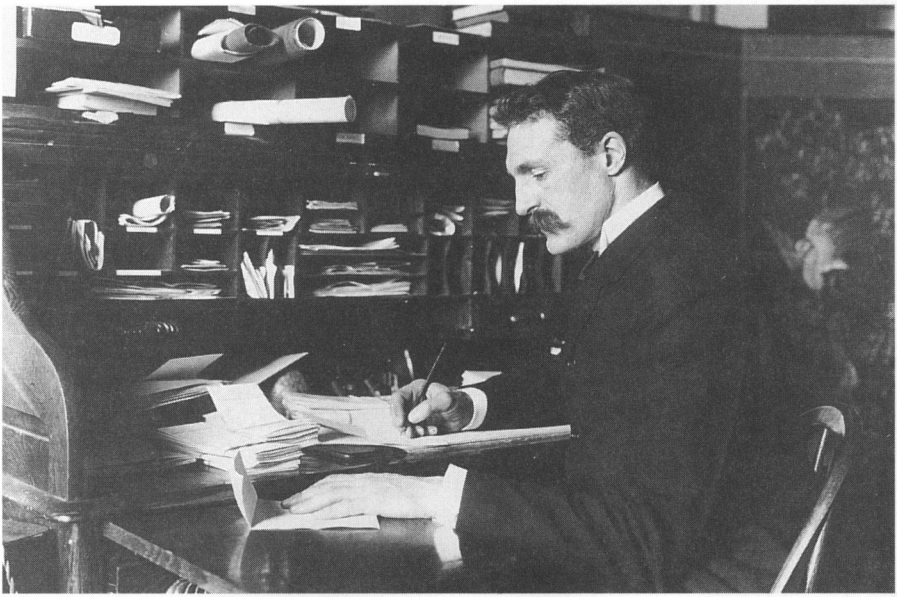
Knowing that most of his readers saw nature and man as separate entities, Muir sought to ease the impact of the collision by cultivating respect—and a preservation movement—for nature. Muir hoped to show that there was more than an economic dimension to trees. Yet even as he elevated trees to a semi-sacred status Muir acknowledged their utility to man, though as living trees, not dead lumber. "To the dwellers of the plain, dependent on irrigation," Muir wrote, "the Big Tree, leaving all its higher uses out of the count, is a tree of life, a never failing spring, sending living water to the lowlands all through the hot, rainless summer."²⁷ Perhaps Muir understood that sacralizing the redwoods would not be enough to insure their preservation, that his audience would be more moved to support his cause when they saw that a threat to the trees was a threat to their food supply. Whatever his rationale, it was one of the last times Muir argued for preservation for the sake of human material comfort.

Pinchot, on the other hand, believed the centrality of human prosperity should be the sine qua non of conservation arguments. Cultivating a "new patriotism," he argued on the pages of *World's Work* that Americans had a civic duty to support conservation. "The question we are deciding with so little consciousness is this: What shall we do with our natural resources? Upon the final answer hangs the success or failure of this nation in accomplishing its manifest destiny," Pinchot wrote in 1908. This was a solemn charge indeed, an explicit rejection of what he believed to be the sentimentalism of the preservationists. The conservation movement was not about nostalgia for a pastoral past; it was about national power and prosperity.

The conservation of our natural resources is a question of primary importance on the economic side. . . . But the business reason, weighty and worthy though it may be, is

²⁶Walt Whitman, "Give Me the Silent, Splendid Sun," *Leaves of Grass, 1892 Edition* (New York, 1983), 251.

²⁷Muir, "Hunting Big Redwoods," 320.



Gifford Pinchot at his desk, c. 1905

not the fundamental reason. . . . The law of self-preservation is higher than the law of business and the duty of preserving the nation is still higher.²⁸

Pinchot was not opposed to business, including the business of resource exploitation, but he considered unregulated business, like unregulated logging and mining, to be reckless. He seized on the economic and patriotic concerns of readers, dispensing altogether with the vague spiritual “dis-ease” that Muir addressed. He too spoke of “poverty, degradation, and decay,” but attributed them to resource mismanagement, not disconnection from nature.²⁹

Pinchot was a consummate pragmatist. He saw in the United States an urbanizing nation with an almost limitless capacity for growth if the exploitation of the country’s natural resources were supervised by professionals able to apply “expert skill to . . . problems of the greatest delicacy and importance throughout our western country.”³⁰ With Progressive politics at a zenith and a magazine audience dominated

²⁸Gifford Pinchot, “The New Patriotism,” *World’s Work* 16 (May 1908): 10236.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 10235; see also Pinchot, “New Hope for the West,” *Century* 68 (June 1904): 312.

³⁰Pinchot, “Trees and Civilization,” 995.

by professionals who themselves believed in the application of expertise to special problems, Pinchot's message was well received in the parlors of the middle and upper class. The fight for conservation pitted Pinchot and his reformers against the well-financed timber, mining, and railroad interests of the West who still held sway over many Congressional opponents of land reclamation. By educating his readers and appealing to their organizational and reform sensibilities, Pinchot hoped to overwhelm the monied interests with public opinion, much as public opinion had forced Armour and Swift to capitulate to food and drug regulation following the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.³¹

The selfish interests that impeded national progress and democracy were the objects of much of Pinchot's patriotic rhetoric. It was time to think of the common good, Pinchot argued:

Individualism has been the keynote of our great development. . . . [B]ut individualism which substantially says to all of us that it has the right to acquire one dollar for itself at the cost of two dollars to the commonwealth is individualism pushed too far. It is this point of view that very largely underlies the question of conservation.³²

Pinchot's emphasis on community and a revitalized democracy reflected the influence of Pragmatists like John Dewey. Like Dewey, Pinchot believed that through education a new individual, with a greater understanding of his role in a community of individuals, could be created. Through his public advocacy of the conservation movement Pinchot attempted to foster a new consciousness about the need for national, collective ownership of natural resources. "The essential thing to be achieved," Pinchot wrote in 1908, "is far less the taking of specific and individual measures than the creation of a mental attitude on the part of our people, the creation of a habitual and effective public sentiment which will look ahead."³³

Pinchot also raised the specter of economic tyranny, the consequence of the control of resources being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. To be prosperous and happy, people required "land . . . to live on and natural resources for their support," an impossible dream if those who had acquired large holdings of western land continued to accumulate and abuse the land.³⁴ He worried that the "homestead system of small free-holders" would "be replaced by a foreign system of tenantry," a system

³¹See Richardson, *Politics of Conservation*, 17-46.

³²Gifford Pinchot, "Foundations of Prosperity," *North American Review* 188 (November 1908): 748.

³³*Ibid.*, 742.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 752.

that denied the equality of opportunity Roosevelt had held aloft as the highest ideal of conservation.³⁵ “Equality of opportunity . . . in the conservation of our natural resources, not for the trusts but for the people: . . . upon such things . . . the perpetuity of this country as a nation of homes really depends,” wrote Pinchot in 1909.³⁶

Highly-educated patrician that he was, Pinchot understood the power of rhetoric and chose words and themes that would generate the most sympathy for his cause. He evoked images of the besieged yeoman farmer, the bulwark of Jeffersonian democracy, and portrayed conservation as protection against the avarice and venality of the Western profiteer and his political allies. “Conservation is the most democratic movement this country has known for a generation,” Pinchot wrote.

It holds that the people have not only the right, but the duty to control the use of our natural resources. . . . And it regards the absorption of these resources by the special interests, unless their operations are under effective public control, as a moral wrong. Conservation is the application of common sense to the common problems for the common good, and I believe it stands nearer to the desires, aspirations, and purposes of the average man than any other policy now before the American people.

At stake was not just the control of natural resources but the political morality of the nation. Conservation was for Pinchot the single most important battlefield in the war to prevent a few great commercial enterprises from gaining control of resources, of politics, ultimately of the average man in America.³⁷

Pinchot urged his readers to believe that conservation would lead to eternal prosperity and a just nation. Conservation would bring into existence “a sane, strong people, living through the centuries in a land subdued and controlled for the service of the people, its rightful masters.” He enjoined the American public to help “bring the Kingdom of God to earth,” uplifting the nations of the world through development of exemplary public spirit.³⁸ Conservation was the most important manifestation of this new public spirit. Pinchot’s image of a heavenly kingdom on earth harkens back to the rhetorical tradition of John Winthrop and his City on the Hill. The conservation movement would serve as a new beginning, just as the

³⁵Gifford Pinchot, “The Conservation of Natural Resources,” *The Outlook* 87 (12 October 1907): 293; see also Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (Seattle, 1910).

³⁶Gifford Pinchot, “The A B C of Conservation,” *The Outlook* 93 (4 December 1909): 772.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 770.

³⁸Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation*, 27, 95-96.

Puritans had hoped to revitalize Christianity in a new land. Gifford retained imperial ecology's foundations of control and mastery, seeking to change only the methods of subduing nature. Muir's egalitarian ecology made him a heretic to Pinchot, as was anyone who believed man was of nature and not above it.

For Pinchot, conservation was patriotism; it was a calling, a means of controlling nature for the benefit of man. He perpetuated the notion long ingrained in the American consciousness that nature's bounty was the source of the nation's strength and individualism. Conservation insured continued prosperity; progress could tolerate no sentimentality, certainly none of the preservationists' reverence for life, which had no obvious role in the progress of humankind. While some lamented the passing of the buffalo, Pinchot did not:

It was not a bad thing, in one sense, that the buffalo should have been partly destroyed, because the economic development of the Western country could never have taken place if the grasses upon which the buffalo lived had not been made available for domestic cattle.³⁹

The garden of America was to be tended with care; but if prosperity hinged on replanting the garden, so be it. Pinchot hoped to generate in his readers an awareness that the meat on their tables came at a small cost within nature's economy, but one well worth paying. Similarly, he wanted them to understand that some giant redwoods—carefully culled by professionals, of course—must go to the sawmills. Conservationists, the genuine American patriots, should steer a course between the selfish profiteers who would clear cut all the forests to fill their own pockets and the backward-looking preservationists who would compromise America's future with their premodern visions of the natural world.

John Muir's elegiac dispatches from the mountains of California delivered quite a different message to the readers of *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Century*, and his many books. As he had begun to do in the late 1890s, Muir criticized the mechanistic view of nature that denied the validity of other life forms except as economic units. Knowing that many of his readers believed an urban existence had degraded humanity, Muir wondered whether they did not abandon their humanity further when they saw plants and animals simply as useful, whether Pinchot's utilitarianism might sever Americans further from a greater community. To Muir, the American view of nature had resulted in a despoiled kingdom of heaven on earth. Beware, he cautioned, for in killing without cause or reflection you kill the future:

³⁹Pinchot, "Foundations of Prosperity," 743.

Think of the passenger pigeons that fifty or sixty years ago filled the woods and sky over half the continent, now exterminated. . . . None of our fellow mortals is safe . . . who in any way interferes with our pleasures; or who may be used for work or food, clothing or ornament, or mere cruel, sportish, amusement.⁴⁰

Humans had nearly ruined Eden with their selfish habits. Where Pinchot argued for collective solutions to bad habits, Muir's crusade aimed to reform individual behavior. Muir believed that material prosperity was insufficient for either personal or national fulfillment. He hoped to coax people out of the cities and into the newly created parks to witness in the mountains and canyons "Nature's grandest buildings," which had anticipated "every architectural invention of man."⁴¹ Muir hoped that after experiencing the rhythms and majesty of nature his readers would recognize the need to protect areas not just from private exploitation but from government-managed exploitation as well.

Muir and Pinchot's battle for the public's soul reached a crescendo during the 1913 debate in Congress over a bill to construct a dam in the Hetch-Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park. No fight could more clearly illustrate the divide between conservationists and preservationists. The city of San Francisco argued that the potential water supply from a reservoir in the Hetch-Hetchy Valley was essential for the city's growth and prosperity and freedom from private interests who would charge exorbitant prices for water. Pinchot became the city's chief advocate before Congress, so clearly did the dam fit into his vision of conservation. "The benefits to be derived from [the Hetch-Hetchy's] use as a reservoir" far outweighed the value of the valley as a place of beauty, he said.⁴²

Muir, well acquainted with the valley from his years of tramping in the Yosemite, likened the proposed project to the desecration of a temple where "Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike." In his 1912 book *The Yosemite*, Muir spoke with the fire of a prophet: "Dam the Hetch-Hetchy! As well dam for watertanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has been consecrated by the heart of man."⁴³ Muir's longtime friend and publisher Robert Underwood Johnson, who in the past had been leery of Muir's pantheistic heresies,

⁴⁰John Muir, "Plunge into the Wilderness," *Atlantic Monthly* 110 (December 1912): 818.

⁴¹Muir, "The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West," 28.

⁴²Senate Committee on the Public Lands, *Hearings, Hetch-Hetchy Reservoir Site*, 63d Cong., 1st sess. (24 September 1913), quoted in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 60.

⁴³John Muir, "The Tuolumne Yosemite in Danger," *The Outlook* 87 (2 November 1907): 488; Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York, 1912), 261-62.



John Muir in the Sierra. Courtesy John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections, University of the Pacific Libraries. Copyright 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust.

worked frantically behind the scenes and in public to get the bill voted down. Indeed, Muir's readers overwhelmingly supported the preservation of the Hetch-Hetchy. For them, Hetch-Hetchy and the Yosemite represented refuges that could serve as a temporary antidote to the stress of modern life.

But Muir's advocacy of nature for its own sake, nature that had value independent of psychological or economic worth, was lost on most of his supporters. As it served the selfish psychological needs of the vacationing middle class, the idea of nature was being commodified in the national parks just as surely as the products of nature had been by Pinchot. As Norman Forester observed in *The Nation*, "What the nature-lover really desires is not to be a part of nature, but to . . . cast away 'worldly' cares and city life with its difficulties, as well as farm life with its difficulties, so that he might be, like the inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, 'freed to roam and reminisce under the pines.'"⁴⁴ Though many Americans opposed the construction of the dam in the Hetch-Hetchy, few heeded Muir's call for nature for its own

⁴⁴Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 170-75; Norman Forester, "The Nature Cult Today," *The Nation* 94 (11 April 1912): 358.

sake. Despite the public outcry, Pinchot's advocacy for the dam won the day, and on 19 December 1913 President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill into law.

The struggle between conservationists and preservationists over Hetch-Hetchy was to be Muir's last great fight. With his death in late 1914 the preservation movement lost its most eloquent voice. He was the giant redwood of the preservation community, strong and peerless as nature's publicist. He once wrote of the redwoods that "no description can give any idea of their singular majesty, much less of their beauty."

Excepting the sugar pine, most of its neighbors with pointed tops seem to be forever shouting, "Excelsior!" while the Big Tree, though soaring above them all, seems satisfied, its rounded head poised lightly as a cloud, giving no impression of trying to go higher.⁴⁵

As a writer and naturalist, Muir's stature lent the preservation cause credibility. He nourished a preservation ethic within the consciousness of early twentieth century America's reading public, though the dictates of economics ultimately insured that Pinchot's creed of utilitarianism would drive national conservation policy. The gospel of progress and the capitalist ethos of unlimited growth was too ingrained in the national consciousness for Muir's alternative view of what constituted prosperity to change American attitudes about nature.

Muir himself expressed the conventional attitude about nature when he promoted the national parks as sanctuaries from modernity where one could come to be restored by nature. And although Muir publicly adopted a nearly implacable preservationist stance in the final decade of his life, his private feelings about the preservation even of his beloved Sierra were more complex than those exposed on the pages of *Atlantic Monthly* and *Century*. In a letter to Theodore Roosevelt in April 1908, just before Secretary of the Interior James Garfield signed over the Hetch-Hetchy to the city of San Francisco, Muir averred he was keen to save Yosemite from commercialism and development except for "the roads, hotels etc., required to make its wonders and blessings available" to the world-weary urban visitors. Moreover, Muir was quite willing to sacrifice another valley to save Hetch-Hetchy. "I am heartily in favor of a Sierra or even a Tuolumne water supply for San Francisco," Muir wrote Roosevelt, so long as it fell outside the boundaries of Yosemite.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Muir, "Hunting Big Redwoods," 304.

⁴⁶John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt, 21 April 1908, reprinted in William Frederic Bade, *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1924), 417.

Thus the private John Muir acknowledged his own utilitarian view of nature, latent for some ten years. With his endorsement of a reservoir somewhere in the Sierra, Muir conceded that cities were not all evil. The provision of roads and hotels in national parks, though it made the parks more accessible, also brought them more under the controlling hand of humanity, transformed them into packaged spas for the spirit. The continued abuse of the environment in the twentieth century is evidence that few people have returned from their therapy sessions in the wild having rejected their imperial view of nature.

The power of religion, both real and metaphorical, pervades most treatments of American cultural and intellectual history, and this examination of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot as public intellectuals is no exception. Both were deeply religious men whose spiritual proclivities instructed their respective philosophies of nature. Pinchot believed in the Biblical injunction that man had a duty to subdue the land and beasts, that nature's bounty existed so that man could be fruitful and multiply. Muir, though strictly raised as a Scottish Presbyterian, embodied a distinctly pre-Christian, or at least unorthodox Christian, view of the natural world. Like Saint Francis of Assisi, he believed God's love was suffused through every living thing, that man was but "an infinitely small composing unit of the one great unit of creation."⁴⁷

The two men's distinctly different styles of public discourse reflected these religious sentiments; both men understood the power of religious metaphors and the resonance they would have in the minds of their overwhelmingly Christian readers. Using his position as chief forester, Pinchot spoke of the good of professionally managed public lands and of the evil tyranny of private profiteering, of the pitfalls of avarice, and of the rewards of thrift. He called for a new morality. He sought to build a church of conservation, for he understood that institutions outlive individuals. Muir, in contrast, was ever the mystic, urging followers to experience for themselves the restorative power of nature. He hoped that Pinchot's church would protect the sources of spiritual renewal so that his audience might come heal their souls and change their world view. But he did not harangue; his passion was given to private meditation in his beloved Sierra Nevada. For Muir, the unchecked destruction of the country's national resources—and the unchecked industrial expansion these resources fed—was a danger to the individual soul, an abrasion to the human spirit. For Pinchot this same destruction endangered the national soul: democracy.

Though the conservationists won the battle for the Hetch-Hetchy, it cannot be said that either they or the preservationists won the war against private profligacy

⁴⁷Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy*, 358-74; Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-37; Muir, *Thousand-Mile Walk*, 317.

in the exploitation of resources. Pinchot's ideal of the professional forester proved to be as chimerical as every historical effort to manage civic affairs with disinterested professionals, as his own institution, the Forest Service, abandoned his philosophy of careful resource management and began to serve corporate interests. Private interests continued to log public lands—often irresponsibly—only now it was being done under the auspices of the Forest Service, a fact that remains galling to preservationists to this day.

The early success of the conservation reform obscured the unwieldiness of having several government agencies with overlapping resource management responsibilities, a weakness private interests have exploited. Despite Pinchot's professed ideal of guaranteeing Jeffersonian equality of opportunity through federal control of resources, the opponents of federal conservation often were small ranchers and farmers who quickly realized that only wealthy ranchers and timber corporations could afford land leases. And imposed morality, however well-intentioned, always carries with it elitist assumptions about the few knowing what is best for the rest of the community. Indeed, in reaction to the limited success of his conservation program Pinchot himself underwent something of a conversion to the preservationist cause in his later years. He began to see not the economic value of a tree but its potential healing effect on the fractured psyche of a world ravaged by social injustice and two world wars. For "in God's wildness," as Muir had once written, "lies the hope of the world—the great, fresh, unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and the wounds heal ere we are aware."⁴⁸

⁴⁸James Penick Jr., *Progressive Politics and Conservation: The Ballinger-Pinchot Affair* (Chicago, 1968); Miller, "The Greening of Gifford Pinchot"; Muir, *The Wilderness World of John Muir*, 315.