

Lecture #14: The Conservation Vision

Suggested Readings:

Samuel Hays, *Conservation and The Gospel of Efficiency* (1959)

Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (2001)

Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (2001)

Gifford Pinchot *Fight for Conservation*, 1909; John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)

Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (1999)

For a good web resource on this subject, see <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome.html>.

Outline

I. John Muir: Domesticating the Sublime

progressive conservation movement often narrated using Muir/Pinchot dichotomy, following Roderick Nash
Muir born Scotland 1838, grew up in Wisconsin, tension with Calvinist father, mechanically gifted, 1866
machine accident almost blinded him, walked to Gulf, 1868 to Yosemite, began writing about Sierra
Nevada for *Overland Monthly*, 1892 formed Sierra Club

climax of story is struggle to save Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite Nat Park; dam approved 1913

Muir as chief 19th-century celebrator of romantic wilderness, sublime without terror

II. Gifford Pinchot: Nationalizing Conservation

Pinchot so effective as publicist that he self-consciously exaggerated his own role

George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*, 1864, among pivotal texts of U.S. conservation: deforestation as
disastrous human impact on nature, erosion, watershed deterioration

preservation of Adirondack State Park, 1892 as "forever reserved" defended as protecting water supply of
New York's rivers and cities; picturesque/hunting/science converge

early bureaucrats defending conservation: Carl Schurz (Interior, 1877-81); Bernard Fernow (Forestry Bureau
Chief, USDA, 1886-98). Both represent German forestry tradition

1891 Forest Reserve Act set aside national forest reserves in Interior Department

Pinchot born CT 1865, Yale BA 1889; managed Biltmore forest in North Carolina starting 1892;

1898 appointed chief of USDA Forestry Division; 1889 studied at Nancy, founded Yale Forestry

School; 1905 got Theodore Roosevelt to transfer forests from Interior to USDA

alliance with Roosevelt key to Pinchot's success: 1901-10, forest acreage rose 51-175 mill

III. The Search for Efficiency

Pinchot's 1910 book, *The Fight for Conservation*, a key Progressive Era tract: Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian
doctrine extended to include "greatest good for greatest number for longest time"

central commitment to efficient use of resources, end of waste, technical rule by scientific experts, suspicion
of democratic process, intense nationalism, strong state

nature explicitly for human use, development as highest good as long as well managed

conservation for Pinchot ultimately a question of values: defending the national good

IV. Western Reclamation: A Progress from Desert to Garden

irreducible tension between two impulses, both with romantic roots: encounter with wild or picturesque vs.
search for human improvement in the garden of progress

greatest number were located in the cities, so countryside subservient to urban good

nowhere more true than West, where largest urban populations located where water was not

transporting water to San Francisco in wake of 1906 earthquake/fire: Hetch Hetchy

grand drama of Owens Valley and Los Angeles Aqueduct: Fred Eaton, William Mulholland, and J. P.

Lippincott surreptitiously set out to acquire property in Owens River valley in southern Sierra

Nevada, overcome valley opposition to construct aqueduct completed in 1913, becomes one of
city's chief water supplies

coming of water to southern California underpinned urban growth, massive boundary expansion of Los

Angeles via annexation: delivery of water to desert areas produced rich new agricultural and

suburban residential areas (railroads and land developers promote new settlements, Colorado

Desert becomes Imperial Valley)

alternative romantic icon here: the garden in the desert, progress through technology

among chief visionaries for an irrigated West: William Ellsworth Smythe, whose 1905 book *The Conquest of
Arid America* was most important tract promoting government support of irrigation

prophetic impulse: Salt Lake Valley as type for Palestine, the cactus desert transformed

all Progressive conservation came together in irrigated garden image: racial nationalism, imperial conquest,
technical progress reclaiming waste, making desert bloom, nature & humanity in landscape without
contradiction--"man's partnership with God"

political expression: Francis G. Newlands' Reclamation Act of 1902, Federal irrigation in support of
homestead-scale family farms, revolving fund financed by farm payments

Truckee-Carson project of 1905 was first fruit, plagued by problems; Boulder Dam 1936 on new scale