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PRESIDENTS AND
THE AMERICAN
ENVIRONMENT
INTRODUCTION

The presidency is not merely an administrative office. That is the least of it. It is pre-
eminently a place of moral leadership. All of our great Presidents were leaders of thought at
times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified. . . . Without
leadership alert and sensitive to change, we . . . lose our way.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

A century and a half ago a new concern was heard among US intellectuals—that this bounteous “new world” was running out of the abundant resources that had drawn European and (involuntarily) African millions. An early voice was George Perkins Marsh, whose Man and Nature (1864) drew a large readership and much influence. “Man is essentially a destructive power. . . . He has felled the forests . . . broken up the mountain reservoirs . . . torn the thin glebe [soil] . . . has ruthlessly warred on all the tribes of animated nature.”

Marsh was one of the earliest voices of US conservation, a social reform movement beginning to organize for nature protection as the nineteenth century advanced. In 1890 a small but influential wildlife conservation organization, the Boone and Crockett Club, located in New York City, came to an important resolve at about the same time as a group of professional foresters. Natural resource/nature preservationists could not by their own efforts make a change they fervently wished—the establishment of a system of national forests carved out of public lands in the West and providing protection and management for vital timber resources. Kindred spirits, less well organized, imagined more national parks based on the Yellowstone (1872) model.

The New York–based forest preservationists needed the aid of the citizen serving as the president of the United States. They stirred themselves in 1891 to enlist the intervention of President Benjamin Harrison, who was asked to sign a bill into law and under its authority declare a few national forests. He did so, and at this unlikely place our multifaceted story began.

It goes on today, more than a century later, originally called conservation, then environmentalism, as social movement and government policy activity expanded beyond national forests, parks, and wildlife refuges to include a vast pollution-control effort at all governmental levels. The first president engaged in this new government commitment to nature protection—Harrison—had to have this new policy area explained to him, which did not take
long, as he was only asked to sign some papers preserving federal timberland. Counting from Harrison, twenty-two successive presidents (including Obama) have with varying degrees of enthusiasm engaged the expanding natural resource protection mission Harrison had accepted for what turned out to be a permanent stay (for environmental policy, not for Harrison) in and around the White House. A slight majority of the twenty-two over the years has aligned with the two energetic Roosevelts and helped make environmental policy a growing enterprise. A substantial minority of presidents resisted nature protective policy expansions over the course of the twentieth century but were only able to delay or weaken it.

Of the many historical accounts of environmentalism, some frame the story as a social movement, which it was and is; others frame it as the ideas of intellectuals such as Marsh, John Muir, John Burroughs, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson, or some combination thereof. This book is built around presidents and federal policy, where there has been a rich environmental engagement ranging from Theodore Roosevelt’s establishment of the Pelican Island bird refuge when a lawyer in his office told him the US Constitution did not explicitly prohibit it, to Calvin Coolidge playing hide-and-seek games in the Oval Office while ignoring reports of coastal industrial pollution. Presidents have mattered, a little or a lot, as they used or resisted these new objectives and tools.
THE NEW NATION’S PUBLIC LANDS  A FIRST
CENTURY WITHOUT A NATIONAL VISION

If we ask when conservation—the original name for the broad concern to protect the US natural environment from damage and depletion—arrived on the agenda of the federal government, and thus of presidents, we discover a surprise. It took a century after the founding of the nation. Sustained presidential engagement came not with George Washington, nor with the Thomas Jefferson who sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map the resources of the West, nor with Abraham Lincoln, who mobilized the nation for the Civil War. The environmental protection enterprise in our national life and politics came to the president’s desk in the administration of a much smaller figure, Benjamin Harrison, elected in 1888. It was still there, and growing, for all his successors.

It takes only a little knowledge of US history to generate an immediate objection to this. Although history texts and college classes are typically built around a narrative constructed out of the dominating issues posed in our early national life—slavery, the tariff, a national bank—historians know that few matters attracted more congressional attention in the republic’s first century than the disposition of one natural resource—the public domain, or public lands. At one time or another 78 percent of the 2.3 billion acres now constituting the United States was in federal hands. The original thirteen states, after much quarreling, ceded to the federal government 233 million acres in the decade after the union was formed. The government leaders in Washington, D.C., no matter which political party dominated at the time, pursued the general objective of acquiring
more public lands by war or treaty or purchase, confident that they could figure out later how to pass them on to users, which the federal government was not and did not intend to be. An additional 523 million acres (MA) came with the Louisiana Purchase in 1903. Florida (43 MA) and much of the Pacific Northwest (180 MA) were added by treaty. The nation gained 334 MA from Mexico at the end of the Mexican-American War and 365 million with the purchase of Alaska in 1867.

Thus the fledgling federal government owned a huge part of the US environment, which land-hungry citizens wanted transferred to them as farmers, miners, loggers, livestock herders. Inevitably, then, the public lands acquired by the new federal government as a sort of splendid dowry concerned the Continental Congress and every federal Congress from the first. There was general agreement that the government should transfer—a word that could mean lease, sell, give—to citizens use of this dowry of land mostly west of the first thirteen states. In its highest-minded form the impulse to privatize public lands would turn landless and unskilled laborers into Jefferson’s “sturdy yeoman farmers,” who were the necessary core, in a broadly held view, of republican democracy. Beyond this, the national government had no long-term goals of its own with respect to the public lands other than to strike some political balance between contending goods, such as fostering development, pleasing constituents, and raising revenue.

Striking that balance was the source of endless partisan and regional political infighting. Congress, as well as state legislatures hoping to influence Capitol Hill, wrangled incessantly about the best ways to transfer the lands to land-hungry citizens and the corporations they were forming. Federal land was used to pay soldiers for their service; to provide a source of revenue from sales; to help found land-grant, state-run universities and other educational institutions; to help the states with a variety of development projects; to aid railroad expansion westward. Conflict came not just from infighting over these competing uses but also from sectional divisions. Some in the East wanted high fees from land sales in order to discourage the drain of coastal labor westward. Others in the East and Midwest, moved by mounting antislavery sentiment, argued for essentially free land for homesteaders, who would carry those sentiments into the new territories and states. Southerners supported land sales priced for maximum revenue so that the tariff, the main source of federal revenue, could be cut.

Public land law was thus in a constant state of dispute and satisfied no
one, given especially the fraudulent manipulation of those laws by speculators, corporations, fence-erecting squatters, grazing outfits, and illegal timber cutters. These issues gave many Congresses much to orate about—what was on and under public land and how to give it away or sell it. These were not environmental matters as we use the term, and there was no backdrop of actual or impending scarcity. President John Quincy Adams in 1828 set aside almost 1,500 acres of oaks on Santa Rosa Island in Pensacola Bay for future naval masts and spars and was harshly criticized for it in the next election.

The disposal of public lands would seem an easy assignment but was not. It came in fits and starts, influenced by economic conditions and wars with Indian nations, and it sometimes came in large hunks. Several (mostly southern) states were given millions of acres of what were regarded as useless marshlands in 1850. By the end of the Civil War, the Homestead Act of 1862 had begun its distribution of 288 million acres in 160-acre parcels. Grants to states peeled off 328 million acres; to railroads went 94 million. By 1867, with the purchase of Alaska, almost 1.5 billion acres were still in federal hands, but the acquisition phase was over, and “disposal,” the unanimously agreed-upon goal of national land policy, began to relentlessly shrink the nation’s immense land dowry.

From time to time presidents became involved with the public land issue through territorial acquisition. Think of Jefferson buying the Louisiana Territory, or James Polk making war on Mexico and annexing much of its northern acreage. This was nation building and was occasionally presidential business. Yet the disposal of public lands was the messy job of the General Land Office in the executive branch, working under an immense tangle of laws annually piled one on the other by Congress. In Paul Gates’s magisterial history of public land law, he estimated that Congress had passed 3,500 separate land laws (when he counted them in the 1960s) with no overall coherence, provoking a cascade of disputes.

This arena of national policy was usually beneath presidential notice. One turns to the many biographies of US presidents from Washington to Harrison and finds in the indexes of these books virtually no entries under “public lands.” Notable exceptions would be Andrew Jackson’s unpopular efforts to keep white settlers from stealing Indian lands and Lincoln’s signing of the Homestead Act of 1862, the Republican Party’s effort to expand the number of farmers in the West by offering 160 acres to individual settlers upon five years of cultivation of the land. Millard Fillmore in 1851 became one of sev-
eral pre–Civil War presidents to recommend sale or lease of mining claims, an idea with little traction. Congressional attention to the public land law of mining accelerated contentiously in the 1870s, notably crippled by the almost total absence in US government of either the will or the regulatory capacity for establishing a government-regulated or -owned mining industry.

This mostly forgotten and contentious history of public land disposal can by no stretch be called “natural resource management.” It was certainly not environmental protection as we understand it. Presidents—and Congresses—were not in that business yet, in the century between Washington and Harrison.

Thus nature’s abundance was still evident. Historian William Cronon tells of New England colonists who saw spawning alewives, smelt, and sturgeon so thick they fancied they might walk across the water on the fishes’ backs; waterfowl so dense at migrating time that “some have killed a hundred geese in a week, fifty ducks at a shot, forty teals at another”; and “millions of millions of passenger pigeons so thick that I could see no sun.” It was there in inexhaustible bounty to be used, most assumed, and any needed replenishing spoken of in the Book of Genesis would come from the land and the creatures themselves. Any changes made by humans represented progress, as the US wildlands were turned into cities, farms, gardens.

Armed with this basic exploitative outlook, the US population expanded westward. A population of 4 million at the founding grew to 23 million by 1850, then tripled to 76 million by 1900, expanding to the Pacific and settling even the remote, inhospitable sectors of the national territory sufficiently so that the Census Bureau declared in 1890 that the frontier, in the sense of a line of settlement moving westward, could no longer be said to exist. This growing population daily enhanced its technical capabilities to clear land; dam and divert rivers; drain swamps; plow; reap; mine; manufacture goods; build expanding cities. Expansionists, as their bible instructed them, were being fruitful, multiplying, and subduing the continent (and the original inhabitants), while leaving the replenishing to nature itself.

DEFORESTATION IN AMERICA

A billion acres of forest covered the part of the continent that was to become the United States, three-quarters of it east of the Mississippi. The forest
cover of New England—vast stands of maple, birch, and hemlock only slightly modified by Indian ground-clearing fires—was the first to give way to plowed fields and the search for timber for home heating and other energy uses, fencing, railroad ties, housing, naval stores, and household products. By the mid-nineteenth century household timber cutting was augmented by mechanized crews in the expanding mobile lumbering industry as it spread into the Ohio Valley and then to the states on the western shores of the Great Lakes—Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—leveling forests of white pine, maple, oak, hemlock, cedar to feed into the steam-powered circular and band saws of portable mills following the tree-topplers. A growing country demanded more wood products, and industrial lumbering veered southward, responding to boosters such as William H. Harrison of Chicago, whose How to Get Rich in the South (1888) promised the “supply of timber is inexhaustible.”

It may have seemed so in the 1880s, when the Appalachian forests had been severely thinned by individual settler/farmers and the appetite for naval stores had drawn small timber outfits and sawmills into only the easily reached virgin forests of loblolly pines and hill-country hardwoods of the Carolinas. South and west of that, most of the South’s original forest cover was intact. One writer remembers the forests along the Natchez Trace in Mississippi:

“It was the Garden of Eden had the people only known it. The finest hardwood forest that ever grew out of the ground covered . . . this great State of Mississippi and it was fine. . . . The massive yellow poplar . . . the red gum, . . . its texture as fine as mahogany. . . . Then the ash, hickory, beech and white maple. . . . This greatest of all forests was a haven for the deer, wild turkey, wild hog, grey fox.”

Historian Tom Clark, in his lyrical The Greening of the South (1984), writes of a vast 147 million acres of longleaf pine that “hovered around the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts,” stretching from southern Virginia to eastern Texas, and of a larger area of cypress hardwoods in river bottoms and adjacent highlands, “400,000 square miles lying silently and awesomely in virgin woods.”

Down from the exhausted virgin forestlands of the Great Lakes region came the “timber carpetbaggers,” in Clark’s phrase—lumber companies from New York, Michigan, and Illinois—joining the undercapitalized south-
ern outfits, buying private lands or access to them, claiming public lands when possible, cutting illegally as well as legally. There was virtually no reforestation and no forest research. Industrial lumbering companies moved on to the next stand. Clark renders a harsh verdict on the lumbering industry “that seemed destined for oblivion and left more than 150 million acres of forest lands [in the South] an economic shambles.”

AWAKENING TO WILDLIFE DEPLETION

To those felling timber in and across seemingly endless forests, destiny commanded those doing the work—westering, nation building, economically developing. Worriers about the permanence of North America’s vast forests were eventually heard, but the first doubts about the new nation’s conquering and settling style came from the hunters. The deer were deemed “overhunted” in New England, reflected by a closed season in Massachusetts as early as 1696 and intermittently across New England thereafter. Elk were thinning out east of the Appalachians as the nineteenth century began, and the last bison on that side of the range was reported killed in 1801. By midcentury the 60 million beaver estimated in North America when Columbus landed were gone but for patches retreating from the pelt gatherers into the high country of the West.

Most game hunters were subsistence and market hunters, but some were sportsmen, ranging on weekends out from New York and Boston into the Adirondacks or northern Maine, from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., into the watery edges of the Chesapeake Bay. They were often keenly aware of the dwindling numbers of waterfowl, turkey, deer. As early as 1844 the secretary of the New York Sporting Club informed a local newspaper that “the objects and pursuits of the club . . . are confined solely to the protection and preservation of game.” It may have been the first private conservation organization in the United States, but in the 1850s such groups formed in other states.

The sweeping habitat alteration brought by deforestation and expanded farm acreage in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth combined with aggressive hunting and improved firearms to reduce wildlife numbers. Then the unimagined began to happen. Astonishingly dense and vast flocks of passenger pigeons were commonplace in the early
days of the nation. One ornithologist saw a flock in Kentucky in 1806 he estimated as a mile wide and forty miles long, and John James Audubon reported a flight of the birds in Ohio that blotted out the noonday sun as in a solar eclipse. The Carolina parakeet seemed equally numerous in the Carolinas and Florida. Without qualm, hunters knocked or netted them out of the air for meat, decorative feathers, or mere sport. Incas, the last parakeet, and Martha, the last pigeon, died in zoos in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Equally sudden and astonishing was the diminishment of the vast herds of buffalo (bison) stretching from the East Coast to the immense migrating herds on the Great Plains, perhaps 60–100 million animals. After the Civil War the railroad carved up their habitat, and there began a great slaughter for hides or tongues or Indian impoverishment or sport, the annual kill estimated at 5 million in the early 1870s. By the mid-1880s only remnants of buffalo adding up perhaps to one thousand in all remained in pieces of Texas, Colorado, the Dakotas, and along the Yellowstone River. This storied animal’s complete extinction was glumly predicted.

These dramatic modifications of the US environment brought by population growth, dispersion of that population across the continent, and the relentless pace of industrialization generated a slowly building literature characterized by expressions of alarm. Complaints about wildlife depletion had been heard for generations, but in the 1870s there was an astounding increase in national and local groups of sportsmen and their national magazines. American Sportsman, Forest and Stream, and Field and Stream were founded and gained wide readership in that decade, and historian John Reiger has counted 308 hunting and 34 fishing groups active not only in comradeship and storytelling but in pressing local and state governments to enforce game protection laws (some of which dated back to colonial times), establish game preserves, plant trees to restore habitat, and establish fish and wildlife commissions (with little power and low budgets). This little-noticed ferment over wildlife depletion, although it had little impact on the slaughter of beaver, buffalo, passenger pigeons, Carolina parakeets, and other once-abundant game, would flow into the public land controversies of the 1890s.

Seen in the centennial year of 1876, just to choose a vantage point, the impressively growing country was racing through its resources of timber, soil, and wildlife with only scattered complaints from naturalists and nature writers and spasmodic attention by local governments. Presidents and Congress
were occupied with the really important national issues of slavery and secession, tariffs, the money supply. Then, in the last three decades of the century, the foremost (and essentially the only) natural resource policy issue facing the federal government on an ongoing basis—public land disposal—took a remarkable new turn.

RETHINKING NATURE AND THUS THE PUBLIC LANDS

An essential part of the context for that change of mind about the public domain to the west was the dramatic clear-cutting of US forests by industrial lumbering companies in the second half of the nineteenth century. The production of lumber increased eightfold from 1850 to 1910, more than double the rate of population growth, which tripled in that period, Douglas MacCleery tells us in *American Forests* (1992). At the start of the twentieth century US timber was being cut much faster than the rate of growth, and forest cover was shrinking while demand for timber continued to increase. Fire destroyed 20–50 million acres annually, and the lumbering industry was shockingly wasteful of the timber it did cut from the earth. There was virtually no reforestation or long-term forest management from the private sector. Knowledgeable people began to warn of a “timber famine” ahead.

Against the background of this headlong destruction of forests, two new streams of thought on natural resource matters gained momentum in the last decades of the nineteenth century and began to converge. The first was the growing popularity of the nature appreciation themes pioneered in the fiction and essays of Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and other writers who both reflected and legitimized a sharp turn among readers from terror and revulsion of wilderness to appreciation of it. Artist George Catlin wrote that the next step beyond appreciation and capturing (as he did) the landscapes of the West in portraits, sketches, and essays during an nine-year visit from 1832 to 1841 was to “imagine places like Yellowstone as they might in [the] future be seen (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could see for ages to come.” The year Catlin arrived in the West, 1832, Congress set aside the Arkansas Hot Springs area for preservation, with the limited intent of protecting the area’s medicinal springs as a tourist attraction.
Catlin seems the first to have articulated a preservationist alternative to public land “disposal”—though a case might be made for Jefferson, who in 1767 on a walk in Virginia came upon what he called “the most sublime of Nature’s works.” The natural bridge was a 215-foot-high limestone arch that he bought and declared, “I view it in some degree as a public trust and would on no consideration permit the bridge . . . to be masked from public view.”

Thoreau, a century later, urged the readers of the Atlantic Monthly to see wilderness areas as places of spiritual nourishment and asked, “Why should not we . . . have our national preserves, . . . in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist?” These voices for wild-terrain preservation to the benefit of people from all corners of the nation reflected the strength of many forms of a broad nationalist impulse, among intellectuals at least. A similar spirit animated the urban park impulse, of which New York’s Central Park was the chief expression, as well as the historic preservation movement, its major project the purchase, restoration, and protection for public access of Washington’s home at Mount Vernon in the 1850s. The landscape painters and photographers of the Hudson River school and artists such as Albert Bierstadt acquainted a distant public with the stunning beauty of Yosemite and the Rockies.

Another stream of natural resource preservationist thought flourishing in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the rise of professional forestry, a science-based, new discipline that began to fashion a fundamental challenge to the reckless behavior of those, from small-lot tree cutters to the giant lumbering corporations such as Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company, Kirby Lumber Company of Texas, and the Northern Pacific Railroad, which acted as if the free-market lumbering practices stripping away US forest cover could preserve the forest resource base for future generations.

Why the new wilderness fixation? Historians offer a multifaceted explanation: the public optimism and confidence in social progress in the pre–Civil War years were giving way toward the end of the century to worries about the fundamental direction of an economy wracked by severe depressions in the mid-1870s, 1880s, and 1890s—worries about labor unrest, distress in the Farm Belt, the growth of socialist parties. If the Census Bureau was correct that the frontier no longer existed, and if historian Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in 1892, was right that frontier experience accounted for the vigor of US democracy and the optimistic national temperament, was the nation on the wrong course as it raced toward an urbanized
future? One last theory has its sponsors—that settlers of this country re-
sented the European sense of cultural superiority when they compared their
cathedrals and royal gardens with what the New World had built—until
places like Yellowstone were presented in paint, photo, and prose. Historian
Donald Worster argues that this growing impulse to “embrace . . . wild na-
ture” had by the end of the nineteenth century “become one of the most pop-
ular pursuits in the modern world.” He finds it rooted also in a search for
religious alternatives to the established Protestant churches.

To a growing number of writers and readers a different, intimate, and re-
spectful engagement with wilderness fulfilled a complex set of modern
yearnings. As time went on, Thoreau became less a singular voice and more
the literary patron of a growing number of notable, successful followers.
John Burroughs, born on a New York dairy farm in 1837, wrote nearly thirty
books offering to his large readership accounts of immediate, detailed, and
affectionate encounters with birds as well as speculations on the merits of
scientific, as contrasting with religious and aesthetic, sensibilities. At the
end of the century and until his death in 1921, he was, in the words of his
most recent (and best) biographer, “the most famous and widely published
nature writer in America.” This was quite an achievement, for the field was
rich in talent, including female nature writers with large audiences—Olive
Thorne Miller, Mabel Osgood Wright, Florence Merriam Bailey (whose “bird
books” had immense sales), and novelist Gene Stratton Porter (who made
the Linderlost Swamp an appealing destination for her heroines).

If Burroughs had a rival it was John Muir, born one year later in Scotland,
then migrating with his parents to a Wisconsin farm in 1849. After attending
the University of Wisconsin–Madison and fired with enthusiasm by a class
in botany, Muir decided to transfer to the “university of the wilderness” and
walked a thousand miles from Indiana to Florida, keeping a journal that he
later published. Muir then moved to California in 1868, finding work as a
sheepherder and ranch hand. This drew him into the Sierra Nevada Moun-
tains, where he was profoundly moved by the sight of Yosemite Valley, the
“grandest of all special temples of Nature.” He began to write about the Sier-
ras and was published in prominent magazines in the East as well as in Cali-
rnia. Muir’s lyrical voice and quasireligious engagement with nature
combined with a national “back-to-nature” cultural movement to make him
a distinctive and widely read national writer and the strongest voice for wild
nature since Thoreau: “The tendency nowadays to wander in wildernesses is
delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.”13

His was the much-quoted sentence expressing the core of what would in time be called ecology: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”14 His reputation drew several prominent writers to visit and hike with him in the Sierras: Robert Underwood Johnson, Emerson, Gifford Pinchot, and, in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt.

RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC LANDS

With the mention of Roosevelt I get ahead of the main story, which was a rethinking of our floundering national policy on the disposal of the public domain. The nature writers were a part of that rethinking, but they generated no action agenda. That would come from the increasing number of activists appalled by what was happening to the forestlands and wildlife of the United States and especially on that large remainder of the public domain Congress had not yet given away.

The government’s stewardship over these lands had been a scandal throughout the nineteenth century. The problems fell into two categories. Most public lands were in the arid Great Plains and Mountain West, vast regions too high and dry for agriculture. The project of transplanting to it farming homesteaders from the East had a high failure rate because they lacked capital, equipment, appropriate local knowledge, and rainfall. The second and larger problem was the lawlessness of land-hungry and impatient western ranchers and miners. The General Land Office, established in 1812 and lodged in the Department of the Interior after 1849, was an incompetent unit run by political hacks who took full advantage of opportunities for fraud and graft as they decided who got which acreage. The government in Washington, D.C., could not protect the land from invasion by poachers—timber cutters, miners, ranchers overgrazing fragile grasslands, and squatters. Archaeological sites were plundered by thieves carrying away Native American artifacts and dispersing, destroying, and desecrating indigenous sites.
This uncontrolled private rip-off of national assets intensified in the post–Civil War era of materialism, which historian Vernon Parrington memorably named the “Great Barbecue.” This mostly western story of abuse of natural resources was conveyed to the public in the new mass media magazines and newspapers in the second half of the century, along with another story of reckless exploitation, the harvesting of the eastern and southern virgin forests by lumbering outfits ever on the move and uninterested in reforestation. Congress was intermittently unhappy with the situation on the public lands, concerned with the struggling homesteaders, and oblivious to the environmental damage from lawless timber cutting and range overgrazing. Remedies were in short supply; half-hearted about the issue, Congress often favored just distributing the public lands among the states.

Two streams of thought converged in the mid-nineteenth century to generate a far-reaching reform movement, producing an alternative concept of the future of the public lands. The first, an increase in the appreciation of wilderness that began early in the century, was augmented in the 1870s by a second stream of thought and reformist energy drawing much of its talent from the ranks of a new and mostly eastern fraternity (they were almost all men) of scientifically trained bureaucrats calling themselves professional foresters. They shared with the wilderness defenders the goal of convincing members of the US public that they must make fundamental changes in values as well as personal and political behavior, or this bountiful continent would lose its forests and fertile soils as had ancient empires around the Mediterranean.

One mighty book provided the indispensable history-based vision of a grim future toward which the young republic was headed. George Perkins Marsh, a lawyer and US representative from Vermont, found Washington political life in the 1850s boring and spent most of his time learning foreign languages and helping launch the Smithsonian Institution. He eagerly accepted from President Lincoln a post as minister to Italy in 1862, served also in Turkey, and traveled widely in countries around the Mediterranean, where he noted the link between deforestation and the decline of civilizations. “The earth,” Marsh wrote in his remarkable 1864 book *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Nature*, “is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime and human improvidence . . . would reduce it to such a condition of impover-
ished productiveness . . . as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species.” Great civilizations around the Mediterranean, he wrote, had already gone through the destructive cycle of deforestation, erosion, flooding, weakening of agriculture and commerce. Several modern societies seemed to him on the same path—Australia, South Africa, the United States. All this in 1864! The book sold 10,000 copies before the year was out, was reprinted several times and revised, and had a large and continuing influence.15

Marsh proposed no real action program, but others who shared and were influenced by his warnings soon pushed a modest reform agenda for change in US public land policy. Carl Schurz was a Wisconsin senator with a reputation for civil service reform when new President Rutherford Hayes in 1877 appointed him secretary of the interior. He welcomed the appointment because he knew the department to be the most corrupt of all federal agencies, a place where this civil service reformer could make a large difference. He also carried in his memory from years in his native Germany a model of farsighted and firm timber management he wished to bring to the United States. He quickly launched an intensive study of timber policy on public lands, issued a report charging western lumbermen of “not merely stealing trees, but whole forests,” and proposed sweeping changes—selling timber at market value, sending enforcement teams to crack down on illegal cutting and milling on public lands, and initiating reforestation. In his first annual report, in 1877, Schurz offered a bold idea: “All timber lands belonging to the United States should be withdrawn from the operation of the preemption and homestead laws.”16

In his memoirs Schurz complained, “I found myself standing almost solitary and alone. Deaf was Congress, and deaf the people seemed to be.”17 “Almost” alone because he had a small group of allies in the newly formed American Forestry Association (AFA), and history was quietly moving in his direction. In 1817, historian Louise Peffer tells us in her indispensable book The Closing of the Public Domain (1972), Congress gave the president authority to permanently withdraw certain lands from entry, to allow Schurz to create military posts and lighthouses. Then in 1832 Congress, without much discussion, agreed to set aside for permanent public use the Arkansas Hot Springs for their medicinal value. Few sensed the extraordinary potential of the precedent, in Peffer’s words, that “ground possessing extraordinary natural values” could be “kept from becoming private property on the theory that a
wider public good would be served by retaining title in the government.” As we have seen, Catlin, writing in 1832 about the “probable extinction of buffaloes and Indians,” advocated a large national park where both indigenous people (not his terminology) and wildlife might be preserved. The idea broke through again when Thoreau, in an influential article in the Atlantic Monthly in 1858, asked, “Why should not we . . . have our national preserves . . . and not be ‘civilized off the face of the earth’—our forests . . . [used] not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation?”

A place to apply a version of the idea was soon found—a majestic valley on public land inside the borders of the State of California and in the Sierra Nevada Range. The high, remote Yosemite Valley had been seen by the time of the Civil War by only 600 or so tourists, so stunned by the sight of its overhanging granite cliffs and waterfalls that its fame had spread to eastern magazine audiences. On May 17, 1864, with the Civil War an all-encompassing national preoccupation, California Senator John Conness introduced a bill to set aside the Yosemite Valley and nearby Mariposa Grove of sequoias—sixty square miles of federal land—to California on the condition that it never be sold to private parties but “preserved for public use, resort, and recreation . . . for all time.” The acreage to be granted was “for all public purposes worthless but which constitute . . . some of the greatest wonders of the world.” Conness admitted the backing of “various gentlemen” of California, “of fortune, of taste, and of refinement.” Not much is known about this almost furtive preservationist impulse arising in California. The preliminary work of ideas had been done except for the part about making the gift to a state government. The bill passed without significant objection and was signed by President Lincoln without comment. The federal government had given a large piece of the Yosemite area away to the people of California, though Senator Conness spoke of the “benefit of mankind.”

Soon it was obvious that giving the Yosemite Valley floor and the Mariposa Grove to the state government in Sacramento was a flawed solution to the question of what to do with remaining US public lands—especially those of exceptional grandeur. Illegal homesteaders began to construct lodgings and other tourist facilities in Yosemite, moving faster than the government in Sacramento, where the governor of California, with the gift of Yosemite on his desk, appointed a board of commissioners to oversee the new state park. Among them was Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York’s Central Park. Olmsted prepared a report on management issues that linked
public parks to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and stressed the necessity of protecting the asset. The state government went on the cheap, hiring one man, Galen Clark, at $500 a year, to maintain roads and guide and house tourists. Inevitably, individuals abused the park, and a particularly aggressive homesteader named James Hutchins built housing and claimed property rights. But Muir was by now a frequent Yosemite visitor and interpreter as well as a nature writer with a growing audience reaching to the great cities of the East. He drew attention to abuses of the valley floor in Yosemite and denounced sheepherders for bringing “hooved locusts” who devastated the fragile alpine grasses. In September 1890, a national park bill for Yosemite passed both houses of Congress and was signed by President Harrison. Congress had reclaimed the abused asset, clearing the way for Yosemite and other places to evolve toward a national, not state-led, public park system in the United States.

The struggle over what to do with Yellowstone after it was declared a park in 1872 was fought out among eastern politicians, several of whom had visited the high, remote region and told incredulous easterners of its erupting geysers, hot springs, and stunning scenery and wildlife. A nineteen-man party visited the region in 1870 and reported a campfire agreement that the region should not be carved up for individual properties but “set apart as a great National Park.” Others, most persistent among them corporate officers of the Northern Pacific Railroad, liked the idea because it conjured up dreams of a tourist economy. The terrain, like that of Yosemite, was said to be fit for little else, certainly not farming by homesteaders. Congress debated several ideas—divide the region up into individual plots or perhaps give it to Wyoming when it became a state. President Ulysses Grant on March 1, 1872, signed a law establishing at Yellowstone the world’s first national park—2.2 million acres of spectacular mountains, waterfalls, geysers, and hot springs and an unsurpassed diversity of fauna including buffalo, elk, wolves, more than 300 bird species, 70 mammal species, and 128 butterfly species. Some congressional doubters were won over by the argument that Yellowstone was too high and cold to be suitable for farming and therefore “economically worthless” unless seen and “used” as a tourist attraction because of the natural wonders found there. No one in the Grant administration spoke of the legislation as a far-reaching precedent beneficial to citizens from other, eastern and southern states, not to mention future generations.
Grant’s memoir makes it clear that he understood and agreed with the basic argument for a park at Yellowstone, a place of such stunning beauty (he claimed to have visited there with his wife) that it should be reserved for all US citizens, not a few homesteaders. He must, however, have been ignorant of the facts on the ground, because he said nothing then or later of the need for military or other protection against poachers or artifact thieves. Disorder and violence continued—some of it brought by illegal hunters who killed all but a handful of bison and 4,000 of the park’s elk herd in one year, some by the US Army’s war against the Nez Perce as it drove them from the park. In 1886 General Philip Sheridan sent Cavalry Troop M and eventually three more to police the park—boring duty, most troopers complained, riding horseback over 2 million acres in an effort to curb poaching, vandalism, and careless campfires.

This shift at Yellowstone from disposal of public lands to individuals or corporations toward what was vaguely called a “reservation” alternative was not just a western curiosity. The New York Forest Commission in 1872 halted the sale of state forestland without indicating what would replace “disposal,” and in 1885 New York established the Adirondack Forest Preserve, 715,000 acres to remain forever as “wild forest lands.” But preservation of wilderness valued for itself was not the primary motive even here. The Adirondack park was the watershed from which New York City took most of its water, and a recent drought bringing low water to the Erie Canal had moved the legislators to prevent development in the watershed.

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT GROWS—FROM THE TOP DOWN

We can now see that a social and political mobilization was taking place—one without a name—that would transform public land policy and mark the national policy debut of one of the longest-running US social movements. The social base of the critique of the nation’s reckless squandering of its natural endowment mobilized first among sportsmen, people who greatly enjoyed hunting and fishing and had become alarmed about the depletion of their quarry. The spark came in the 1870s when a sportsmen’s magazine counted 34 organizations devoted to fishing and more than 300 to hunting, most of them only recently formed. It is not clear whether the emergence of
four major national sportmen’s magazines in that decade—American Sportsman, Forest and Stream, Field and Stream, and American Angler—was cause, effect, or both. What is clear is the commitment of these organizations and magazines to go beyond journalism of outdoor exploits to include a sustained editorial complaint about wildlife extinction and the advocacy of actions citizens and governments might take to protect both the wildlife and its nurturing habitat.

Another elite mobilization took place among people increasingly worried over timber depletion. The AFA was founded in 1875 and the American Forestry Congress in 1882, the latter led by Bernhard Fernow, a German-born and trained forester who tirelessly extolled the German model of timber management. These groups, joined by the new (1873– ) and prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), were in agreement that US forests must somehow come under more protective federal management, and they made sure their views were heard in the eastern media and in the halls of Congress.

These two concerns ran on separate tracks throughout the 1870s and 1880s as they gained strength. In at least one influential organization in New York City, they sat down together on a December evening in New York in 1887 at the invitation of a short, nearsighted man named Theodore Roosevelt (TR).

As a child growing up on the family estate at Oyster Bay, Long Island, TR read books about nature and built a “Roosevelt Museum of Natural History” in his bedroom. He studied natural history at Harvard in the hope that he could have a career like that of John James Audubon. He visited the South Dakota Badlands in search of the outdoor hunting and ranching life that might remedy his asthma and wrote several “nature books,” such as Hunting Trips of a Ranchman (1885) and The Wilderness Hunter (1893).

On that 1887 evening in New York TR asked ten amateur riflemen from the city’s elite to join him in establishing the Boone and Crockett Club. They did so, and the club, at first limited in membership to male hunters of big game, might well have become only a drinking, eating, and bragging club. But its leaders were TR and his close friend George Bird Grinnell, editor of the influential magazine Forest and Stream (1873– ), and the club soon became something larger. As Grinnell tells it, “Beginning as a club of riflemen . . . it early discovered that more important work was to be done in the field of protection than in that of destruction,” in arousing in the country the feel-
ing club members shared that the “selfishness of individuals was rapidly doing away with all the natural things of this country.” At Grinnell’s suggestion, the club was opened to those whose outdoor interests lay not only in big-game hunting but also in birds or fish or both, and the membership soon came to include many of the most respected men in the Boston-Washington corridor—Elihu Root, Henry Stimson, Owen Wister, Henry Cabot Lodge. The club members chose TR as their first president—a brilliant choice because he had an interesting future ahead of him. He was appointed New York police commissioner in 1895, became assistant secretary of the US Navy in 1897, was elected governor of New York in 1899, and became vice president of the United States in 1901, the year in which an assassin killed President William McKinley and gave TR his best and last promotion.

Again I have edged ahead of the story, which is the coming together in the 1880s and 1890s of the intellectual and organizational elements of a small, upper-class, energetic social movement determined to convince the US public and government to think about and treat nature differently. Before the Boone and Crockett Club organized, Grinnell established the Audubon Club in New York in 1886, though he was too busy to expand it. Not so the determined and resourceful Augustus (Harriet) Heminway of Boston, who was outraged at the bird slaughtering that was mostly driven by women’s’ purchases of plumed hats. She formed the Boston Audubon Club in 1896, and it quickly spread to other cities and states, becoming the National Audubon Society in 1905.

On the West Coast, Muir and his close ally Johnson, publishers of New York magazine The Century, convened in 1892 a meeting in San Francisco of some influential friends such as David Starr Jordan, the president of Stanford University; Warren Olney, an Oakland lawyer soon to be mayor; Muir’s artist friend William Keith; and several professors from the University of California–Berkeley and Stanford. The principal goal was to form some sort of group to help push for a change in the management and if possible also the size of the new Yosemite National Park, so designated in 1890 after California failed to protect the Yosemite Valley floor from harmful intrusions. The grassland along the river, Muir wrote, “is downtrodden, frowsy, and like an abandoned backwoods pasture.” After Civil War hero Sheridan condemned the squatting, wildlife poaching, and vandalism of the thermal springs, Congress half-heartedly tried assigning ten “protective assistants” to protect the part of Yosemite that was still a national park. When vandal-
ism continued, the US Cavalry patrolled the four new national parks from 1886 to 1916—Yellowstone, General Grant and Sequoia National Parks, and, in California, the parts of Yosemite not given to that state—without clear goals or much enthusiasm for duty in these remote outposts. It seemed time to form a lobbying group, which they called the Sierra Club. Muir hoped “we would be able to do something for wilderness and make the mountains glad,” whatever that might be. Yosemite was foremost in their minds, though they were fully aware of growth pressures on all West Coast natural places. The club quickly enrolled 300 members—prominent Bay Area educators, scientists, politicians, and business leaders—and pledged itself to “explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast” and “to enlist the support . . . of the people and the government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.”

organizing for conservation

These three mostly male, Caucasian, East Coast, upper-class organizations were the most visible of many lobbying groups arguing for different federal (and state) land policies. Yet the demand for better governmental protection of natural resources was broader, deeper, and growing. The National Audubon Society had chapters in sixteen states by the end of the century, and its members were beginning to talk about habitat protection along with discouraging the “buying and wearing . . . of the feathers of any wild birds.” The ranks of Audubon chapters were chiefly female, reflecting an expansion of women’s civic clubs after the Civil War. By the 1880s women’s clubs could be found in every sizable city and every state, many of them taking up environmental issues broadly defined as including tree planting and protection of nearby natural and archaeological sites. They were brought together when the General Federation of Women’s Clubs organized nationally in 1890, the world’s largest women’s organization, with considerable clout in city, state, and national politics.

We can see in all of this the beginnings of what would be called the conservation movement, a term apparently invented in 1907 by the most prominent and influential forester of that generation, Pinchot, trained at Yale University and in Germany. We now recognize conservation as part of the
larger progressive reform movement, a middle-class mobilization of social criticism and reform ideas that played a large role in the social and political life of the United States from the 1890s to the end of World War I and onward.

What did these newly organized conservationist reformers want? They would have answered in broad terms, quoting Emerson, Marsh, Burroughs, Muir: the end-of-century United States needed changed public attitudes and behavior regarding the land and its creatures. Their tools for such changes were the educational effect of lectures, books, tracts, illustrated articles in the new magazines with national circulation. Then came the formation of voluntary citizens’ associations. Then governmental action, usually starting with governments close to home. Several states in and after the 1870s had established forest study commissions, offered tax incentives, and declared Arbor Day for tree planting as well as enacted forest and hunting regulations (poorly enforced).

As with the campaigns for abolition and women’s suffrage, against child labor and alcohol, and other reforms of the Progressive Era, the natural resource protectors found state governments usually slow, irresolute, poorly staffed for regulatory assignments, overmatched by national corporations as well as local poachers. Those concerned with wilderness/wildlife protection and those focused on forestry/public lands soon realized the importance of gaining command of the federal government. As the 1890s arrived, their national policy goals were just becoming clear to them—more national parks and national forests and better protection for those already established, especially the crown jewel, Yellowstone. Beyond this, the nation’s public land law and administration must make a historic shift from privatization to preservation (and management) of permanently public space. The road to this shift was not yet clear—which translates as “leadership wanted.”

I am aware there is a parallel story cluster churning through the nineteenth century of park building in the heart of US metropolitan areas, including Central Park in New York and smaller green spaces in virtually every large city. The best account of this story is my son Wade Graham’s American Eden (2011). Read these books together.