
Roosevelt, Conservation, and the Revival of Democracy

As this issue of *Conservation Biology* lands in the mailboxes of committed conservation scientists, policymakers, and advocates around the world, we mark an auspicious anniversary. If you are inclined to dismiss history as of little relevance to the unprecedented challenges we face in conservation, read no further. If, however, you wish to feel your efforts as part of a larger and longer story, to pay homage to those upon whose shoulders we stand, and to prepare well for the “Great Work” ahead, the moment is worth noting. And if you share David Orr’s conviction that “it is time to reexamine American democracy and its prospects”—for the sake not only of American democracy, but of democracy and conservation worldwide—then it is *necessary* to note the anniversary.

One hundred years ago, on 6 September 1901, a mentally disturbed anarchist named Leon Czolgosz shot and seriously wounded U.S. President William McKinley as he attended the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was visiting with members of the Vermont Fish and Game League at a luncheon on Isle La Motte in Lake Champlain. Upon learning the news, Roosevelt and his aides hastened to Buffalo to monitor the president’s precarious condition.

By the tenth of September, McKinley had recovered sufficiently that Roosevelt was able to leave Buffalo for a short vacation in the nearby Adirondack Mountains. T.R. met his family at Camp Tahawus (described as “the most remote human habitation in the Empire State”) at the base of Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the Adirondacks (Morris 1979). The

vice president spent the evening of 11 September at a cabin upslope from the camp. The next morning Roosevelt, his wife Edith, two of their children, and several other members of a climbing party embarked on an ascent of the mountain. They spent the night in cabins halfway up the mountain.

The following morning came on grey, dank, and drizzly. The climbing party split, Edith and the children heading back down to Tahawus, Roosevelt and the others hiking on up to the peak of Marcy, which they reached by late morning. Descending then to the shore of Lake Tear of the Clouds, highest source of the Hudson River, Roosevelt and his companions paused for lunch. As they ate, a camp guide emerged from the trees bearing a yellow telegram with the news that McKinley’s condition had deteriorated and instructing Roosevelt to return to Buffalo at once. After an arduous journey out of the mountains, Roosevelt boarded a night train to Buffalo, arriving there at dawn on 14 September. He learned upon his arrival that McKinley had died. That evening Roosevelt took the oath that made him the nation’s twenty-sixth president (Roosevelt 1913).

Roosevelt’s rise shocked and appalled many of the political cognoscenti, including not a few in his own Republican Party. Roosevelt had joined the presidential ticket the previous year only after dithering with his party’s leaders. As governor of New York, Roosevelt had shown a troublesome penchant for “altruistic” legislation, especially regarding the protection of natural resources and the reigning in of corporate power. Roosevelt’s initiatives in New

York flummoxed the high, mighty, and influential. Fearing that further action by this bull (moose) in their china shop would diminish their fortunes and ruin the state’s economy, they found a convenient solution: draft Roosevelt for the vice presidency (“about the last thing,” Roosevelt opined, “for which I would care.”) (Morris 1979). Six months later, “that damned cowboy” was president. Both Roosevelt and his detractors faced a far different future than either had bargained for.

The naturalists and proto-conservationists of the day surely felt more at ease with Roosevelt’s ascendancy. Not since Thomas Jefferson took office a century before had the United States had a chief executive so well informed in the natural sciences. Roosevelt’s own ambitions and precocial talents as what we would now call a field biologist had been thwarted by higher education’s tendency to make a “fetish” out of the exclusive study of life’s “minutiae.” “I had no more desire to become a microscopist and section-cutter than to be a mathematician,” he recalled later in life (Roosevelt 1913). This, however, did not idle Roosevelt’s curiosity. Even as he barnstormed the country during the election season of 1900, his curiosity burned. A campaign timetable notes that, on a day loaded with seven stump speeches and sessions devoted to “dictating letters,” “answering telegrams,” and “meeting the press,” Roosevelt reserved the period from 12:00 to 12:30 p.m. for “reading an ornithological work” (Morris 1979). (This is the part where we all sigh for the day when such a chief executive may again inhabit the West Wing.)

Roosevelt's tenure in the White House, from 1901 to 1909, was as tumultuous, invigorating, dramatic, and provocative as the man himself. For those who care about conservation, it was the time when the word came to acquire something like its modern meaning, not only for those in the public policy arena but for the American public generally. As the Progressive Era campaign of political and economic reform advanced, conservation became one of many fronts on which Roosevelt and his allies (including his chief forester and confidante Gifford Pinchot) confronted the forces of concentrated power, political corruption, corporate "cunning and fraud," and "the tyranny of mere wealth, the tyranny of a plutocracy" (Roosevelt 1913).

We still live daily with Roosevelt's immense conservation legacy: more than 200 million acres of national forests, national monuments, national parks, and wildlife refuges that he proclaimed on the public domain; appointment of several prominent commissions through which he shaped a coherent national conservation policy; laws for "wild life" protection he helped to secure and enforce; and agencies he bolstered to carry out these policies and laws. Latter-day critics of various stripes have taken issue with aspects of this legacy. Modern conservation biologists, for example, may look back with consternation on the narrow utilitarian slant of Progressive Era policies affecting the development of forests, minerals, and waters. Still, when we read Roosevelt's stalwart affirmation, in reference to conservation, that "the Executive is the steward of the public welfare"—and when we know that he meant it—we find some deep political longing satisfied (Roosevelt 1913).

Roosevelt left the presidency in 1909. Shortly thereafter, Wisconsin's legendary progressive senator Robert LaFollette sought to assess his legacy. After weighing the construction of the Panama Canal, the securing of peace in the Russo-Japanese

War, and other notable presidential acts, LaFollette considered "the great and statesmanlike movement for the conservation of our National resources, into which Roosevelt so energetically threw himself at a time when the Nation as a whole knew not that we are ruining and bankrupting ourselves as fast as we can." This LaFollette considered "the greatest thing Roosevelt did, undoubtedly. . . . This immense idea Roosevelt, with high statesmanship, dinned into the ears of the Nation until the Nation heeded." The impact spread even beyond the nation's boundaries. Roosevelt deserved credit for "inspiring and actually beginning a world movement for staying terrestrial waste and saving for the human race the things upon which, and upon which alone, a great and peaceful and progressive and happy . . . life can be founded. What statesman in all history has done anything calling for so wide a view and for a purpose more lofty?" (quoted in Roosevelt 1913).

As important as is Roosevelt's conservation legacy per se, it is just as important to note how closely conjoined conservation, political reform, and economic justice were in the Progressive Era. Roosevelt's presidency changed forever not only America's physical but also its political landscape. Roosevelt was somewhat chary of the label "reformer" and dismissive of "that type of bubble reformer who is only anxious to go to extremes, and who always gets angry when he is asked what practical results he can show" (McCarthy 1912). But reformer he was, using his "big stick" against "mighty industrial overlords" and governmental "agents of reaction," and for "the practical betterment of living and working conditions among the mass of the people." Roosevelt, in LaFollette's words, "made reform respectable in the United States" and "impressed on the American mind the one great truth of economic justice" (quoted in Roosevelt 1913).

Politically, we have yet to come fully to terms with the marriage of democratic reform and conservation that Roosevelt embodied. For that matter, we conservationists have yet to understand how our first century of conservation has prepared us for the "Great Work" ahead—the century of conservation we now face. But for all of its confusion and vitriol, the bizarre results of the presidential election of 2000 may offer us a key clue in confronting this political conundrum.

Before considering that clue, I offer a thesis: In the transition from the older conservation movement and tradition to the modern environmental movement, we lost a great deal, and we gained a great deal. We have yet to understand fully those gains and losses, and we are still reckoning with them. In considering this thesis, one might choose any one of many prompting questions. In the summer of 1964, the U.S. House of Representatives passed its version of the Wilderness Act by a vote of 373 to 1; how might that vote turn out today? Why, as the "wise use" movement arose, were environmentalists caught with their history down, unable to respond by drawing upon a venerable conservation tradition that has long emphasized community values, cooperative resource management, civic engagement, and responsible citizenship? Why has the conservation of private lands—70% of the United States' land base—only recently begun to receive the type of attention it badly needs and deserves from environmental organizations? Why did advocates of environmental justice and land conservation have such difficulty, initially, in recognizing their shared concerns? Why still do we have too few voices able to articulate the cross-landscape connections between wildland protection, biodiversity preservation, ecosystem restoration, sustainable agriculture, and sustainable suburban and urban communities—all as part of a coherent and politi-

cally diverse commitment to conservation?

Such questions help us identify at least some of the causes of what David Orr terms our “utterly inappropriate” politics when it comes to conservation. The causes include ones we as conservation biologists are intimately familiar with: fragmentation, ignorance, and neglect. Not, in this case, the fragmentation, ignorance, and neglect of the physical landscape, the effects of which we are so sadly aware; rather, it is our conservation vision and the continuity of our political inheritance that is too often fragmented, ignored, and neglected.

Now the clue. Examine the county-by-county results of the 2000 election. As *USA Today* explained it, “The map tells the story. . . . Geography is perhaps the most striking yardstick by which to measure the gulf between those who voted for Bush and those who voted for Gore” (Lawrence 2000). George W. Bush, who invoked the Roosevelt legacy more than once on the campaign trail, prevailed in some 2400 of the nation’s 3100 counties. Al Gore, with his strong environmentalist credentials, prevailed by an almost three to one margin in urban areas. The suburbs split down the middle. Ralph Nader, with his claim to the progressive political mantle, failed to meet his own 5%-of-the-votes threshold. Apparently, among the things we have lost in the transition from conservation to environmentalism, and in misconstruing their historical relationship, is a strong sense of common purpose across the rural-urban divide. This common purpose is a legacy that, in at least a few places, a few older conservationists can yet recall. It is a tragic loss.

This begs further hard questions. Why are Democrats increasingly scarce in much of rural America, and Republicans in much of urban America? Why has “rural environmentalist” come to seem like more and

more of an oxymoron? How, from a global perspective, does our rural-urban split reflect similar global fault lines between the north and south, the rich and poor, the developed and developing nations? How can we hope even to begin making headway toward David Orr’s “moral and ecological recalibration of humans in the biosphere” when we have such a hard time making common cause along the county road that leads out from the city, through the sprawling subdivisions, past increasingly vulnerable small farms and ranches, and ends—at least we may hope—at the edge of a still-wild place?

And then let us ask the most challenging question of all: how can we change this situation? How can we renew not only connections across the landscape but also the commitment to political reform, civic responsibility, and care for land that gave birth to the conservation movement one century ago?

One thing is certain. It will not happen the way it did during the Progressive Era. Conservationists have learned at least a few things in the intervening decades about the ways nature works, the capacities of ecosystems, the effects of people, and the consequences of blind tinkering. Meanwhile, our human communities, technologies, and economies have evolved profoundly. Our addictions to fossil fuels, constant entertainment, instant communications, mass media, and simplistic answers lock us into political patterns that may have to break before they are reformed. Some may be nostalgic for the progressive verve of Roosevelt and LaFollete, but they will not be rising from their graves to meet us. We, their heirs, must chart new political paths. As David Orr notes, we did not choose this work, but we must rise to it.

We may begin by recognizing those who are already doing so. They are in our midst. They are reaching out

to their neighbors and recognizing their shared hydrology in watersheds around the earth. They are working to bring ranchers and land conservationists together in the American West. They are simultaneously restoring tallgrass prairies and defending the small farmer in the American midwest. They are rejecting spiteful political labels—and maybe even their own immediate economic or recreational self-interest—to defend roadless forests and other wildlands wherever they still exist. They are connecting commercial fishermen, managers, and scientists in efforts to avoid tragedies of the marine commons. They are strengthening social connections to build both healthier urban neighborhoods and healthier hinterlands. They are running for town and county boards, doing the hard work of local governance with a land ethic in mind. They are reviving democracy. They are recreating conservation. They are too few.

But they may be bolstered by the knowledge that, one hundred years ago, a bold and rash and immodest champion of democracy enacted dramatic reforms even as he sought, in his words, “to preserve from destruction beautiful and wonderful creatures whose existence was threatened by greed and wantonness” (Roosevelt 1913).

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