

# Conservation and the Progressive Movement: Growing from the Radical Center

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The year 2001 marked the 100th anniversary of two signal events in the annals of American politics and conservation. On January 1, 1901, Robert M. "Fighting Bob" La Follette was inaugurated as the governor of Wisconsin. Later that year, on September 14, Theodore Roosevelt assumed the U.S. presidency following the assassination of William McKinley. These events marked the arrival of the Progressive Era, during which conservation first emerged as a coherent movement. For several decades, the voices for reform had been swelling: Grangers, Greenbackers, and Populists across the rural Midwest; socially conscious urbanites and anti-monopolist businessmen; civil service crusaders and progressive educators; suffragists and settlement workers; forest advocates, wilderness preservationists, concerned scientists, and conscientious sportsmen.<sup>1</sup> With the rise of Roosevelt and La Follette, reform moved to the center stage of politics. In the decade that ensued, conservation flourished.

Roosevelt's immense conservation legacy is well known: the proclamation of more than 200 million acres of national forests, monuments, parks, and wildlife refuges on the public domain; appointment of high-level commissions through which his administration shaped the nation's first coherent conservation policy; enactment of new laws "to preserve from destruction beautiful and wonderful creatures whose existence was threatened by greed and wantonness"; and the bolstering of federal agencies to carry out these policies and enforce these laws. We have never had, before nor since, a president more knowledgeable in the natural sciences, or one

who took closer to heart the conviction that, as concerns conservation, “the Executive is the steward of the public welfare.”<sup>2</sup>

La Follette’s conservation legacy is more diffuse. Although a committed supporter of conservation measures throughout his political career, La Follette is identified primarily with his uncompromising dedication to political reform. To appreciate his contribution to conservation, one must read it in the broader context of the times. Wisconsin’s timber barons, who in 1901 were stripping off the last of the great stands of white pine, had dominated the state’s politics for three decades. La Follette’s rise to the governorship and later (in 1906) to the U.S. Senate marked the end of the pine-logging era as plainly as did the vast stump fields of the cutover North. Consumed by its own excess, the era of forest exploitation in the upper Great Lakes—and of the political influence and corruption that accompanied it—was bound to pass (as it did, to the South and the Pacific Northwest).<sup>3</sup>

Under La Follette and his followers, Wisconsin became a national leader in policy innovation in fields from education and labor law to public health and electoral reform. Roosevelt and La Follette clashed regularly as their political fortunes intersected—an ongoing battle of Progressive titans. During a moment of détente, Roosevelt praised “the movement for genuinely democratic popular government which Senator La Follette led to overwhelming victory in Wisconsin” and recognized Wisconsin as “literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation aiming to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> For his part, La Follette judged the president’s leadership in conservation as “the greatest thing Roosevelt did, undoubtedly. . . . 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.”<sup>5</sup>

The Roosevelt and La Follette anniversaries passed by with no fanfare, no high oratory. It is no surprise, given the way our contemporary political constituencies line up. Few Republicans seem interested in emulating their party’s Progressive forebears—Roosevelt and La Follette, of course, were both Republicans—and are content merely to invoke TR’s legacy in surefire applause lines. Few Democrats, who rely on urban and suburban environmentalists as sure votes, seem aware that there was once a broad-based conservation movement that included rural America, without which environmentalism as we know it today would simply not exist. Few of the contemporary heirs to Progressivism seem to envision their place in politics as

anything but pushing and pulling Democrats further toward the traditional left. Few libertarians seem to care as much about their public responsibilities as their private rights. All are bound by the tired mental image of a one-dimensional left-to-center-to-right political spectrum. All are inclined to render environmental issues into predictable politics.

By contrast, consider Wendell Berry’s careful words: “Our environmental problems . . . are not, at root, political; they are cultural. . . . Our country is not being destroyed by bad politics; it is being destroyed by a bad way of life. Bad politics is merely another result. To see that the problem is far more than political is to return to reality.”<sup>6</sup> The Progressive movement was indeed an intensely political response to a cultural problem. Roosevelt himself described the problem as a century-long “riot of individualistic materialism, under which complete freedom for the individual . . . turned out in practice to mean perfect freedom for the strong to wrong the weak.”<sup>7</sup> In the arena of conservation, it meant unrestrained power to plunder a continent’s natural wealth.

But, however political its means, the Progressive Era did not arise from within a single political party, and it was not identified with one (at least not until the tumultuous presidential election of 1912). Progressive forces fought within and between and outside the Republican and Democratic parties. Difficult as it may be, we must somehow try to imagine a time when the spirit of reform, fairness, equity, public service, and the primacy of the public good defined and pervaded political debate.

The conservation movement was among the fruits of that time and spirit. The twentieth century would bring fundamental changes in our understanding of ecosystems, the ethical foundations of conservation, and the social and economic connections within our lives and landscapes. These changes would call into question the scientific assumptions and utilitarian slant of Progressive Era conservation policies regarding development of the country’s forests, rangelands, minerals, and waterways. But the actions undertaken in the first decade of the 1900s ensured that there would in fact be a movement capable of evolving with time.

The Roosevelt and La Follette anniversaries did not pass without at least a modest nod. On September 23, 2001, on an evening somber with recent events, a group of us gathered in commemoration in Wisconsin’s Sauk County to hear voices from the Progressive tradition. It was a fit setting. Sauk County, in the south-central part of the state, was a historic hotbed of Progressivism and gave the world Fighting Bob’s remarkable wife, Belle

Case La Follette. Later on, Sauk County became the home place for Aldo Leopold's essays in *A Sand County Almanac*. That September night, we recited the words of Roosevelt:

The true reformer must study hard and work patiently. . . . Reformers, if they are to do well, must look both backward and forward; must be bold and yet must exercise prudence and caution in all they do.<sup>8</sup>

Of Gifford Pinchot:

Conservation is a moral issue because it involves the rights and the duties of our people—their rights to prosperity and happiness, and their duties to themselves, to their descendants, and to the whole future progress and welfare of this Nation.<sup>9</sup>

And of Wisconsin's own Charles Van Hise:

The paramount duty remains to us to transmit to our descendants the resources which nature has bequeathed to us as nearly undiminished in amount as possible, consistent with living a national and frugal life. Now that we have imposed upon us the responsibility of knowledge, to do less than this would be a base communal crime.<sup>10</sup>

We stayed late into the evening, finding solace in the words of those from an earlier generation who worked, each in his or her own manner, for a healthier body politic and a healthier land.<sup>11</sup> In 1901, a revolution dawned in the United States of America. Among its other contributions, that revolution challenged the assumption that had dominated national development for generations: that the American land was a mere storehouse of inexhaustible resources, existing solely for the indulgence of the present generation of its most privileged species. We are still reeling from the revolution.

## Seeing Our History Whole

There is much confusion and debate over the way that revolution has played out in the decades since. How did we get from 1910's "conservation as wise use" to the anti-environmental opportunism of the so-called wise

use movement in the 1990s? From "sustained yield" to "multiple use" to "ecosystem management"? From "fish and game" to "wildlife" to "biodiversity"? The answers are murky, even for careful observers of the history of conservation and environmentalism.

Take, for example, Peter Sauer's 1999 lament in *Orion* magazine that the environmental movement had deteriorated into "a cacophony of bickering ideologies." What had "happened to its unity and idealism," he wondered, "and when did it fall into disarray?" In Sauer's experience, the movement was once characterized by seamless connections between our concern for human rights and our concern for nature. Sauer recalled a golden moment in the late 1940s when, amid postwar chaos, we began to recognize our joint obligations to the human community and the biotic community. He cast a worried (and nostalgic) look upon a movement that had "[lost] its grip on the principles declared by [Rachel] Carson and Aldo Leopold." That hold, he suggested, had begun to slip with the death of Carson in 1964—two years before *A Sand County Almanac* became available in paperback, six years before Earth Day put environmentalism on the political map. Younger generations, Sauer feared, would never really know what the environmental movement "once stood for."<sup>12</sup>

Take, too, the caricature of environmentalists, popular in postmodernist critiques, as deluded naïfs, dismissive of human concerns, neglectful of local landscapes, seeking escape from history, denying people a place in nature, and waxing sentimental for a North American wilderness that never existed in the first place. This view, rising through the 1990s, underlay the "great new wilderness debate," at the core of which rests the contention that environmentalism, if it is to right itself, must be purged of its false and romantic fixation on an unpeopled wilderness.<sup>13</sup> Proponents of this view posit (in a too typical statement) "an emerging environmentalism that moves beyond merely preserving pristine wilderness and also calls for clean air and water as human rights as well as environmental necessities."<sup>14</sup> By this reading, the environmental movement never "stood for" any kind of broad conception of social obligation or justice. It never had anything like a unifying ideology, except perhaps a false one premised on securing opportunities for privileged white folks to contemplate and recreate in the great outdoors. It implies that protectors of the wild and defenders of human justice have never had, and could not have had, much of anything to say to each other.

These opposing takes reflect a broader confusion. They indicate that

something is amiss in our reading of conservation and environmental history. We can lay out evidence both for and against their interpretations. We can point out the lax and often anachronistic use of the terms "conservation" and "environmentalism." (Neither Carson nor Leopold, for example, would have recognized the term "environmentalism.") Leopold used the word "environment" no more than a handful of times in his entire corpus.) We could note that neither position adequately accounts for the complex interplay between social justice and conservation through the twentieth century. We could cite lesser-known verses from conservation's texts to both prove and disprove their premises—and to enrich the dialogue. (One of my favorites: the 1954 statement by the great wildlife biologist and wilderness defender Olaus Murie comparing conservation's modest ethical development to "our heavy-footed progress in toleration of 'other' races of men" and calling for "tolerance for the views and desires of many people.")<sup>15</sup>

The point is that in the rush to criticize, deconstruct, salvage, advance, and reform "the movement," those who care about such things have not yet achieved a satisfactory story. For all the work and writings of a generation of environmental scientists, advocates, historians, journalists, and critics, our narrative still has major holes, still misses the mark. The difficulty derives in part from the massive challenge of covering all the relevant bases. We have no comprehensive history of conservation—much less one that captures both the continuity and the disparity between conservation and environmentalism.

Ironically, this may reflect the fact that environmental history as a field achieved definition even as the baby boomer, Earth Day-inspired, counterculture-tinted, increasingly politicized, ever more globalized environmental movement grew through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Historians and other observers in this N<sub>1</sub> generation could be expected to view the past through the lens of the environmentalism they grew up in and with, to overlook or underemphasize important aspects of earlier conservation history, and to see plainly the conspicuous flaws in their own generation's environmental worldview. The effect, moreover, is not confined to environmentalists per se; "conservative" skeptics and outright anti-environmentalists see through the same lens, just from the other side.

In short, before we can "reconstruct" conservation, we need to lift the lens and see conservation and environmentalism with fresh eyes: as a dynamic amalgam of science, philosophy, policy, and practice, built upon an-

precedents in the United States and in cultures and traditions throughout the world, but responding to conditions unique in human and natural history.<sup>16</sup> During the Progressive Era, these constituent elements of conservation came into alignment and a new movement materialized. That movement has continued to evolve ever since in response to expanded scientific knowledge, emerging ecological realities, shifting political pressures, and a constantly changing cultural context.

### Resources and Responsibilities: Conservation's Original Tension

Conservation in the Progressive Era rested on utilitarian and anthropocentric premises. "The first principle of conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now," Gifford Pinchot wrote in his 1910 book *The Fight for Conservation*.<sup>17</sup> In order to provide (as the guiding philosophical mantra had it) "the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time," natural resources were to be efficiently managed and developed in a manner informed by science. The "science" of the time was disciplinary, applied, production oriented, pre-ecological. It sought and provided raw numbers: tree growth rates for the forester, stocking rates for the range specialist, base flow rates for the water engineer, tonnage rates for the mining engineer. It did not seek or provide much insight into systemic social, cultural, economic, or environmental effects.

Policies were geared toward ensuring the orderly administration of resources and the prevention of waste. Such policies were to be adopted and applied "for the benefit of the many, and not merely the profit of a few."<sup>18</sup> The policies would be developed and carried out by professional civil servants working within government agencies responsible for particular resources. Removed from direct political influence and trained in the relevant science, government experts would discharge their administrative duties with impartial, businesslike efficiency. Pinchot oversaw the premier manifestation of Progressive Era conservation, the USDA Forest Service. The Forest Service quickly became, in the words of Pinchot biographer Cha: Miller, "the prime marker of the executive branch's consolidation of authority" and the standard by which other efficiency-driven federal agencies were judged.<sup>19</sup>

With their commitment to enlightened, honest, and restrained use of resources, the new conservationists stood in *opposition* to the rank exploiters of public lands and water, forests and minerals, game and grass. With their emphasis on long-term development and management of resources, they stood in *contrast* to those who placed priority on the preservation of wild nature. The preservationist impulse had grown through the 1800s, focusing on special landscape features, unique scenic sites, and dwindling game populations. The rapid destruction of the Great Lakes pines swelled the preservationist call through the 1870s and 1880s (and, significantly, drew attention not just to rarities such as the redwoods but forestlands more generally). In the 1890s, the call was answered with the designation of the country's first forest reserves.

The contrast between proponents of wilderness and proponents of rational resource use intensified during Roosevelt's presidential years and beyond, coming to a head in the celebrated battle between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot over the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. It is an episode, and an ideological fissure, deeply incised in the history we have told ourselves. The very drama of the episode, however, has distorted our view of the broader Progressive conservation crusade, of the events leading up to it, and of the subsequent role of wilderness protection vis-à-vis the conservation movement (and ultimately environmentalism). Only recently have historians begun to look at the Muir-Pinchot schism more carefully and to understand how it has colored our understanding of the relationship between utilitarian conservationists and wilderness preservationists.<sup>20</sup>

For those whose support for reform grew out of the direct experience of rampant resource exploitation, the Progressive conservation crusade was an appropriate response of national authority to private, corporate irresponsibility. The enhanced role of the federal government did not represent centralization, Theodore Roosevelt informed the United States Congress in December 1908: "It represents merely the acknowledgment of the patent fact that centralization has already come in business. If this irresponsible, outside business power is to be controlled in the interest of the general public, it can only be controlled in one way—by giving adequate power of control to the one sovereignty capable of exercising such power—the National Government."<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt had a fine gift for being simultaneously coy and convincing. Of course his policies strengthened centralized au-

thority. Of course that centralization was evoked by decades of corporate collusion, unchecked resource exploitation, and government corruption.

And, of course, stronger federal authority was anathema to those still busily profiting from exploitation, those who had known nothing for decades but the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, those who were among the "locally powerful."<sup>22</sup> They tended not to reside (at least not in their former numbers) in the wasted pineries of the upper Great Lakes. They were legion in the wide-open West. As Daniel Kemmis has written, "At the heart of the burning (and still burning) western resentment [toward the Forest Service] . . . lay a repeated exercise of centralized authority, one that has always made large numbers of westerners feel abused—feel, in fact, colonized."<sup>23</sup> Roosevelt, Pinchot, secretary of agriculture James Garfield, and their supporters built conservation into a movement, and they built it by strengthening the hand of federal authority. It may be said that they *had* to build it. It must be said in the same breath that the tension between local and federal authority—and responsibility—was built into conservation from the get-go.

The tension was already long established in American history and identity. It pitted two great channels of American democratic commitment against each other. One channel issued forth from Thomas Jefferson's dictum that that government is best which governs least (not forgetting is Thoreau's addendum from "Civil Disobedience" that "that government is best which governs not at all"). Flowing through colonial rebels, Jacksonian democrats, states' rights, freeholding farmers, westering homesteaders, and even Theodore Roosevelt's own hunting, ranching, and rough-riding patriots, it was "decentralist, localist, agrarian," resistant to powerful government authority.<sup>24</sup> The second channel issued from Jefferson's other words: that "in order to secure certain unalienable Rights. . . Governments are instituted among Men." Flowing again through the colonial rebels and then through abolitionists, prairie populists, Mugwumps, unionists, suffragists, and Teddy Roosevelt's own fellow conservationists and scientists, it turned to government authority to secure political rights, honest administration, and fair economic play.

The two channels were not separate or distinct. They had long intermingled within the American soul, on American land. During the Civil War, the tension between them became, literally, unbearable.

Conservation in the Progressive Era, however, gave a new twist to the old tension. It linked the condition of the body politic to the condition of

the land itself. It demanded that Americans, having drawn so much of their political identity from the land, now recognize their responsibility for the land. The conservation movement may have been primarily utilitarian in its genesis, but it insisted that there was a connection between the ultimate sources of wealth and the morality of the means by which that wealth was secured, distributed, and used. That, in time, would make all the difference in the world.

### Changing Times, Shifting Foundations

Before Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency, "conservation" was an obscure word and concept, barely linked to the idea of stewardship. By the time Roosevelt left the presidency, it was a national watchword, policy, and ethos. But it had only begun its career. Gifford Pinchot himself noted, "Times change, and the public needs change with them."<sup>25</sup> As Char Miller notes, the Progressives' definition of conservation posed problems: "Who defines what the greatest good is, and on what basis? How to measure its production and equitable distribution or, more trickily, how to weigh humanity's material needs against environmental conditions over time? And would it be possible for succeeding generations to redefine the greatest good?"<sup>26</sup> Beyond these questions of intent lay questions of *process*. Assuming that conservation's aims could and would continue to evolve, how would the practice of conservation be defined, pursued, and implemented?

This is where things get murky. Even many historians are prone to jump directly to the present, to see environmentalism as a linear extension of Progressive Era conservation, bearing all its heroic strengths, flaws, and discords. There is a tendency to extrapolate uncritically the dualism between wilderness preservation and utilitarian conservation, as if nothing much had changed since Muir and Pinchot parted company. There is a tendency as well to run through the conflict between federal authority and local interests in environmentalism as if nothing much had changed since Roosevelt and Pinchot created the "midnight reserves" in 1907.

But much has changed. From the moment the Progressive agenda began to play out on the ground, it was subject to adaptation and amendment. The conservation movement was continually reshaping itself long before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* appeared. To assume a static view of conservation's early decades is to miss

the opportunity for a more nuanced account of its later relationship to environmentalism.

Over the next three decades, roughly 1910 to 1940, conservation's utilitarian philosophical foundations began to shift as practitioners and policy makers explored a broader range of values. The science underlying conservation received its first strong influx of more integrated, ecological approaches. Policies established to encourage conservation addressed an ever-broadening array of issues, including protection and management of wildlife, outdoor recreation, wilderness protection, water pollution, soil and water conservation, and urban planning. Conservation became the province not only of the federal agencies but also of state agencies, local governments, and a growing private and nonprofit sector. And perhaps most significantly, conservation became a matter of concern in terms of not only the country's public lands and resources but also its private lands.

The story of conservation in these years is not a simple one of ever-expanding federal power and control. Certainly that trend was evident in many key federal actions: passage of the Weeks Law (1911), which allowed the National Forest System to be extended to the eastern states; creation of the National Park Service (1916); approval of the construction of Hoover Dam on the Colorado River (1928); passage of the Flood Control Act of 1928, which gave the federal government primary responsibility for controlling flooding on the Mississippi and Sacramento Rivers; passage of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (also known as the Norbeck-Anderson Act), which in 1929 authorized establishment of a national system of waterfowl refuges; passage of the Taylor Grazing Act (1934), which restricted the further disbursement of the country's public lands; and passage of the Wheeler-Howard Act (1934), which established the Bureau of Indian Affairs and provided for federal assistance in the management of tribal lands.<sup>27</sup> The Great Depression and the dust bowl brought forth Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, with its "alphabet soup" of agencies, echoing the earlier Roosevelt's response to looming economic and environmental pressures.

These developments seemed to mark conservation indelibly with the imprint of federal paternalism. Yet there was a countervailing trend, also evident in new legislation: the Clarke-McNary Act (1924), which supported cooperative measures in federal, state, and private forestry; the provision in the Taylor Grazing Act establishing grazing districts with advisory boards of local stock growers; establishment of the state-based Cooperative

Wildlife Research Unit system (1935); passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, popularly known as the Pittman-Robertson Act (1937), allocating revenues from the sales of sporting arms and ammunition to the states for wildlife conservation purposes. All these measures dispersed resources and authority, expanding the role of landowners, state agencies, and local governing bodies. Meanwhile, state and local governments increasingly asserted their own conservation responsibilities by, for example, strengthening their resource management agencies, passing pollution control measures, and establishing protected forests, parks, and wildlife areas.

But it was the challenge of soil and water conservation in the 1930s that revealed most starkly the need for local conservation commitment and the limits of centralized government approaches. Extensive soil erosion, development of submarginal soils, siltation of water bodies, disruption of hydrologic cycles, and dislocation of farmers were growing national concerns long before the situation assumed crisis proportions in the 1930s. The federal government responded in the old Progressive way, with the creation of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in 1933, but it had to do so in a novel manner. The SCS was not a landowning agency, yet its mission involved every square inch of the American landscape. It was the only federal agency specifically directed to work with private landowners on conservation. By the very nature of its charge, it had to address the relationship between social conditions and watersheds. If it hoped to have a salutary effect on the land, it could not work through coercive means; it had to respect the needs and experience of local landowners and rural communities.

The agricultural crisis of the 1930s thus prompted—at least for some—a basic reconsideration of the federal role in conservation, and hence conservation generally. As Randal Beeman and James Pritchard note in their book *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century*, the need to address root causes of land degradation in the 1930s helps to “explain the shift from conservation to environmentalism.” Permanent agriculture (their preferred term for the antecedents of today’s sustainable agriculture) “was an idea conceived by individuals born in the Progressive Era, when conservation was generally viewed as the managing of resources for human use, and a task to be pursued mainly by extractive technocrats. . . . Despite, or perhaps because of, their solid indoctrination in conservation values, members of the permanent agriculture cadre were susceptible to nascent ecological ideas that dictated a far more complex set

of values than did mainstream conservation, including interdependence and a heightened reverence for all life-forms.”<sup>28</sup> Conservation on agricultural lands required adjustments not only in the movement’s philosophical stance but also in its implementation. Specifically, enactment of the New Deal conservation programs, while expanding the role of the federal government in the short term, also revealed the ultimate limits of centralized approaches.

As much as any figure of the time, Aldo Leopold appreciated the need for conservation to change to deal with new realities. As a boy, he had witnessed the results of unfettered markets in the deforested North Woods, the disappearing prairies of Iowa, the decimated waterfowl populations of the Mississippi River Valley. As a young Progressive Era forester, he was a carrier of national authority to the newly established national forests of the American Southwest. It was his abiding concern over the degradation of watersheds, first in the Southwest and then in the Midwest, that brought him to the crux of the conservation problem: its *universality*.

The government cannot buy “everywhere.” The private landowner must enter the picture. It is easy to side-step the issue of getting lumbermen to practice forestry, or the farmer to crop game or conserve soil, and to pass these functions along to government. *But it won’t work*. I assert this, not as a political opinion, but as a geographical fact. The basic problem is to induce the private landowner to conserve on his own land, and no conceivable millions or billions for public land purchase can alter that fact, nor the fact that he hasn’t done it.<sup>29</sup>

Conservation, in short, was coextensive with the landscape, and new methods of delivering and encouraging conservation had to recognize and adapt to that fact.

Under the New Deal, the federal role in conservation expanded lavishly. But, by that time, Leopold had developed a firm sense of what government agencies at any level could and could not accomplish. He had come to distinguish between what he called “bogus individualism” and responsible citizenship.<sup>30</sup> His effort to calibrate the proper relationship between the public and private sectors—and private and public responsibility—would continue to the end of his life, finding its final expression in “The Land Ethic”:

Government ownership, operation, subsidy, or regulation is now widely prevalent in forestry, range management, soil and watershed management, park and wilderness conservation, fisheries management, and migratory bird management, with more to come. Most of this growth in governmental conservation is proper and logical, some of it is inevitable. That I imply no disapproval of it is implicit in the fact that I have spent most of my life working for it. Nevertheless the question arises: What is the ultimate magnitude of the enterprise? Will the tax base carry its eventual ramifications? At what point will governmental conservation, like the mastodon, become handicapped by its own dimensions? The answer, if there is any, seems to be in a land ethic, or some other force which assigns more obligation to the private landowner.<sup>31</sup>

In essence, Leopold's land ethic served simultaneously as a rebuke to irresponsible private, local, and individual behavior on the land (Jefferson's yeoman farmers notwithstanding) and as an open admission of the limits of the Progressive conservation mandate and methods (Pinchot's agency experts notwithstanding). We still struggle to navigate these political and ideological currents—with variable winds blowing hard from the right and left.

### Conservation in Transition, Environmentalism Rising

World War II imposed a momentary calm before the winds picked up again. A renewed challenge to jurisdiction over the western public lands in the late 1940s and early 1950s failed to wrest control from the federal agencies but succeeded in inflaming the old tension between centralized and decentralized authority. Latent dissatisfaction with the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act ("federalism in the extreme," in one congressman's words) reasserted itself. Bernard De Voto, native westerner and pro-conservation partisan, decried the "many-sided effort to discredit all conservation bureaus of the government, to discredit conservation itself."<sup>32</sup>

Conservation groups, meanwhile, had rallied in response to growing threats to the nation's wildlands. The premier battleground in the late 1940s and early 1950s was Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah, where the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had proposed to build

two dams as part of a massive plan for developing the upper Colorado River basin (one of the planned dams, at Echo Park, gave its name to the struggle). Regional supporters of the project were arrayed across the political spectrum and across party lines. The dams—eventually stopped through a compromise between dam proponents and wilderness advocates—symbolized more than just the growing postwar threats to wildlands; they exposed the fundamental fault line under conservation's political landscape. The dams' sponsoring agency was first established as the Reclamation Service by Theodore Roosevelt's pen-stroke, through the National Reclamation Act of 1902. In effect, at Dinosaur National Monument, heirs to one part of the Progressive Era conservation tradition had circled around to oppose the actions of another.

Much as the universality of soil erosion had brought home the limits of centralized authority in conserving private lands, the battle at Dinosaur signaled a larger "crisis of progressive faith" (to use economist Robert Nelson's phrase) in dealing with the nation's public lands: "Created in the name of efficiency, public land agencies in practice gave little heed to efficiency. Part of the reason was that public land management proved in the event not to be scientific management, but politicized management."<sup>33</sup> Echo Park demonstrated that "politicized management" could involve clashes not just between local and federal interests but between different alliances of local and federal interests. More was at stake, evidently, than ideological purity.

All these events still predated *Silent Spring*, the first Earth Day, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the rise of environmentalism as a self-conscious movement. One way to understand environmentalism is as a response to private and public *irresponsibility* during the economic boom years between 1945 and 1965. Roosevelt's "riot of individualistic materialism" was enjoying a long and unprecedented reprise. Leopold's land ethic seemed to have gained little currency. Although the nonprofit side of the conservation movement found temporary solidarity in wilderness advocacy, the movement as a whole was increasingly fragmented. Some conservationists were willing to explore the broader social, political, and philosophical dimensions of wilderness loss, pollution, land degradation, species extinction, and resource depletion. Others, however, were unprepared or unwilling. As Leopold had noted earlier, "in our effort to make conservation easy," we had "made it trivial."<sup>34</sup> Under the strain of postwar economic expansion, social and demographic change, philosophical



disquiet, political realignment, and increasingly reductionistic and specialized science, conservation was cut loose from its old Progressive moorings.

Environmentalism arose as conservation drifted. Environmentalism reconfigured the substance of, and relationships among, conservation science, philosophy, and policy. Environmental science, building on ecology's insights, was essentially integrative and systems-oriented. Environmental philosophy was more accommodating of varied values and belief systems. Environmental policies contended with issues that conservation as such had not adequately addressed or anticipated: atmospheric and water pollution, nuclear and toxic waste, human population growth, energy production, land use and urban sprawl, endangered species, the global threats of ozone depletion, climate change, degradation of the oceans. Conservation suddenly found itself in a greatly enlarged political arena, and many older conservationists were overwhelmed. Younger environmentalists rushed in to fill the expanded space. And the new ranks of environmental activists, drawing lessons from their contemporaries in the civil rights and women's movements, relied on federal authority as a necessary tool to confront entrenched private interests and political power.

This is where we need to take time out to define our historiographic problem.

Let us be painfully circumspect.

Let us say it this way: *When the modern environmental movement superseded the older American conservation movement and tradition, we gained a great deal, and we lost a great deal; we have yet to understand fully those losses and gains, and we are still reckoning with them.*<sup>35</sup>

In the transition, we gained, among other things, a global, more integrated view of humankind and the earth's ecosystems; appreciation of the full diversity of life and the importance of ecosystem functions; a more coherent critique of heedless industrial and technological development; a greater appreciation of interdisciplinary science as a tool for solving problems; a greater appreciation, nonetheless, of the limits of science in solving problems; a broader and better-informed constituency that now included urban and suburban dwellers; and a more thorough understanding of the social and economic causes and consequences of environmental degradation. In short, we gained perspective on the full dimensions of humankind's environmental dilemma, as well as a broader base of support for actions to address it.

But we also lost much in the transition to environmentalism, including

the attitude of stewardship that formerly bound conservationists, hunters, farmers, ranchers, and other landowners more closely together; the heightened attention to private land conservation; a respect for the realities of rural life and the structural constraints facing rural economies; the connection, explicit in the 1930s and 1940s, between wilderness protection and other aspects of land conservation; the sense that this movement—call it what we will—was about more than honing legal tools to “protect the environment” (to use the lazy politician's shorthand); and the vision of conservation as a commitment binding people and places together across ideological divides, across landscapes, and across generations. As the institutional memory of “traditional” conservation faded, the very word itself seemed fated to slip into oblivion. It carried less and less weight with the new generation of environmentalists.

As the transition continued through the years following Earth Day, the historical tension between centralized and decentralized authority in American conservation and environmental policy reasserted itself. It did so now along multiple, overlapping fault lines: federalism versus localism in managing the country's public lands; regulatory versus free-market approaches in controlling pollution; the carrot of policy incentives versus the stick of enforcement in protecting endangered species; enthusiasm versus reluctance in supporting international environmental treaties and protocols. In these and other arenas, there was still room for lively policy debate; on at least some issues, creative solutions were hammered out and real gains were made.

At the same time, however, environmentalism became a combat zone in the culture wars. The environmental politics of the 1970s begat U.S. Secretary of the Interior James Watt and the sagebrush rebellion, which begat an ever closer alliance of Democrats and environmentalists, which begat the “wise use” movement of the 1990s, which begat the opportunism of the early presidency of Bill Clinton, which begat the “Contract with America” and the Newt Gingrich revolution, which mystified mainstream environmentalists but galvanized action by (among other culturally conservative environmentalists) the Evangelical Environmental Network, which took both conservative and liberal think tanks aback, which in turn left things in a complete muddle that neither George W. Bush, Al Gore, Ralph Nader, nor their dedicated camp followers could clarify as the new millennium arrived.

Every turn in the cycle further polarized the contestants. Partisan

operatives drove the political wedges in ever deeper. As the sound bites flew, it became increasingly difficult to work out a coherent story.

We still don't appreciate fully just what we have lost and what we have gained.

### Reintegrating Conservation

Remarkably, however, conservation did not simply wither away. Environmentalism had grown up fast, overshadowing its venerable predecessor. Yet, hunkered down under the canopy of environmentalism, conservation proved to be deep-rooted and shade tolerant. Written off, nearly forgotten, it surprised perhaps even itself by continuing, slowly and quietly, to lay on new rings of growth.

Gradually, from the late 1970s on, conservation began to reinvent itself. Conservation biologists, building initially on new concepts in island biogeography, sought to unite multiple disciplines in the effort to understand, protect, and maintain biodiversity. Conservation of the marine environment and biota established itself as a new arena for research and action. At least some wilderness advocates revisited their premises, retooled their science (including their anthropology), and returned to the necessary work of protecting wild places. Watershed advocates and community-based conservation organizations gave a positive focus to the "decentralist, localist, agrarian" strain of American democracy. Landscape ecologists and conservation-savvy planners, architects, designers, and builders lent their expertise to the effort to better integrate human land use and resource management at various spatial scales. Practitioners of sustainable agriculture reinvigorated the tradition of "permanent agriculture" that had tapered off after World War II. The movement for environmental justice arose to address an entire suite of neglected concerns and to involve communities that neither environmentalism nor conservation had effectively engaged.

A friend once observed that "we environmentalists are pretty effective at fighting against things; we are not so effective at creating solutions." Since the 1970s, ecological restoration has provided a new outlet for affirmative, hands-on action. Seeking to enhance the ecological integrity of local landscapes, from the wild to the urban, restoration has offered many a battle-weary environmentalist something to work *for* and *at*, not just something to *stop*. The restoration movement, as much as any development in recent

decades, stood as evidence of a resurgent land ethic. Kenneth Brower, introducing a new edition of Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* in 2001, predicted that "the century or two of the Preservation Era will prove to be a prologue, an introductory chapter, noble but brief. Almost all the wilderness that can be saved has been saved. For the duration of our time on the planet—for whatever piece of eternity we have left here—restoration will be the great task."<sup>36</sup>

In all these fields, people from varied backgrounds have been seeking ways to depolarize environmental issues (at least to some degree), reintegrate conservation, and build a new consensus for action. The common denominator is a commitment to land health on the part of individuals, neighborhoods, watersheds, organizations, agencies, and businesses, and a desire to achieve tangible results, whether on private, public, or community lands.<sup>37</sup> These trends suggest the possibility of an emerging "cross-landscape" constituency that can address the harmful feedback loops that encourage continued degradation of urban, suburban, exurban, rural, and wild lands alike. They reflect the emergence of a "radical center" where people who care about land and communities and wild things and places, whatever their political stripe, may meet to make common cause.<sup>38</sup> They point toward a new conception of economic freedom—one that realizes there can be no freedom without responsibility, and no definition of sustainability that does not embed the circle of human economics within the greater sphere of nature. They show that the desire to build better relationships between people and land is tenacious. It will not go away.

Always, the conversation must return to the core concept of responsibility. The latest "riot of individualistic materialism" and corporate avarice cannot last forever; the peak of Enron's stock price may have served as its high-water mark (or so we can hope). In any case, a renewed commitment to conservation values must, sooner or later, find a home once again in our civic life, under a form of political leadership that does not yet exist. Where might we find it? How might we encourage it? As historian Donald Worster has suggested, "a history that is more alert to the landscape around us, looking for clues there about our past behavior and acknowledging the agency of nature in human life, is . . . a good place to start. It can help overcome one-generation thinking. It may even promote a wider area of responsibility, which is all that conservation asks."<sup>39</sup>

Conservation emerged in the Progressive Era, effectively broadening the "area of responsibility" in American life. It has evolved continually ever

since, one dominant strain having mutated to help create what is now a global environmental movement. Changes in science and in ethics, in society and in the world, continue to prompt us to reconsider our responsibilities: not merely in terms of long-term economic self-interest but in terms of our obligations to our neighbors, our communities, future generations, and nonhuman nature. In the long run, our own well-being is wound up in these broader responsibilities in intricate and inescapable ways.

The Progressives of the early 1900s could not foresee the utter transformation of the world that the ensuing century would bring. Nor, for that matter, could the stalwarts and plutocrats and reactionaries they fought. In three generations, we have built a world that their generation would not recognize. The solutions the Progressives devised to meet the problems of their time will not suffice for us to meet ours. However, the basis upon which they acted is of the essence. They saw the need, as we must again, for public responsibilities to keep pace with private privilege. To that end they made democracy work, as we must again, "to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole."