

Progressive Environmentalism

In 1893, while speaking to a crowd gathered at Chicago's famed Columbian Exposition, historian Frederick Jackson Turner offered up what has come to be known as his "frontier thesis" of American history; that is, his belief that a unique American character did in fact exist, and that this character, with its emphasis on individualism, innovation (and which served to differentiate white Americans from their European contemporaries) had come about as a direct result of white settlers' interactions with "wilderness areas." But there was a problem, he then insisted, for according to the 1890 Census, the frontier had ceased to exist. "Up to and including 1880" he wrote, quoting a federal census taker, "the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." For Progressive Era Americans, living amid the social, economic, and ethnic fragmentation of late-nineteenth century, Turner's thesis was, understandably, quite disturbing. After all, if the frontier was so important to "Americanization," what would become of the nation and its people now that said frontier was no longer a viable entity?

That Turner's thesis spoke to a unique set of beliefs and fears harbored by Progressive Era Americans is undeniable. And yet, a concern for wilderness areas, and for the unique position that such areas held as molders and shapers of culture, had long-since animated the consciousness of writers, painters, naturalists, and other well-educated Americans. Consider: beginning in the early 1820s, writer James Fenimore Cooper thrilled readers with his "Leatherstocking tales," a series of books that served both to glorify pioneer life and celebrate the presumed innate goodness of wilderness; between 1827 and 1838, painter John James Audubon

roamed the nation's eastern forests, painting exquisite portraits of avian life while at the same time lamenting man-made wilderness degradation; and in his 1854 work *Walden*, writer Henry David Thoreau told of his extended stay in the rural Massachusetts backcountry, a trip which convinced him that periodic forays into the wilderness were essential to the maintenance of a strong, healthy character. And yet, the fact remains that none among the three wished to do away with civilization. Rather, they hoped to strike a balance between the human progress and wilderness preservation, with the hope being that Americans would be able to "extract the best of both worlds."

Within a decade of the Civil War (1861-1865), this concern for wilderness preservation had blossomed into a full-fledged, government-sponsored movement. Thus it was that in 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant approved the founding of the nation's first national park – Yellowstone -- in the backcountry of western Wyoming. It should be noted, of course, that Yellowstone's founders were anything but environmentalists; if anything, writes historian Roderick Nash, they were interested in preventing "private acquisition and exploitation of geysers, hot springs, waterfalls, and similar curiosities," and had precious little regard for "the aesthetic, spiritual, or cultural values of wilderness." Furthermore, like many of their contemporaries, key park advocates tended to view the Native Americans who inhabited the Yellowstone lands as a nuisance, and so were generally supportive of efforts to see them relocated to reservations. Still, the fact remains that Yellowstone set a precedent for wilderness preservation in the United States, one that would see numerous national and state parks founded across the nation in the coming decades.

Interestingly enough, the move to conserve America's wilderness areas would soon diverge into two separate, and at times quite competitive, sub-movements: conservationism and

preservationism. Unlike modern conservationists, whose goal it is typically to protect fragile wilderness areas and endangered species from encroachment and outright destruction, those of the late nineteenth century were interested in “conserving” natural resources, and then making those resources available for private industrial exploitation. Perhaps no one exemplified this early conservationist ethic more so than Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the National Forest Service. According to historian Samuel P. Hays, Pinchot’s primary concern during his tenure was to apply “scientific, sustained-yield timber management” to America’s forests, lest they be destroyed (and thus lost to industry) by rapacious capitalists. The aesthetic beauty and public recreational potential of wilderness areas meant nothing to him, or to the other “apostles of the gospel of efficiency” (conservationists) who shared his views; his and their only concern was “‘that which confers the greatest good upon the greatest number’.” In practice this meant managing and harvesting the nation’s timber and mineral resources.

Preservationists, on the other hand, were more closely comparable to modern environmentalists. That is, they sought to protect America’s remaining wilderness areas, or at least those areas that they *defined* as wilderness areas, from all manner of encroachment -- industrial encroachment included. Chief among the preservationists was Scottish-born John Muir, a farmer’s son who, after spending several years at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, came to view natural science and religious speculation as complementary pursuits. Like Thoreau before him, he believed wholeheartedly in the physically and spiritually regenerative power of nature, and wrote numerous books in which he advocated human/wilderness interaction. In time, his efforts would give rise to the Sierra Club, one of the first private American associations dedicated exclusively to the preservation of wilderness areas.

Needless to say, Muir's views placed him at philosophical odds with more utilitarian-minded conservationists such as Pinchot. It should thus come as no surprise that the two men clashed publicly in the late nineteenth century.

The subject of Muir's and Pinchot's dispute was California's scenic Hetch Hetchy River Valley, which had been set aside as a national park in 1890. Just ten years after the park designation went into effect, San Francisco Mayor James D. Phelan sought approval from the Department of the Interior to dam the Hetch Hetchy as a means of creating a reservoir for his city. To preservationists' relief, the plan was initially thwarted by Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock, who saw no reason to "violate the sanctity of a national park." But in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, which saw fires engulf the stricken city, and which strained the city's water supply beyond limit, Hitchcock's successor, James R. Garfield, was more than happy to reverse departmental policy and approve the request.

Muir and his fellow preservationists were, of course, horrified by the decision. For them, Hetch Hetchy represented nothing less than a "cathedral," and so to destroy it would be tantamount to sacrilege. Pinchot, on the other hand, supported the project, arguing that a greater use would be served by building the dam and providing San Franciscans with potable water than it would be by leaving the Hetch Hetchy to a handful of nature lovers. In the end, Pinchot and the Conservationists prevailed; President Woodrow Wilson approved the dam project on December 19, 1913, condemning the Hetch Hetchy. And yet, for utilitarian Conservationists, the victory was rather hollow, for it aroused among Progressive Era Americans -- not a few of whom were familiar with, and concerned about the implications of, Turner's frontier thesis -- a passion for preservationism that placed them odds with Pinchot and his allies. "For three centuries,"

Nash writes, “[Americans] had chosen civilization [over wilderness preservation] without any hesitation. By 1913 they were no longer so sure.”

Given Americans’ newfound desire to preserve wilderness, it was only a matter of time before they turned their attention east, to the great forests of Southern Appalachia. For it was there that private lumber companies, working with Pinchot’s approval, were rapidly decimating one of the last great stands of virgin timber east of the Mississippi River. The story of preservationists’ fight to save the Southern Appalachian forests from destruction, and of the impact that this fight had on the life of Gatlinburg, Tennessee and the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, will be discussed in further detail in the essay “Gatlinburg, Pi Beta Phi, and the Founding of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.”