

GIFFORD PINCHOT

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# Breaking New Ground

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*Presented to Gifford Pinchot by  
the members of  
Julia L. Pinchot '07*

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It was my great good luck that I had more to do with the work of more bureaus than any other man in Washington. This was partly because the Forest Service was dealing not only with trees but with public lands, mining, agriculture, irrigation, stream flow, soil erosion, fish, game, animal industry, and a host of other matters with which other bureaus also were concerned. The main reason, however, was that much of T.R.'s business with the natural resources bureaus was conducted through me.

It was therefore the most natural thing in the world that the relations of forests, waters, lands, and minerals, each to each, should be brought strongly to my mind. But for a long time my mind stopped there. Then at last I woke up. And this is how it happened:

In the gathering gloom of an expiring day, in the moody month of February, some forty years ago, a solitary horseman might have been observed pursuing his silent way above a precipitous gorge in the vicinity of the capital city of America. Or so an early Victorian three-volume novelist might have expressed it.

In plain words, a man by the name of Pinchot was riding a horse by the name of Jim on the Ridge Road in Rock Creek Park near Washington. And while he rode, he thought. He was a forester, and he was taking his problems with him, on that winter's day of 1907, when he meant to leave them behind.

The forest and its relation to streams and inland navigation, to water power and flood control; to the soil and its erosion; to coal and oil and other minerals; to fish and game; and many another possible use or waste of natural resources—these questions would not let him be. What had all these to do with Forestry? And what had Forestry to do with them?

Here were not isolated and separate problems. My work had brought me into touch with all of them. But what was the basic link between them?

Suddenly the idea flashed through my head that there was a unity in this complication—that the relation of one resource to another was not the end of the story. Here were no longer a lot of different, independent, and often antagonistic questions, each on its own separate little island, as we had been in the habit of thinking. In place of them, here was one single question with many parts. Seen in this new light, all these separate questions fitted into and made up the one great central problem of the use of the earth for the good of man.

To me it was a good deal like coming out of a dark tunnel. I had been seeing one spot of light ahead. Here, all of a sudden, was a whole landscape. Or it was like lifting the curtain on a great new stage.

There was too much of it for me to take it all in at once. As always, my mind worked slowly. From the first I thought I had stumbled on something really worth while, but that day in Rock Creek Park I was far from grasping the full reach and swing of the new idea.

It took time for me to appreciate that here were the makings of a new policy, not merely nationwide but world-wide in its scope—fundamentally important because it involved not only the welfare but the very existence of men on the earth. I did see, however, that something ought to be done about it.

But, you may say, hadn't plenty of people before that day seen the value of Forestry, of irrigation, of developing our streams, and much besides? Hadn't plenty pointed out the threat of erosion, the shame and pity of the destruction of wild life, and the reasons against man's vandalism of many kinds? Hadn't plenty pointed out that forests, for example, affect floods, and many other cases in which one natural resource reacts upon another?

Certainly they had. But so far as I knew then or have since been able to find out, it had occurred to nobody, in this country or abroad, that here was one question instead of many, one gigantic single problem that must be solved if the generations, as they came and went, were to live civilized, happy, useful lives in the lands which the Lord their God had given them.

But, you might go on, after the new idea was born, wasn't the situation just as it had been before? Shouldn't each Government bureau go on dealing with its same old subject in its same old way?

Not by a jugful, as they say in the backwoods.

The ancient classic simile of the bundle of twigs, which the Fascists have perverted and made known throughout the world, might point the moral and adorn the tale I am trying to tell. In union there is strength. But perhaps we can find a better illustration in the birth of our own Government.

The American colonies, like the Government bureaus which have to do with the various natural resources, were founded at different times, for different reasons, and by different kinds of people. Each colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire, dealt with nature in a

somewhat different form. Each had to face a problem unlike the problems of all the others, and each was itself unlike all the other colonies.

Before the Declaration of Independence they were so many weak and separate twigs. Could we have become what we are today if the thirteen colonies had remained independent, self-sufficient little nationlets, quarreling among themselves over rights, boundaries, jurisdictions, instead of merging into a single nation with a single federal purpose?

The mere fact of union produced something different and unknown before. Here were new purpose and new power, and a future infinitely greater than anything thirteen separated colonies could ever have lived to see. Union did not wipe out the thirteen separate characters of the thirteen separate states, but it did bind them together into the strength of the new nation.

*E Pluribus Unum* is the fundamental fact in our political affairs. *E Pluribus Unum* is and always must be the basis in dealing with the natural resources. Many problems fuse into one great policy, just as many states fuse into one great Union. When the use of all the natural resources for the general good is seen to be a common policy with a common purpose, the chance for the wise use of each of them becomes infinitely greater than it had ever been before.

The Conservation of natural resources is the key to the future. It is the key to the safety and prosperity of the American people, and all the people of the world, for all time to come. The very existence of our Nation, and of all the rest, depends on conserving the resources which are the foundations of its life. That is why Conservation is the greatest material question of all.

Moreover, Conservation is a foundation of permanent peace among the nations, and the most important foundation of all. But more of that in another place.

It is not easy for us moderns to realize our dependence on the earth. As civilization progresses, as cities grow, as the mechanical aids to human life increase, we are more and more removed from the raw materials of human existence, and we forget more easily that natural resources must be about us from our infancy or we cannot live at all.

What do you eat, morning, noon, and night? Natural resources, transformed and processed for your use. What do you wear, day in and day out—your coat, your hat, your shoes, your watch, the penny

in your pocket, the filling in your tooth? Natural resources changed and adapted to your necessity.

What do you work with, no matter what your work may be? What are the desk you sit at, the book you read, the shovel you dig with, the machine you operate, the car you drive, and the light you see by when the sunlight fails? Natural resources in one form or another.

What do you live in and work in, but in natural resources made into dwellings and shops and offices? Wood, iron, rock, clay, sand, in a thousand different shapes, but always natural resources. What are the living you earn, the medicine you take, the movie you watch, but things derived from nature?

What are railroads and good roads, ocean liners and birch canoes, cities and summer camps, but natural resources in other shapes?

What does agriculture produce? Natural resources. What does industry manufacture? What does commerce deal in? What is science concerned with? Natural resources.

What is your own body but natural resources constantly renewed—your body, which would cease to be yours to command if the natural resources which keep it in health were cut off for so short a time as 1 or 2 per cent of a single year?

There are just two things on this material earth—people and natural resources.

From all of which I hope you have gathered, if you did not realize it before, that a constant and sufficient supply of natural resources is the basic human problem.

But to return to the newborn idea. The first man I carried it to was Overton Price. Within a few days I told him the story as we rode our horses together on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and asked what he thought of it. He saw it as I did. I was glad of that, for my reliance on his judgment was very great.

After Overton, I discussed my brain child not only with my Father and Mother, whose interest in my work never flagged, but with McGee, Newell, Gannett, Shipp, Beveridge, and others. It was McGee who grasped it best. He sensed its full implication even more quickly than I had done, and saw its future more clearly.

McGee became the scientific brains of the new movement. With his wide general knowledge and highly original mind we developed, as I never could have done alone, the breadth and depth of meaning which lay in the new idea. McGee had constructive imagination.