

## Three Views on Forest Conservation

The history of forestry in the United States has been shaped by our nation's changing ideas about forests. Three individuals from the late 1800s to early 1900s greatly influenced those ideas through their work and their writing. John Muir, Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold each cared deeply about America's forests. But they had differing views on the value of forests and how to "conserve" or maintain them.

### John Muir

John Muir was born in Scotland in 1838 and immigrated to Wisconsin with his family when he was 11 years old. As a farm boy, he enjoyed inventing things, including a device he created to push himself out of bed in the mornings. Muir briefly studied natural sciences at the University of Wisconsin, but left school to study in what he called the "University of Wilderness." He would take off to explore the natural world on foot while doing odd jobs to support himself.



In 1867, Muir was involved in a factory accident that nearly blinded him. When he recovered, he became even more devoted to learning about a world unchanged by humans or machines. He walked from Indiana to Florida, sailed to Cuba, New York, and Panama, and eventually made his way to California, where he continued his walking explorations in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Starting in the 1870s, Muir became known for his newspaper articles and essays, in which he wrote in poetic and spiritual terms about the natural world. He believed that wilderness is important for its sheer beauty and for its ability to renew the spirit. He also believed that nature has value whether or not people can derive a direct benefit from it. For Muir, conservation meant leaving areas untouched by human hands.

Muir fought to preserve areas of pristine forest and keep them from human destruction. He wrote a series of essays pushing for the establishment of Yosemite National Park, which was eventually created in 1890. He also worked to create Grand Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. In 1892, he co-founded and became the first president of the Sierra Club, an environmental preservation organization.

Some quotes from Muir's writings:

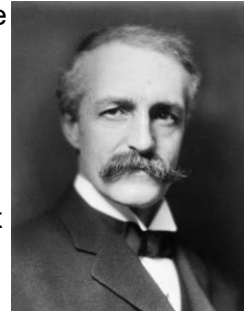
"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine into trees."

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike."

"It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods —trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that."

**Gifford Pinchot**

Gifford Pinchot (PIN-show) was the first professionally trained forester in the United States. Born in 1865 in Simsbury, Connecticut, he was raised in an upper-class family of merchants, politicians and landowners. He traveled abroad regularly with his parents.



When he entered Yale University in 1885, Pinchot's father suggested that he become a forester since he had always loved being in the woods. At that time, not a single American had made forestry a profession, and no university offered a degree or even a course in forestry. After graduation, Pinchot decided to study forestry in France, where he learned about selective cutting and other forest management techniques.

When he returned to the United States, he looked for ways to apply what he learned. He worked as a resident forester for George Vanderbilt's Biltmore Forest Estate. In 1889, he became head of the U.S. Division of Forestry. In 1900, he founded the Society of American Foresters (SAF), a professional organization whose objectives were to bring high standards to the new field of forestry and to further the cause of forestry in the United States.

In 1905, he was named Chief Forester of the newly formed U.S. Forest Service under President Theodore Roosevelt. During Pinchot's five years in that position, his aim was to protect the nation's forests for their timber, but also for future generations. Under his leadership, the Forest Service grew from 60 national forests covering 56 million acres to 150 national forests covering 172 million acres.

For Pinchot, the term conservation meant the efficient use of natural resources, and he held a utilitarian or practical view of forests. He believed that forests are for people to use, but he also stressed their "wise use." His view was that natural resources should be managed by considering the "greatest good" for the greatest number of people over time.

Some quotes from Pinchot's writings:

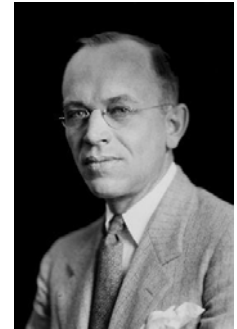
"When the Gay Nineties [1890s] began, the common word for our forests was 'inexhaustible.' To waste timber was a virtue and not a crime. There would always be plenty of timber."

"Conservation is the foresighted utilization, preservation and/or renewal of forests, waters, lands and minerals, for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time."

"Without natural resources life itself is impossible. From birth to death, natural resources, transformed for human use, feed, clothe, shelter, and transport us. Upon them we depend for every material necessity, comfort, convenience, and protection in our lives. Without abundant resources prosperity is out of reach."

### Aldo Leopold

Aldo Leopold was born in 1887 in Burlington, Iowa. Growing up, he had a keen interest in the natural world and spent hours journaling about and sketching his surroundings. After graduating from the Yale Forest School in 1909, he pursued a career in forestry, working for more than 20 years with the U.S. Forest Service in New Mexico and Arizona.



In 1933, he published the very first textbook about wildlife management. Later that year he became a professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin. In 1935, he and his family began restoring a worn-out farm along the Wisconsin River, which further informed and inspired his understanding of the natural world.

Through his writings and teaching, Leopold advanced the idea of the “land ethic,” which places value on all living things as well as their interactions in the environment. To Leopold, the term conservation meant managing natural areas based on ecological principles – not just on economics.

In a sense, Leopold’s philosophy bridged Muir’s view that nature should be protected from people and Pinchot’s view that nature is primarily a source of resources for people. Leopold brought a new understanding of our interconnected relationship with the natural world at a time when technology increasingly separated people from it.

Leopold recorded his findings and thoughts in short essays, which were published the year after he died in 1949 as the book *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. His words inspired many conservationists in the 1950s and 1960s, and helped spur the environmental movement.

Some quotes from Leopold’s book:

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

“Civilization has so cluttered this elemental man-earth relationship with gadgets and middlemen that awareness of it is growing dim. We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry.”

“Cease being intimidated by the argument that a right action is impossible because it does not yield maximum profits, or that a wrong action is to be condoned because it pays.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Compare the three views of conservation held by Muir, Pinchot and Leopold. In what ways were they similar? In what ways were they different?
2. Choose one of the quotes to analyze more carefully. In your own words, what is this person saying about forests or natural resources? What does this quote tell you about the person's beliefs about forests?
3. Name one way each person's views helped define our nation's current relationship with forests.
4. Each of these three people spent a lot of time outdoors and in nature. Do you think going outdoors is necessary to develop beliefs about the protection or use of the environment?

### Source

Oregon Forest Resources Institute. (2017). Inside Oregon's Forests: A high school forestry curriculum. Portland, OR. Retrieved from <https://oregonforests.org/>.