

Will the Forest Service Celebrate Its Bicentennial?

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The news from the Far North is not good. In the spring of 2007, University of Alberta scientists reported that portions of the northern Canadian tundra were transforming into new forests of spruce and shrubs at a much more rapid rate than once was imaginable. “The conventional thinking on treeline dynamics has been that advances are very slow because conditions are so harsh at these high latitudes and altitudes,” reports Dr. Ryan Danby, a member of the UA research team. “But what our data indicate is that there was an upslope surge of trees in response to warmer temperatures. It’s like [the forest] waited until conditions were just right, then it decided to get up and run, not just walk.”¹

The impact of global climate change is multifaceted and chilling: as tundra converts to forest cover, species and their habitats must move higher up or die off; sheep and caribou are already responding to the environmental transformation, which in turn has affected members of Canada’s First Nations who are dependent on these food sources. Moreover, the process feeds off itself: trees absorb more light than does tundra and emits that energy as heat, further warming the atmosphere and reinforcing the very conditions that allow more spruce to flourish on the formerly treeless terrain. “These results are very relevant to the current debate surrounding climate change,” Professor Danby notes, “because they provide real evidence that vegetation change will be quite considerable in response to future warming.”²

The scientific data, and their myriad implications, raise critical questions about whether and how human institutions will respond to what is a demonstrably human-generated crisis. This is particularly relevant to those land management agencies around the globe, such as the U.S. Forest Service, whose holdings range across innumerable bioregions and ecotones. How will the Forest Service, for example, be able to steward its 193 million acres of forests and grasslands as the climate and landscape shift in relation to one another, with ramifications that are not as yet knowable?

That confounding question comes at a fascinating moment in the agency’s history. Founded in 1905, the Forest Service recently celebrated its centennial, a golden opportunity to reflect on its historic mission and to consider how (and whether) its prior commitments will carry it through the next one hundred years. Will it survive? Will it be around to celebrate its bicentennial? The question may seem odd, given that the agency managed to reach its centenary. After all, the Forest Service has encountered many serious challenges over its lifetime and managed to weather them, and that legacy that suggests it might prove just as nimble when confronted with future trials, however unpredictable or dire.

Still, the past may not be such a useful guide for how to react in the future, given the overwhelming challenges that a warmer earth is expected to produce. Which is another way of saying that, compared with the agency chiefs of the twenty-first century, Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the Forest Service, had it easy.

Simpler Times?

All Pinchot had to do, as the agency’s founder, was coordinate and negotiate with Congress and the executive branch to establish the land management agency; persuade the legislative branch to transfer millions of acres in the forest-reserve system from the Department of Interior to the Department of Agriculture; create the internal structure of the new agency, hire staff, and develop the rationale for its budget and land management activities; recognize the need for a research office and find the funding and personnel to set up the first scientific experiments in range management, hydrology, and silviculture; launch the Society of American Foresters and reinvigorate the Journal of Forestry; encourage the development of state forestry programs; forge links between the agency and private landowners and timber companies; develop a legal team to ensure that the federal courts sanctioned the Forest Service’s work on the ground; defend the agency from repeated attacks by powerful coalitions of western state legislatures and governors and ward off blistering blasts from those same states’ congressional delegations; and convince the American public that federal regulation of natural resources on public lands was a really good idea—at that moment, and well into the future.

As complex as that abbreviated listing of Pinchot’s tasks appears, his dilemmas seem almost straightforward when compared with those facing the now century-old organization and its leaders, line officers, rangers, and staff. They daily must wrestle with the complexities posed by

an integrated series of forces that threaten to overwhelm the agency's capacity to manage the landscapes in their care.

Pinchot and his contemporaries, for instance, created the Forest Service in a nation of ninety million, at a time when the bulk of the population lived east of the Mississippi River and the resources the agency oversaw ranged from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific coast. Today, the United States contains more than three hundred million people, and it is experiencing the greatest demographic migration in its history. Americans have been moving south and west in vast numbers since the 1950s, a surge that is expected to continue; demographers predict that by 2050, half the nation will live west of the Mississippi. The implications of this trend for public land managers are already manifest: as major cities such as Denver, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, and Seattle swell in population and sprawl in size—a pattern that is being replicated in smaller communities like Bozeman, Boise, and Bend—the impact of this unmanaged growth on national forests and grasslands (as well as state parks and local open space) has been and will remain profound.

Managing for recreational use was never a major issue for early-twentieth-century forest rangers. Neither were they faced with growing numbers of residents who chose to live within what is now dubbed the urban-wildland interface. New homes being hammered into once sparsely settled fire ecosystems of the American West have revolutionized fire management policies. True, timber towns were often in the line of fire, incinerated when wildland blazes overwhelmed firefighters' ability to control them. Yet for all the horror of the blazes that swept through Peshtigo, Wisconsin (1871), Hinckley, Minnesota (1894), and Yacolt, Washington (1902), the deep-seated fear about forest-fed flames spreading into midsized and major cities of the twenty-first century is of another order altogether. So dangerous has this situation become that firefighting agencies at all levels have been forced to debate how much time, energy, and human resources they should commit to battle fires that erupt in the wildland-urban interface. The degree to which shifts in human geography have influenced the Forest Service's actions is reflected in its spending patterns: more than forty percent of its budget is allocated to fire, a disproportionate amount that undercuts its ability to underwrite other critical responsibilities.³

The same transformations also have posed a dilemma that the Forest Service in the past never had to address—how to manage water. Although the agency's Organic Act of 1897 stressed that the first task of federal land managers would be the protection of watersheds and streamflows, and although the agency has always taken up that task with great seriousness, it is now faced with a new pressure: in the West, upwards of sixty percent of the region's water supplies sheets off the national forests, a matter of considerable import as the regional population grows. Moreover, the "white gold" that flows in its many rivulets, creeks, and rivers is a state-regulated resource, a situation that creates a crosscurrent of obligations and responsibilities whose turbulence will only intensify with the escalating demand for potable water in San Diego, Las Vegas, Sacramento, Portland, and Tucson.

Keeping those watersheds pristine is further complicated by the uptick in forest disease and insect infestation spanning North America. Bark beetles, spruce budworms, and woolly adelgids are among a host of other problems that are compromising the health and integrity of federal, state, and tribal lands in the United States; in 2006, Colorado lost more than 4.8 million acres of lodgepole pine to the mountain pine beetle, and other states report similar levels of devastation. Such infestations have consequences for the high-country forests and downstream communities. In January 2007, Senator Ken Salazar (D-Colorado) predicted that should fire erupt in these weakened forests, the catastrophe would be so great it would become known as "the Katrina of the West."⁴

This pressure-packed situation suggests, too, just how much things have changed since the agency's early years. In 1899, in his first official report as head of the Division of Forestry, Pinchot wrote, "With a view of obtaining some preliminary data for inaugurating more extensive investigation, an agent has been appointed who will have for his work a study of the more destructive diseases affecting timber."⁵ His was another, less troubled time.

The same could be said of the most intractable issue confronting the contemporary Forest Service (and the planet), about which those living a century ago had not a clue: climate change. The global dimensions of the rise in Earth's atmospheric temperature and the speed with which this is altering the Canadian tundra have been confirmed by researchers of the Forest

Service and the U.S. Geological Survey, as well as university scientists. They have determined as well the link between temperature change, forest composition, and the intensity and length of the fire season.⁶

Add to that combustible mix of forces confronting the twenty-first-century Forest Service the following: an ever-changing political landscape at the local, state, and national levels; constant revisions to federal environmental legislation through federal court rulings; and the swift pace of forestland fragmentation as the timber industry offloads millions of wooded acres through timber investment management organizations. Consider also the agency's internal demographics. When it was established in 1905, the forty-year-old Gifford Pinchot was one of its elders; in 2007, half of the senior-level employees were eligible for retirement, a reality that undoubtedly will pose an additional interlocking set of difficulties for those who will work within and lead the agency over the next fifty years.

In so many respects, then, Pinchot was lucky to have been present at the Forest Service's creation. He was fortunate to have been among the first generation of American foresters whose mission seemed relatively uncomplicated. It seems appropriate to ask, therefore, whether a century-old federal agency, born in radically different times and under dramatically different circumstances, remains relevant. It seems reasonable to wonder, too, whether its continued existence is a given, its survival without doubt.

How will Forest Service respond to the welter of opportunities and challenges that already have emerged and those that will arise in the coming years? What follows is a discussion of three possible paths the agency might pursue; for clarity, I have segregated the three tracks but know that in reality they might well merge or intersect at various points in time ... and I know, too, that my speculations might be completely wrong.

Scenario One: Evolutionary Dynamics

The Forest Service has evolved in relation to the lands that it manages; it is tied deeply to the land because that is its job. But this assertion only seems axiomatic: it is also true that as the forests and grasslands have changed over time, these alterations have forced their stewards to respond, establishing a dynamic interaction between environment and the professional conservationists who seek to manage it.

That reciprocity may prove the key to the agency's long-term survival. Because its mission has been in flux over the past hundred years and the agency has had to adapt, its resilience has allowed it to respond to shifts in political temper, scientific knowledge, and social concern. There is no reason to assume that this pattern will not continue to define its actions in the twenty-first century, enabling it to morph as needed while retaining its oversight authority and core responsibilities.

Its very creation, after all, depended on an argument about evolving landscapes. Take three images that the third chief of the Forest Service, William B. Greeley, used to illustrate one of his articles, "The Relation of Geography to Timber Supply." Published in 1920, the paper and its accompanying maps, entitled "Virgin Forest Cover: 1620, 1850, 1920," help us see what early American foresters understood about the landscapes they were now commissioned to manage.

Taken together, the three images tell a story of profound change, but Greeley's title also offers us a clue about how he and his cohort interpreted these changes. "Virgin Forest" is a loaded term on any number of levels, but it is particularly so when the 1620 illustration is read against those denoted 1850 and 1920. From Greeley's point of view, why was 1620 virginal? What had happened in the succeeding three hundred years? If, as Euro-American settlers, farmers, and industrialists slashed their way through the pristine stands of original forests, if these woods lost their virginity—if they were raped—then what was the Forest Service's function? To serve as the police force, Greeley implies: to offer protection and stand as steward of the resource that has been destroyed.

This is a critical point, for Greeley's imagery indicates what he and his peers imagined early America was like, and it also reveals how they used these images and their interpretations of them to speak to the broader public about why the Forest Service's existence was so critical for the country.

Certainly, that is why Gifford Pinchot, who as early as the 1890s recognized the power of photographs to propel his fellow citizens to action, lugged a camera wherever he traveled, and why he insisted that the Forest Service employ this instrument in its daily work. His appreciation of photography becomes important when you contemplate what his corps included in their images—or, as in the case of a 1910 shot of a clearcut in southern Michigan, what was missing.

So why in 1910 did the Forest Service photograph a fifty-year-old flatland clearcut in Michigan? Or take one of a devastating 1915 harvest in mountainous Colorado? These images were designed to show how human mismanagement was endangering the nation. The country was running out of trees. Worse, if left in these cutover conditions, the land would not regenerate its forest cover. In the Michigan instance, reforestation had not occurred because a postharvest fire had ruined the soil; that's why agriculture had not succeeded there, either. In Michigan, the lack of furrows, like the absence of trees, stood as a withering indictment of an earlier generation's heedlessness; in Colorado, the twisted trunks and deeply rutted hillside illustrated Americans' unwillingness to care for the land and the natural and human communities that depended on it.

In political terms, the Forest Service, still in its infancy, collected such images to convince the nation that its work was critical to national security, that conservation—and conservationists—mattered. The way to put the land back together was to support and fund an organization whose mission it was to restore what had been destroyed. Replant, regenerate, repair: this would be the Forest Service's environmental ethos for its first fifty years.

Yet embedded within that purpose was an intense anxiety, best captured in a 1908 cartoon: "Uncle Sam as He May Appear in Twenty Years." Like Sampson, a crewcut Uncle Sam would be shorn of his power, too weak to maintain his authority and expand his reach. So why in the first decade of the twentieth century were some Americans worried about their nation's potency, as embodied in the presence or absence of trees? What did they fear, or rather, what did they fear they would not become? A world power.

Contemporaries fully understood that they were on the cusp of greatness, even imperial dominance. By 1910, the American gross national product had exceeded the combined output of England, France, and Germany. Yet in recognizing that they had the chance to supplant Europe, many Americans were also haunted by the fear that they would miss this opportunity by acting as other empires had—by consuming and devastating their natural resources at such a rate and to such an extent that their economy would collapse along with their dreams of hegemonic power.

Conservationists played a part in this wider cultural debate: their descriptions of forest devastation and the resultant "timber famine" dovetailed with their prescription—to create a system of public lands dedicated to the practice of conservative resource management. This argument had emerged in the aftermath of the publication of George Perkins Marsh's seminal work, *Man and Nature: Earth as Modified by Human Action* (1864), and gained momentum in the 1870s and 1880s as the American Forestry Association, fishing and hunting clubs, and other allied groups agitated at the local, regional, and national levels for regulatory mechanisms to control resource exploitation. Their agitation had an impact, however delayed: in the 1870s the Division of Forestry was created within the Department of Agriculture. In 1891, Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act, granting the president power "from time to time, [to] set apart and reserve in any State or Territory having public land bearing forests . . . public reservations," a legislative initiative that had been nearly twenty years in the making. As if to make up for lost time, however, within a year President Benjamin Harrison had set aside more than thirteen million acres as forest reserves, and his successor, Grover Cleveland, during his first term, added another five million; by 1899, the number had swelled to forty million. But it was not until 1897 that any form of administrative control over these reserves had been codified, and not until 1905 would the forest reserves be united with federal foresters, when the Forest Service was created and given oversight of national forested lands.

President Theodore Roosevelt, who was sworn into office following President McKinley's assassination in 1901, helped tip the balance in favor of conservation. He used his office to lend much-needed support to the conservation movement, one compelling sign of which was that between 1901 and 1908, he added 110 million acres to the National Forest System; it was under his watch that these lands were transferred from Interior to Agriculture and that the Forest Service

was created, and it was he who placed the new agency under the leadership of a close friend and ally, Gifford Pinchot.

In short order, Pinchot and his peers used their legislative mandate to hire and train rangers to survey and map the lands within the boundaries of the national forests; pressed rigorously for the resolution of legal challenges, which ultimately led to a Supreme Court decision affirming the Forest Service's statutory standing and authority to manage the forests and grasslands; and assiduously lobbied Congress for annual budget increases to match its expanded duties.

With the establishment of these boundaries—topographical, political, and legal—the Forest Service could get to work. And the central managerial task was, as the earlier Forest Service photographs proclaimed, to repair an abused land. From 1905 until World War Two, its energy largely was focused on the regeneration of cutover and overgrazed terrain; during the Great Depression its charge widened to include eroded farmlands, located principally in the South. A Forest Service photograph of a gullied Arkansas cotton farm is emblematic of the hundreds of others taken during the hard times of the 1930s and recalls those shot twenty years earlier. Although separated in time, all these images argue that the Forest Service's engagement is vital: national in scope, local in significance. The agency mended what others had broken; it was our soft-hatted custodial agent.

That hat hardened with the advent of global war and postwar prosperity. Then the task was to get out the cut. In 1940, logging on the national forests amounted to no more than two billion board feet, but by 1960 the figure had zoomed upward, and it topped twelve billion board feet in the late 1980s. This was a shift in activity of incalculable importance: as I have argued elsewhere, the Forest Service, which had been formed "in response to late 19th century anxieties about woodland devastation, 50 years later ... had pushed to the front lines of hard hat-wearing timber productivity."⁷

Just how complete the change had become is captured in a photograph of a clear-cut on the Bitterroot National Forest, near Missoula, Montana. It became a signifier of the agency's new ability to harvest trees in once-difficult terrain, carving out terraces and then regenerating that landscape; the photograph illuminates the technologically sweet ambition to turn a natural forest into a plantation and revels in this application of scientific expertise to the land.

But this is also a photograph of protest, and it signals growing popular criticism of the Forest Service's fascination with science and technology. Even an internal task force chided employees on the Bitterroot for acting as if "resource production goals come first and ... land management considerations take second place."⁸

Protests over clearcutting and the technological imperative spilled into a parallel debate in the early 1970s over clearcutting in West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest and provoked a backlash against the Forest Service, sparking federal lawsuits, local demonstrations, and a welter of state and congressional inquiries. When the dust had settled, a new legal environment had emerged. Among its most critical components was the 1976 National Forest Management Act, which gave the public a much stronger role in determining forest planning and set limits on clearcutting.

The National Forest Management Act was the last in a remarkable series of landmark environmental initiatives that began in 1964 with the Wilderness Act. Collectively, these bills—including Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act amendments, the Endangered Species Act, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act—constitute the second great wave of environmental activism in U.S. history that, ironically, regulate the very land management regulatory agencies, such as the Forest Service and the National Park Service, that had been born during the first surge, in the Progressive Era.

Since its passage, the agency has appeared to be wandering in the forest. Pounded in the courts, generating at times intense hostility, and faced with drastic budget cuts and sharp reductions in personnel, it has struggled to find its way; one former chief believes the rigorous and fluid legal oversight has led to an "analysis paralysis," a logjam that has prevented the Forest Service from doing its proper work.

This broader struggle to define its contemporary mission has been marked by radical declines in timber harvests, escalating population pressures along the urban-wildland interface,

increased recreational use, intensifying forest fires, and serious water management issues that now concern the whole of the South and West. No wonder the agency's morale is low.⁹

The Forest Service's initiatives reflect this sometimes-shaky sense of self. "New Perspectives," the rubric it employed to describe its policy reforms in the 1980s, was succeeded by "Ecosystem Management" in the 1990s, which in turn was replaced by what recently retired chief Dale Bosworth articulated as the "Four Threats," a strategy for facing the new century's major issues: the loss of open space, the buildup of fire and fuels, invasive species, and unmanaged recreation. The agency's wavering commitments (real and perceived) are linked to the larger culture's curious inability to live up to the environmental principles it purports to embrace. One example should suffice: through legal pressure and political compromise, the public has forced the Forest Service to scale back its timber harvest, which has dropped from twelve billion board feet in the late 1980s to two billion in 2007. Yet the citizenry has not reduced its consumption of wood; rather, demand has increased every year for the past fifty years. We have accomplished this by a simple expedient—outsourcing our demand to Canada, Eastern Europe, southern Africa, and the equatorial band of tropical rainforests, and thus exporting our environmental problems to other parts of the planet.

Such myopia only complicates the environment in which the Forest Service operates. As Gifford Pinchot argued a century ago, the national forests "exist today because the people want them. To make them accomplish the most good the people themselves must make clear how they want them run." Gaining that clarity has been difficult of late, hindering our ability to revise our land management practices on the national forests.

Still, a persuasive case can be made that what has appeared to be a lack of coherent guidelines may simply be a necessary byproduct of evolutionary change. It is tough to decipher, in the midst of a transition, the precise nature of that transition. The agency's history would support this view. Its management of resources, the emphasis of which has moved from grass to trees to water, has revealed its ability, however constrained, to shift its ground, to adapt to changes in politics and polity, ideas and images. That's how organisms survive.

Scenario Two: Devolutionary Progress

Yet sometimes change is so radical that organisms emerge as something else all together. That might have happened to the Forest Service early in its existence, and it might still. Indeed, a proposed alteration that it has faced—and to date fended off—is the devolution of its lands and authority to the states in which its forests and grasslands are located. Those who have argued for this outcome, like those who first made this demand at the Forest Service's birth, have drawn their energy from a powerful strain in American political thought. Start with the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved for the States respectively, or to the people." In attempting to define the precise relationship between federal and state sovereignty, a central issue in the United States since the eighteenth century, the amendment actually underscores that this relationship is in tension. The Forest Service knows this full well, for the agency long has been a flashpoint in the heated political debate.

With reason: as revealed in a 1908 cartoon of Colorado bearing the impress of President Theodore Roosevelt's toothy visage, western critics of the chief executive believed he used the creation of national forests to expand presidential authority; he was, they argued, making the executive branch first among equals. They were not wrong about Roosevelt's ambitions or his use of the Forest Service as a vehicle for them. The first Sagebrush Rebellion, which simmered between 1905 and 1908, was linked to the president's withdrawal of 110 million acres from the public domain to build up the Forest Service's inventory. Although the Supreme Court legitimized the agency's managerial control of these lands (and thus implicitly supported Roosevelt's actions) through a series of test cases resolved in 1911, its decisions did not defuse the political anger that periodically has bubbled up in the West. In the 1950s, western livestock interests reignited the debate but without success. No more successful was the 1990s "Wise Use" movement, which demanded that the federal government relinquish its rights to the national forests; commissioners in Nye County, Nevada, made a more blunt assault, using bulldozers to ram Forest Service fences, and throughout the West, agency vehicles and offices were firebombed and vandalized.

In this overheated environment, Pinchot, mocked in a 1908 cartoon entitled “Czar Pinchot and his Cossack Rangers,” would have felt right at home.

Although the states’ rights argument has never gained much traction with the body politic or the court system in the United States, other countries have reached different conclusions, Canada and New Zealand most notably. Originally, each had followed a similar path as the United States: in a federalized structure in which national and provincial governments maintained different levels of sovereignty, each country established a national forest system under the management of a professional forest service. Like the Forest Service, the Canadian and New Zealand agencies were expected to oversee and maintain their valuable resource base. That expectation is not surprising. Gifford Pinchot had been a strong proponent of the Canadian conservation movement, and the two neighboring countries, like distant New Zealand, had drawn from European ideas and models for how to regulate resource exploitation across time. Linked at their creation, it would have been reasonable to suppose that the futures of these three professional agencies also would have run in tandem.

That’s not what happened. Founded in 1899, the Canadian Forest Service developed simultaneously with schools of forestry. The first of these, at the University of Toronto, was directed by German-born forester Bernhard Fernow, who had recently resigned as head of the U.S. Division of Forestry. These schools’ graduates joined the new agency’s staff, and their scientific expertise shaped the organization’s managerial perspective; by 1924, Canadian foresters had 9.2 million acres under management. Within six years, what proved a short-lived experiment in federal forestry, was over. In 1930, as the global depression bore down, all national forest lands were returned to the provinces from which they had been gained, and the agency’s budget and staff were cut by upwards of seventy percent. The idea of a national agency with land management power never recovered; over the years, the Canadian Forest Service’s bureaucratic status was downgraded from an agency to a department to a service to a division; it regained its departmental status in 1989 but a decade earlier had lost a critical part of its research responsibilities when its forest products laboratories were privatized. Because it no longer has a land base or a scientific mission, the Canadian Forest Service must be content to serve as a “navigator” for private and provincial foresters and forests; its mission statement is revelatory of this change in function: “The Canadian Forest Service promotes the sustainable development of Canada’s forests and the competitiveness of the Canadian forest sector.” Not all have been happy with its new role as a promoter or catalyst. As Ken Drushka and Bob Burt have observed, at “various points in its history, some of its leaders or its critics have looked wistfully at its southern counterpart, the U.S. Forest Service, with its vast national forest base, and its authoritative position in U.S. society.”¹⁰

New Zealand showed no such wistfulness when in the 1980s it embarked on an even more radical and rapid devolution of its public forests. The national role in forestry had begun seven decades earlier. In 1913, after nearly a century of largely unregulated and intense harvesting of native forests, a Royal Commission on Forestry was appointed to evaluate forest conditions, determine which lands would remain in public control and what their potential uses might be, and estimate future demand for timber and other resources. The commission concluded that New Zealand needed a commissioner of forestry and a professional forest service that would manage the state forests. Although World War One delayed the implementation of these recommendations, by 1920 they were enacted, new schools of forestry were established, and management commenced. Sixty years later, the national government owned more than fifty percent of New Zealand’s commercial forests and was thus a dominant presence in the country’s timber economy.

Sixteen years later that was no longer true. In 2000, the government owned only six percent of commercial forestland; thirty-four percent was held by Maori trusts, three percent was under local control; the largest ownership group was international timber companies. Corporate, for-profit forestry now was the law of the land.

How had this happened? In 1986, a new Labour government, responding to the country’s sluggish economy, first corporatized, then privatized the resource agencies. One year later, the New Zealand Forest Service was abolished and folded into the new Department of Conservation. A new Ministry of Forestry was, like its Canadian peer, to serve as a policy shop, and the New Zealand Forestry Corporation, granted control of the state’s commercial forestry operations on

4.4 million hectares, focused on market-driven resource management and the creation of a profitable forest sector.¹¹

Neither the Canadian nor the New Zealand model has been seriously advocated in the United States. True, those who would like to reduce or eliminate the U.S. Forest Service's regulatory clout have proposed transferring the national forests to the states, a pattern that would resemble the Canadian experience, but the 1930 transfer in Canada involved former provincial lands that were being returned to the provinces by the federal government, in stark contrast to the U.S. national forests, which had been in the public domain and therefore had always been federally owned. Moreover, it is not at all clear that the states would have the budgets, staff, or political will to maintain these lands, a reality that perhaps has undercut state governments' interest in a total dismantling of the federal presence.¹²

What about a partial teardown? Since the early 1990s, there have been innumerable academic conferences and grass-roots discussions about adopting a more cooperative conservation model in which local groups devise forest plans in conjunction with federal land managers. Proponents of collaboration are inspired by federal laws, such as the National Forest Management Act and the Endangered Species Act, that require public participation and interagency coordination, and they were energized by community environmental initiatives promoted at the 1997 Seventh American Forest Congress. Bolstered by university-sponsored think tanks, such as the Public Policy Research Institute at the University of Montana, they have launched several successful ventures, including the Quincy Library Group (1992) and the New Ranch program developed by the Quivira Coalition (1997); the latter seeks to operate within what it calls the "radical center—a neutral place where people could explore their interests instead of argue their positions—and at the grassroots, literally the 'grass' and the 'roots,' where we believed, trust needed to be built anew."¹³

The "Lubrecht Conversations" (1998) shared this commitment to establishing an arena in which to experiment with new approaches to old problems. Those involved in the conversation, which gathered outside Missoula at the Lubrecht Experimental Forest, argued for a "bottom up" approach to policy reform. Local-consensus management would evolve to include wider watershed and bioregional perspectives that then would shape larger, national policy reforms. Most captivating was the group's call for the creation of a virtual Region 7 within the Forest Service wherein districts and forests would propose "to develop practical collaborative decision-making processes at the local/regional level, which might eventually evolve into a national restatement of basic mission." If acceptable, the Forest Service would fund the experiment but would not retain authority over its design or implementation.¹⁴

Although to date "Region 7" remains but a tantalizing idea, other experimental formats have been enacted. One on-the-ground example is the Valles Caldera Trust (2000), a government-owned entity that provides management and administrative services for the Valles Caldera National Preserve in northern New Mexico. This national preserve, in combination with the other proposals—some realized, some not—suggest the array of options that have been emerging in timber towns and ranch country in response to decades of political discord, legal maneuvering, and bureaucratic entanglement. This development got another push in August 2005, when the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation convened, a sign that community-oriented, collaborative conservation has captured considerable political interest and generated significant momentum.¹⁵

Whether this top-down support of grass-roots actions will be manifest in long-term reform is uncertain. But these projects' incremental development, innovative perspectives, and experimental character give them a much greater chance of success in revising the reigning principles of public land management in the United States than anything advocated by the Wise Use movement or modeled by the devolutionary actions of Canada and New Zealand.¹⁶

Scenario Three: Revolutionary Impulse

Another radical shift would neither maintain the status quo (evolution) nor shrink the federal managerial presence (devolution)—it would expand the reach and import of federal agency conservationism: the creation of a new Department of Conservation in the executive branch. With a seat in the cabinet, this department would house the nation's most important land

management agencies—the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, Geological Survey, National Resources Conservation Service, National Park Service, and Environmental Protection Agency, as well as other scattered environmental entities within the executive branch. By creating economies of scale and greater efficiencies of action, this new department would save money and time and would serve as the standard bearer for the modern environmental movement.

Most yawn at the prospect; it seems to fly in the face of contemporary environmentalism, which stresses local agency over national solutions, making this an idea out of step with modern grass-roots politics. Fair enough. But an unreflective dismissal of this possibility may lead us to miss a chance to restructure federal land management institutions and their delivery of environmental services. It may not be possible to institute much-desired bottom-up reform without simultaneous top-down change.

Having said that, none of the previous efforts to establish a Department of Conservation have been successful. Some of these failures are a consequence of a longstanding animosity between the Departments of Agriculture and Interior that dates from the initial transfer of forests from Interior to Agriculture in 1905. Naturally, Gifford Pinchot is at the center of this enduring struggle.

When the Forest Service was created in 1905, it, like its progenitor, the Bureau of Forestry, was located in Agriculture. The nation's forests, however, were administered by Interior. To bring the foresters and the forests together, Pinchot faced two choices: shift his tiny staff to Interior to be united there with the national forest reserves, or seek the transfer of millions of forested acres from one cabinet department to another. Because he was convinced that Interior's history of corruption would compromise the newly formed Forest Service, he chose the latter. He inaugurated discussions in 1898, when he was appointed head of the forestry bureau, and seven years later, with President Roosevelt pressing the case, Congress and Interior signed off on the transfer.

Interior has been trying to get those acres back ever since. In the 1920s, Secretary Albert Fall pushed for the transfer of the Forest Service and its forests but failed to achieve his goal when implicated in and later jailed for his participation in the Teapot Dome scandal. Ten years later, Harold Ickes, Franklin D. Roosevelt's innovative and pugnacious secretary of Interior, proposed a Department of Conservation as part of a broader New Deal scheme to reorganize the executive branch. His proposal revolved around moving the Forest Service and national forests to Interior and pulling in other federal land management agencies under one roof; this restructuring, he believed, was logical: those who worked on soils could talk with those who worked with trees; those who worked on water could connect with those who worked with wildlife habitat. In trying to finesse turf wars, Ickes ignited a contentious political brawl that damaged the Roosevelt administration.

In anticipation of such potential problems, President Roosevelt, who fully supported Ickes's plan, informed Secretary of Agriculture Harry A. Wallace in 1933–34 that he must not publicly protest or privately fight the Forest Service's impending transfer; Roosevelt also required Wallace to gag Ferdinand Silcox, chief of the Forest Service. Through back channels, Silcox asked 68-year-old Gifford Pinchot to come to the aid of his agency, a request Pinchot gladly accepted. Over the next seven years, Pinchot and Ickes engaged in a titanic struggle inside and outside Washington. In speeches and over the radio, in letters-to-the-editor and newspaper columns, and before any audience that would listen to them, the former friends blasted each other. Pinchot's reasoning was simple: if he created a storm of protest, he might force the president to recalibrate the costs associated with Ickes's plan. By the late 1930s, after pouring tens of thousands of dollars of his own money into the campaign and creating a vocal lobbying force of fellow conservationists and western legislators, Pinchot forced Roosevelt to change his mind. In 1940, while meeting with the so-called Forest Lobby, a group of senators and representatives from timber-producing states, Roosevelt tore up the executive order authorizing the transfer of the Forest Service.

Although Pinchot frustrated Ickes's plans, the two men's battle royal obscured a larger issue: what was the best way to organize the management of the public lands? Would Ickes's vision of a more coherent and integrated Department of Conservation have provided a more comprehensive leadership for and efficient stewardship of these invaluable resources? We will

never know, of course, but the concept's allure has continued to attract adherents. In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration, at the same time it advocated the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, pushed for the establishment of a Department of Natural Resources that would have been merged with Interior. The idea failed in part because Russell Train, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, argued against it. "There was some logic [to the idea,] he recalled in 2006, "but I testified against it, against building a bigger bureaucracy. I was opposed to burying environmental responsibility in a big conglomeration with everything from Indian affairs to reclamation. The environment would have been submerged."¹⁷

Undaunted, President Jimmy Carter also floated the idea of a Department of Natural Resources in concert with his plan to create a Department of Energy; each would absorb disparate agencies and offer more integrated management. Energy became a cabinet-level position in 1977, but Natural Resources did not get beyond the discussion stage.

Despite presidents' inability to create a superagency devoted to conservation, there are signs that the integration is already taking place, if on a limited basis. In 1997, Congress authorized a program called Service First: Working Together, in which the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management were encouraged to merge various activities. One such joint venture is the Durango Public Lands Center. In it, the two agencies share responsibility for the center, from which they manage their lands in southwestern Colorado. The leadership of the San Juan National Forest and the San Juan Field Office, like the twelve-person staff, are "cross delegated." This means, according to a Forest Service news release, that each employee is responsible for "all aspects of the two agencies' work and is equally responsible to the USFS Regional Forester and BLM State Director. Shared USFS/BLM offices in Pagosa Springs, Durango, and Dolores, Colorado, oversee three combined USFS Ranger Districts and BLM Field Offices." This innovative arrangement makes the San Juan "the only organization in the country with a single team providing leadership in all aspects of land management and public service for the two federal agencies."¹⁸

These interchanges, like the wearing of each agency's uniform and the required fluency in each agency's different statutory regulations, are part of a larger attempt to merge scarce skills and resources among the nation's land management agencies. Sally K. Fairfax, the Henry J. Vaux Distinguished Professor of Forest Policy at the University of California–Berkeley, pushes this argument further, suggesting that this convergence of identities is consistent with a hitherto unacknowledged blending of missions: "The historic distinctions and feuds" between the Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management "no longer matter." She continues:

The hostility between the advocates of forest reserves and park reserves that began before either agency was formed conceals the fact that for most of their existence, they have been more alike than not. As timber fades as a Forest Service preoccupation, and recreation emerges as dominant present and future concerns, the justifications for having multiple and distinct federal management agencies fade as well.

Her argument received support in the form of a November 2006 memorandum of understanding signed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service, and in partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service, that committed the four agencies "to carry out shared or joint management activities to achieve mutually beneficial resource management goals." Service First authority has been used primarily for merging offices, issuing joint permits, sharing management, and creating single points of contact for resource programs. Given the patchwork of lands each agency manages and proximity of their holdings, this integrative approach makes considerable sense, so much so that the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Reclamation, and Army Corps of Engineers are considering seeking Service First authorization. By this incremental fashion the dream of a Department of Conservation that has eluded several presidents and innumerable analysts might well come into being.¹⁹

Future Action

By themselves, the three scenarios sketched out here—evolution, devolution, revolution—will have little chance of defining the Forest Service's institutional structure and its guiding perspectives over the twenty-first century. None of these possibilities will be achieved

without reference to and in combination with the others. Moreover, although any change in the agency's purpose will require internal support from the Forest Service's leadership and staff, the real locus of any transformation lies in the national legislative and executive branches. That's what Roger Sedjo, Senior Fellow at Resources for the Future, had in mind when he noted in 2000 that the Forest Service "no longer controls national forest policy. Instead, mandatory provisions of the law and regulations ... mean that the regional and local landscapes, watersheds, and their resources are now the focus of attention." Because the assessments of these resources' viability shape policy, the Forest Service and other public land management agencies now "lack the institutional capacity and authority to fully develop and implement ecosystem conservation agendas and resource management programs." That these organizations lack the necessary clout is tied to their inability "to interpret and respond effectively to the public's priorities regarding national forest management ..."

To regain the capacity to listen to the citizenry and address its concerns, the Forest Service need only recall the words Gifford Pinchot uttered in 1907 when the nation's forest reserves were renamed the national forests. They were, he said,

made for and owned by the people. They should also be managed by the people ... This means that if National Forests are going to accomplish anything worth while the people must know all about them and must take a very active role in their management."

Despite his conviction that democratic debate was (and remains) essential to public land management, Pinchot knew that the collaborative process of defining and achieving conservation stewardship on the national forests would never be easy. He also knew that that was the only way to safeguard these precious assets.

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¹ *Science Daily*, March 7, 2007, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/03/070305140830.htm>, accessed June 12, 2007.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Wildfire Brings Policy Questions," May 28, 2007,

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=3217627&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>, accessed June 12, 2007.

⁴ Senator Salazar quoted in Rebecca Boyle, "Lawmakers Could Help Abate Beetle Devastation," *Greeley Tribune*, January 2, 2007, <http://www.greeleytrib.com/article/20070102/NEWS/101020048>, accessed March 14, 2007.

⁵ Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, fourth edition, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998), p. 311.

⁶ *Science Daily*, March 7, 2007, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/03/070305140830.htm>, March 14, 2007; "How Does Climate Change Influence Alaska's Vegetation? Insights from the Fossil Record," US Geological Service, June 1997, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/fs-0071-97/>, accessed March 14, 2007; "Climate Change and Thresholds of Ecosystem Change: Invisibility of Tundra in the Northern Rocky Mountains," http://www.nrel.colostate.edu/projects/brd_global_change/proj_10_tundra.html, accessed March 14, 2007; and Dennis O'Brien, "Climate Change Link Seen in Surge of Western Blazes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 7, 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/07/07/MNG7JJR8521.DTL>, accessed March 14, 2007.

⁷ Char Miller, "Crisis Management: Challenge and Controversy in Forest Service History," *Rangelands*, June 2005, pp. 14–18.

⁸ Martin Nie, "The Bitterroot Controversy,"

<http://forestryencyclopedia.jot.com/WikiHome/Bitterroot%20Controversy>, accessed June 12, 2007.

⁹ Jack Ward Thomas, "What Now? From a Former Forest Service Chief," in Roger Sedjo, ed., *A Vision for the Forest Service: Goals for Its Next Century* (Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future, 2000), pp. 10–43.

¹⁰ Ken Druska and Bob Burt, "The Canadian Forest Service: Catalyst for the Forest Sector," *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2001, p. 28.

¹¹ Differing opinions about the meaning of this transformation may be found in Andrew D. McEwen, "Exit of State From Plantation Forest Ownership in New Zealand," <http://www.maf.govt.nz/mafnet/unff-planted-forestry-meeting/conference-papers/exit-of-state-from-plantations.htm>, accessed June 13, 2007; and Nicole Spence, "The Privatization of New Zealand Forests," *Journal of Forestry Research*, 2, 1997, pp. 203–206; for a discussion of some of the earlier history, see Michael M. Roche, "Reactions to Scarcity: The Management of Forest Resources in Nineteenth-Century Canterbury, New Zealand," *Journal of Forest History*, April 1984, pp. 82-91.

¹² A domestic model for state-level control of public lands that has generated considerable interest is the 135 million acres of state-trust lands that have generated considerable economic success for some states; Jon Souter and Sally Fairfax, *State Trust Lands: History, Management, and Sustainable Use* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), and Sally Fairfax, "State Trust Lands Management: A Promising New Application for the Forest Service?" in Sedjo, ed., *A Vision for the Forest Service*, pp. 105–141, suggest that these trusts are an "appealing organizational option" to current federal land agencies.

¹³ For a brief history of the Quincy Library Group, see [http://www.qlg.org/pub/contents/chron.htm](http://www qlg.org/pub/contents/chron.htm); for Quivira, see http://quiviracoalition.org/About_Us/index.html; last accessed June 14, 2007.

¹⁴ *The Legal Framework for Cooperative Conservation*, Collaborative Governance Report 1 (Missoula: Public Policy Research Institute, University of Montana, 2006), which is an outgrowth of the 2005 White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation, summarizes the federal legislative support for collaborative forestry; Elizabeth Beaver et al., "Seeing the Forest Service for the Trees: A Survey of Proposals for Changing National Forest Policy," Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law, June 25, pp. 27–29, http://www.colorado.edu/law/centers/nrlc/publications/Forestry_Reforms_Report.pdf, accessed June 14, 2007.

¹⁵ On the Valles Caldera National Preserve, see <http://www.vallescaldera.gov/about/>, accessed June 14, 2007.

¹⁶ Mexico's experiences with locally determined, collaborative forestry has caught to the attention of the U.S. Forest Service, whose leadership has routinely attended workshops in Oaxaca; for background on and evaluations of the Mexican experience, see the special issue of *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, 15:1, 2002, "Community-Based Approaches to Forest Management."

¹⁷ "Q&A: Russell Train, Green Legislator Pioneer," *American Forests*, Autumn 2006, p. 39.

¹⁸ Information concerning the Durango Public Lands Center can be retrieved at <http://www.co.blm.gov/sjra/> and <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/sanjuan/about/organization/servicefirst.pdf>, accessed June 15, 2007.

¹⁹ Sally K. Fairfax, "When an Agency Outlasts Its Time: A Reflection," *Journal of Forestry*, July/August 2005, p. 265; the 2006 memorandum of understanding is available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/servicefirst/>, accessed June 15, 2007.