

Biographical Portrait

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

(1858–1919)

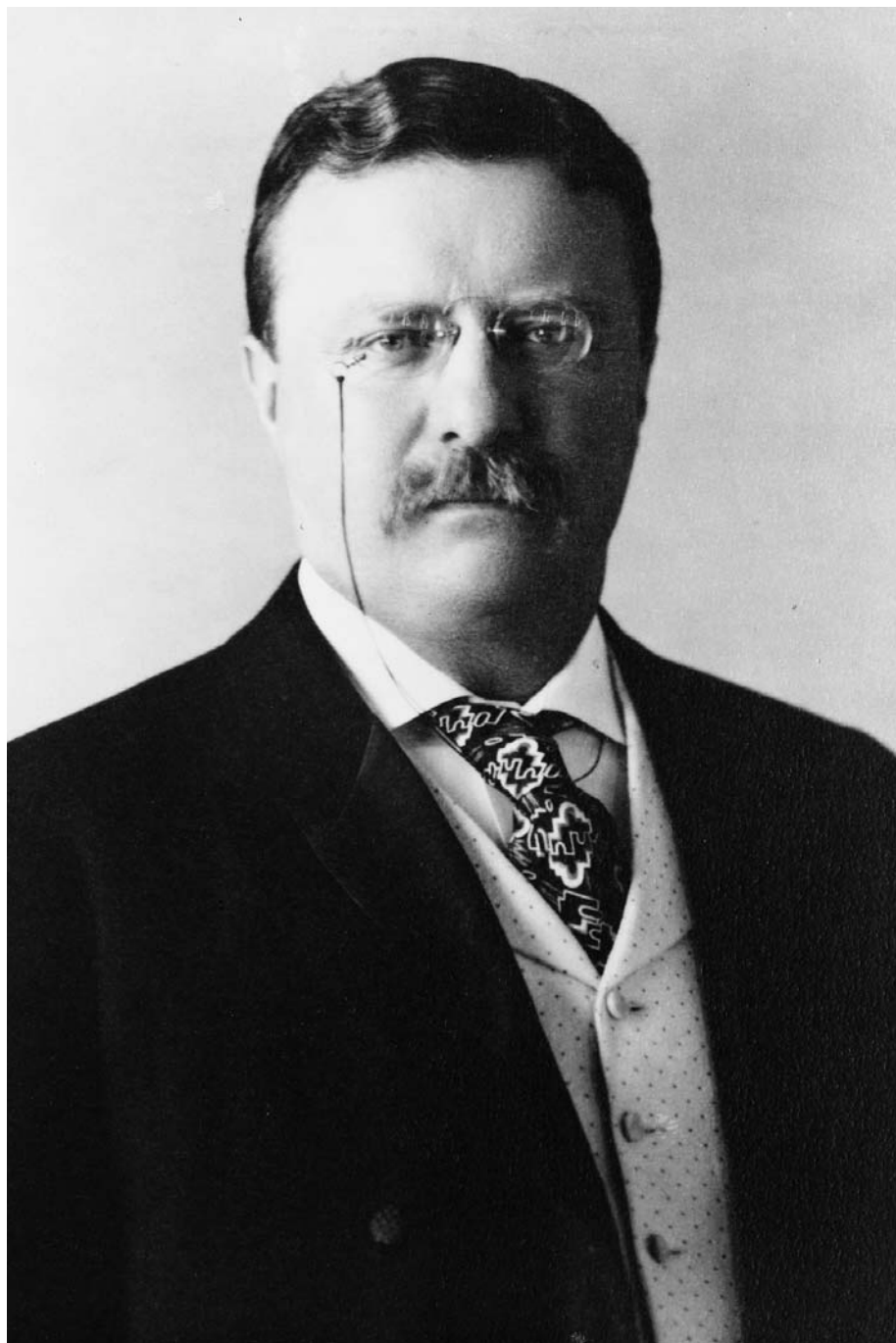
By Scott Gurney

Theodore Roosevelt—outdoorsman, Rough Rider, trust buster—is one of the four presidents memorialized on Mount Rushmore. The first U.S. president to make the conservation of natural resources a central function of government, his scientific understanding and firsthand knowledge of wildlife and natural history informed his natural resource management policy decisions as president. To mark the sesquicentennial of his birth, we revisit his contributions to forest and conservation history.

Born to a wealthy New York merchant on October 27, 1858, Roosevelt was a weak and asthmatic child with a strong intellect. At a young age he pleaded for his father to bring him books on nature while he convalesced. As the boy exercised and the asthma attacks diminished over time, he could spend longer periods outdoors and travel farther to study nature. He pursued the study of ornithology in the manner of his time: reading, shooting, collecting skins, and documenting his collection. He kept field journals and made sketches of animals that he observed. Fitted with glasses to correct his weak vision at age 13, he could now see the world he had only heretofore read about.

On one family trip abroad, in 1872, Roosevelt used his new shotgun to collect hundreds of bird specimens along the Nile River. Back home, he set out on ambitious field trips to the Adirondack Mountains and went moose hunting in Maine. His specimen collection and interest in natural history continued growing.

In the summer of 1874, the Roosevelt family rented a house in Oyster Bay, Long Island. Theodore was very excited by the bird life in the area and spent hours tramping the shoreline, woods, and fields of this naturalist's paradise. A frequent companion in these outings, Edith Carow, recalled that Theodore reeked of arsenic and his



Theodore Roosevelt's work and studies as a naturalist and his experience as a cattle rancher and big-game hunter made him uniquely qualified to shape federal natural resource policy.

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hands were often stained from taxidermy. Ten years later, he would purchase one hundred acres on Cove Neck, about two miles from the house his family had been renting, and build his sprawling country home, Sagamore Hill.

In 1876 Roosevelt entered Harvard, intent on becoming a naturalist. The next year, he copublished his first scientific work, "The Summer Birds of the Adirondacks in Franklin County, N.Y.," a well-reviewed four-page leaflet that listed ninety-seven species. Though he graduated in 1880 with a degree in natural history, he nonetheless found the modern "German method" of laboratory biology unappealing and began casting about for a career. He married Alice Lee and began attending Columbia Law School but soon got interested in political reform and left school. In 1882 he was elected to the New York Assembly and served with distinction for three years.

Roosevelt's interest in nature, outdoor exertion, and the challenge of big-game hunting led him to hunt bison in the Dakota Territory in 1883. Enraptured by what he called the "solemn beauty" of the Badlands, he established a cattle ranch in the area where he shot his first bison. There he learned firsthand of the environmental hazards of overgrazing livestock.

Following the death of his wife and his mother, simultaneously on Valentine's Day 1884, he took solace in the wide-open expanse of the northern plains. TR said that the Badlands looked the way that Poe sounds. In that hard country he overcame his grief and learned to overcome his fears. Run-ins with dangerous men, bad horses, blizzards, and grass fires tested his mettle. He learned a great deal about the land and how it was used and abused. While there, he came to this insight: "It is not what we have that will make us a great nation; it is the way in which we use it."¹

He returned to New York in 1886. He lost the race for mayor of New York City but regained a presence in the Republican Party and was rewarded with appointments to the U.S. Civil Service (1889–1895), the New York City Police Commission (1895–1897), and the Navy, where he served as assistant secretary (1897–1898).

A few weeks after losing the election for mayor, he married his childhood friend Edith Carow and settled into Sagamore Hill. With Edith he would have five children. Their second son, Kermit, would



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Roosevelt's friendships with naturalists like John Muir and John Burroughs were as important in shaping his conservation policy as those he had with scientific professionals like Gifford Pinchot and W J McGee. Roosevelt spent four days camping in Yosemite with Muir in May 1903 and found him to be a kindred spirit.

later accompany his father on his African and Brazilian expeditions.

Roosevelt's childhood interest in ornithology led to a lifelong pursuit of hunting and the study of wild animals. Besides the tangible results of the hunt, manifested in trophies mounted in museums around the world as well as his home, are some real contributions to natural history. In 1887, Roosevelt and several friends, including George Bird Grinnell, formed the Boone and Crockett Club, which would spearhead efforts to establish wilderness areas and federal forests in the 1890s. He wrote numerous magazine articles on hunting, wildlife, and outdoor life, and several of his thirty books are on natural history or animals. Each of his big hunting trips resulted in a book: *Hunting*

Trips of a Ranchman, Hunting the Grisly, Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail, The Wilderness Hunter, Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter, African Game Trails, and Through the Brazilian Wilderness.

In 1898, Roosevelt resigned from the Navy to fight in the Spanish-American War. He came home a hero and was elected governor of New York. While governor, Roosevelt maintained contact with people who he thought would help shape the future of the developing country. A notable visitor to the governor's mansion was the tall, cultured figure of Gifford Pinchot, chief of the forestry division in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Roosevelt often tested new associates by challenging them to a strenuous hike, tennis match, or round of boxing. Pinchot not

Teddy's Newest School



President Roosevelt used the Governors' Conference on Conservation in May 1908 to educate the governors as well as the general public about the importance of conserving natural resources. To keep the issue in front of the public and in the news, he appointed the National Conservation Commission one month later.

only accepted the challenge to box but impressed the governor by knocking him down. Theirs would become one of the most important friendships in American conservation history.

Pinchot's influence with the future president had far-reaching effects. The first American-born scientific forester in the United States, Pinchot was Roosevelt's adviser in crafting forestry policy during his tenure as governor of New York as well as during his presidency. Roosevelt quickly became an advocate of scientific forest management. He declared in his autobiography,

We need to have our system of forestry gradually developed and conducted along scientific principles. When this has been done it will be possible to allow marketable lumber to be cut everywhere without damage to the forests—indeed,

with positive advantage to them. But until lumbering is thus conducted, on strictly scientific principles no less than upon principles of the strictest honesty toward the State, we cannot afford to suffer it at all in the State forests. Unrestrained greed means the ruin of the great woods and the drying up of the sources of the rivers.²

His reform efforts and popularity threatened the entrenched machine politicians of his party. In 1900, to get him out of New York, they added him to the national ticket as President William McKinley's running mate. Following McKinley's assassination, Roosevelt took the oath of office on September 14, 1901.

Cautious at first, Roosevelt gradually began to put his own stamp on the presidency. His first Message to Congress (precursor to the State of the Union Address)

briefly addressed subjects that would define his presidency: social responsibility, relations between capital and labor, foreign policy, and conservation. Among these topics it is the concern with the conservation of natural resources that marks a shift in the presidency:

Wise forest protection does not mean the withdrawal of forest resources, whether of wood, water, or grass, from contributing their full share to the welfare of the people, but, on the contrary, gives the assurance of larger and more certain supplies. The fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use.³

At his behest, Congress passed the National Reclamation Act of 1902 and established the Bureau of Reclamation, which helped bring water to some three million acres of arid land in a dozen western states. The following year, he established the Pelican Island Bird Reserve in Florida by executive order. He created fifty-one wildlife reserves in all. These reserves formed the beginnings of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A remarkable feature of Theodore Roosevelt's first term as president was his cross-country tour in 1903. Some historians believe it was the first time a president had actively run for reelection. He made frequent whistle-stop speeches and spoke for local Republican candidates, but he also found time to explore Yellowstone with John Burroughs and Yosemite with John Muir.

The western trip bolstered his commitment to preserving the natural grandeur of the national parks, as well as expanding the system to protect endangered areas. After visiting the Grand Canyon, he sought to prevent development of large resort hotels and excursion trains there, affirming that "nature has been to work on it, and man can only mar it." Passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906 gave the president the authority to declare such places national monuments without the approval of Congress. Roosevelt made good use of this authority, setting aside eighteen national monuments, including the Grand Canyon.

Elected to his own term in 1904, Roosevelt continued the effort to protect and scientifically manage the nation's forests and the interconnected streams and

rivers that depended on the “great sponge” upstream. With the advice and support of Pinchot, he dissolved the Bureau of Forestry and transferred management of the 63 million acres of national forests from the Department of the Interior to the new U.S. Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture. During his administration, the federal forest system grew by nearly 130 million acres. In all, he extended federal protection to 230 million acres of land.

Roosevelt appointed the Inland Waterways Commission in 1907 and the national Conservation Commission in 1908. The goal of these efforts was to inventory the existing natural resources of the nation, especially forests and rivers, and make recommendations for managing them for the public benefit. Congressional opponents tried to stop these commissions, but Roosevelt thwarted them by having some of the reports printed and distributed with nonfederal money.

As Roosevelt’s term wound down, he searched for a way to ensure that his conservation policies would continue without his guidance. His solution was to call a conference of all of the state governors to discuss the challenges of conservation. The Governors Conference on Conservation inspired many states to establish their own conservation agencies and increased the states’ expectations of what the federal government would do to protect natural resources. This effort was so successful that a North American Conference on Conservation was held with Canada and Mexico to discuss natural resource issues that spanned international boundaries. Roosevelt tried to organize a world conference, but his term ran out before it could be organized. He felt that time was running out not just for him but for the country:

This nation began with the belief that its landed possessions were illimitable and capable of supporting all the people who might care to make our country their home; but already the limit of unsettled land is in sight, and indeed but little land fitted for agriculture now remains unoccupied save what can be reclaimed by irrigation and drainage. We began with an unapproached heritage of forests; more than half of the timber is gone.⁴

Theodore Roosevelt left the White House in 1909 having fundamentally



COURTESY OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

Theodore Roosevelt (left) and Gifford Pinchot had many things in common, including a patrician background, a lifelong love of the outdoors and big-game hunting, and a strong belief in the federal government’s ability and obligation to protect and manage public lands. This photograph was taken when President Roosevelt joined the Inland Waterways Commission for its trip down the Mississippi River to help generate publicity for their efforts.

changed the attitudes and policies of the federal government toward the nation’s natural resources. He had restructured and professionalized government land management agencies and made great strides toward informing the average citizen about the conditions of the nation’s land and water.

After leaving the presidency, Roosevelt undertook an African expedition to collect specimens for the Smithsonian Institution. After his defeat in 1912 as a third-party candidate for president, he explored a newly discovered river in Brazil. The trip nearly killed him, but his party mapped the river and collected specimens. In Roosevelt’s honor, Brazil renamed the river Rio Roosevelt (sometimes Rio T  odoro). His last years were spent at Sagamore Hill writing articles and reviews for various publications. Among his many accomplishments, Roosevelt’s conservation work may be his greatest legacy. □

Scott Gurney is a National Park Service ranger at the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site in Oyster Bay, Long Island. In commemoration

of the 150th anniversary of Roosevelt’s birth, on October 27, 2008, the National Park Service will launch a year-long celebration at the many historical sites relating to Roosevelt as well as other units of the National Park System, including the parks and eighteen national monuments he created. Celebrations will also be at the units of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge and the U.S. Forest Service, founded by Roosevelt in 1903 and 1905 respectively.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Hermann Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Badlands* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), 409.
2. Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1913). See Chapter 8.
3. Theodore Roosevelt, “First Annual Message,” December 3, 1901, accessed at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3773>.
4. Theodore Roosevelt, “Opening Address by the President,” Governors’ Conference on Conservation, May 13, 1908, accessed at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/consrv:@field\(DOCD+@lit\(amrvvgv16div19\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/consrv:@field(DOCD+@lit(amrvvgv16div19))).