

SPECIAL SECTION

Women's Legacy and Future in Forestry

*Paving the Way
for Progress*

BY RACHEL D. KLINE



Rachel Kline and Edie Sonme Hall presented as part of the panel “Women’s Legacy and Future in Forestry: Paving the Way for Progress” at the Women’s Forest Congress. This article is adapted from that presentation.

I’m a historian, so the weight of this moment in history does not escape me. The first American Forest Congress met in Cincinnati’s Eden Park in 1882. It was the first time that a large number of men—and a handful of women—from the public and private sectors gathered together to discuss the future of America’s forests and what they might do about it. And 140 years later, here we are in Minneapolis, a large number of women—and a handful of men—brought together for similar reasons.

As we see today, women certainly have not just a bright future in forestry but in fact a bright present. But women also have a longstanding history in this field that predates even that first congress. Most of our conversation over the past three days has revolved around diversity and inclusion, and I would argue that in order to have an inclusive present and future, we also have to recognize an inclusive past. Women have a long history in forestry and conservation. You are the inheritors of that legacy.

And what has struck me most while being here and listening is that what has been said here is what women have been saying since 1850, at least in print—though they used different terms than what I’ve heard here: “access, diversifying, collaborating, creating connections, relationships,

an ecosystems approach.” These are all things that have been on women’s minds for more than a century in relationship to nature. This conference hasn’t been focused on the technical aspects of work. Can you all talk about that stuff? Of course you can. But without the relationships and the collaboration, it’s just data or process. And that’s what women bring—that rich texture of relationship. And they have for nearly two centuries.

I’ve been researching women in conservation and forestry for a number of years, but this passion goes back further for me to my childhood as I played on the Roosevelt National Forest or spun in my grandfather’s chair at the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Fort Collins, Colorado. My grandfather held many roles in fire and administration, and even dressed as Smokey Bear, for the U.S. Forest Service for 30 years. But I also watched my grandmother support his position in ways that I couldn’t really comprehend at the time. I now know that my grandparents were part of a richly steeped tradition of an “all hands on deck” approach to forestry and that my grandmother and other women played a tremendous role in the creation, organization, and execution of that forestry. Nana hosted a fish fry every Friday for the staff when Papa worked on the Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico during the 1960s. I’ve been so fortunate to follow in their footsteps, working for the Forest Service for over thirteen years now. I’ve visited or worked on more than sixty forests and grasslands and worked in every

region of the agency. When I got the job, my papa quipped, “Huh? We hire historians?” But he thought it was really amazing that I joined the agency, and I’m so proud to work in this field and use history to inform land management decisions. And I’d like to note that while I love working for the U.S. Forest Service, today I’m sharing my personal research.

That research shows a story that is too often untold: that women have been involved in forestry and conservation since the nineteenth century. And it’s their approach to land and nature that has ushered modern forestry, conservation, and agencies like the Forest Service into the twenty-first century. And how women will take that into the future. To quote the illustrious rapper Pitbull, “To understand the future, we have to go back in time.”

Mainstream history has long held that men have been the center of the story. And they have most certainly held, until recently, most if not all professional and leadership positions within the forestry field. We talk about all the greats like Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, who was the “Father of the Forest Service” and America’s first professional forester, and Aldo Leopold, who is considered to be the originator of the term “land ethic,” which calls for an ethical, caring relationship between people and nature.

Meanwhile, women were excluded from forestry schools as well as professional and technical forestry positions and leadership for the first half of the twentieth century, and they fought hard to move into those positions in the latter half of the century. But this doesn’t mean women

As the stickers on her luggage show, Margaret March-Mount crisscrossed the country teaching women and children about forest conservation.

haven't been present in forestry from the beginning.

So, are these men I've mentioned important? Absolutely. They are very much part of the story. But they're only half. And as Jackie Heinricher spoke about on Monday evening, let's address the other half.¹ Because while they may have been excluded from a male-dominated forestry field, they made their own contributions, what these early women called a "feminine forestry" and a "conservation cause."

FEMININE FORESTRY

First, I would like to introduce you to Susan Fenimore Cooper. Some of you may know of her—she was the devoted daughter of James Fenimore Cooper, the famous American author best known for *Last of the Mohicans*. But she's so much more than that.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Susan Fenimore Cooper was an integral voice within early

American nature conversations. And it would be her work that would lay the foundation for women in conservation.

Cooper's observations of nature as part of the home and community were pivotal in the formation of women's nature appreciation at the time. She provided a model for women to engage with natural subjects and advocate for their preservation as a moral obligation, calling on them to awaken their interest in nature, "which may lead them" to what she called "something higher."²

Four years before Thoreau published *Walden*, Cooper published her book *Rural Hours* in 1850. *Rural Hours* is the first nature writing text published by a woman in the United States, and the book saw four decades of success, with numerous editions and reprints.

It was written in the style of a daily journal, capturing Cooper's

observations over a period of two years of the seasons, flora, and fauna of her native upstate New York. But more than just daily musings, Cooper saw patterns of climate change, loss of species, and unsustainable environmental practices, and she feared for the loss of the American landscape.

Cooper advocated that Americans approach the landscape "more humbly and gratefully and with less greed," by creating a sustainable balance between humans and nature. While she praised the "social spirit" of the land modestly shaped by the laborer and husbandman, she criticized the unsustainable practices of Americans' depleting forests and species for the use of one generation. Throughout her works spanning forty-three years, Cooper repeatedly reported the loss of American wildflower species, the diminishing numbers of migrating birds, the decrease of fish, and the



Susan Fenimore Cooper, seen here around 1855, had to use the pseudonym "A Lady" in order to get her book *Rural Hours* published because it was so unusual.



PUBLIC DOMAIN (2)

reduction of wildlife like moose, elk, deer, wolves, and martens killed for their fur or displaced by wood-cutters.

On forestry, she criticized practices like pollarding, or lopping the heads off trees. She called such a mutilation of trees unethical and a deplorable practice that wasted whole trees for fleeting pursuits. She also spoke out on the exploitation of old-growth trees.

Cooper's remedy for this exploitation was to connect nature and forests to the home as a way for Americans to understand the value of trees and why they should care. Writing "the earth is the common home of all," she asserted that Americans had a moral obligation to know and recognize the nature around them.

Susan Cooper's call to "something higher" planted a seed in the minds of nineteenth-century women to recognize the importance and value of nature, and she was quickly followed in print. We also know that Thoreau read her because he quotes her, revealing that this was certainly a conversation involving both men and women.

So, who are some of these other women? Elizabeth Wright, Olive Throne Miller, Celia Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edith Thomas, Anna Botsford Comstock, Gene Stratton Porter, and Mary Hunter Austin are just a few who wrote on natural history, the importance of nature, the progressive depletion of the natural world, the need for thoughtful preservation, and the assertion of nature not as other but as home. In 1918, Mary Austin credited women's capacity for intuitive judgment as their platform from which to speak, stating that women should bring to nature writing "Not their ability to see the world in the way men see it, but

the importance and validity of their seeing it some other way."³

During the Progressive Era, which lasted from 1890 to 1920, thousands of women took up Cooper's appeal for nature appreciation and preservation and advocated for the protection of birds, forests, and watersheds. Like Cooper, they claimed that preserving American nature preserved American life.

One of these women was botanist Mira Lloyd Dock. She was the most prominent spokeswoman for scientific forestry at the turn of the century. A wealthy Pennsylvanian, Dock was a lecturer, clubwoman, and public official, being the first woman to serve on an official conservation board. Her scientific know-how and passion for forestry enabled her to educate women about conservation but also gave her the ear of professional men. Friends with Gifford Pinchot and other male foresters, she gained favor within the professional forestry circuit, which enabled her to expand her own education—not available to most women—as well as assert her influence into the pressing forestry issues of the day.

She also taught aspiring male foresters at the Pennsylvania State Forest Academy and even created portions of the curriculum. A forest owner herself, she permitted the school to use her property for its experimental field school. Dock really highlights how women circumnavigated the exclusion of women in forestry by studying something else, like botany, and becoming an authority in forestry anyway.

THE CONSERVATION CAUSE

As I was researching these women, particularly in the early Forest Service, I kept coming across this phrase that

they would use: "the conservation cause." While women engaged in all kinds of conservation work, a constant thread throughout their records is their shared idea of a conservation cause based on the "greatest good." Gifford Pinchot captured his philosophy in his use of the utilitarian maxim the "greatest good for the greatest number," derived from eighteenth-century English writer Jeremy Bentham, to which Pinchot added "in the long run." This philosophy for the new agency emphasized that forest management should consider the many needs of forest users and implement long-term decisions that best served the most people as well as the environment over time. The question of who was best fit to determine and fulfill "the greatest good" was answered with the Progressive credo of efficient government regulation based on scientific management.

Meanwhile, the many women who worked for the Forest Service since its earliest days took conservation and, like Pinchot, made it their own. While Forest Service women heartily subscribed to the ideal of scientific management, they added to it a deeper environmental concern and tied it to American morality, culture, and citizenship. In their minds, the practice of forestry was not only for the benefit of the lumberman or the carpenter, but also for the cultivation of relationships between tree life and human life.

Let's take a look at some of these women.

First is Edith Mosher, who worked for the Forest Service from 1905 to 1920. She is known as the founder of conservation education in the agency. And I love how her story begins, almost like a superhero origin story. An elementary school

teacher, Mosher was standing at her blackboard one day in 1900, preparing a lesson inspired by a small peach branch she held in her hand, when it dawned on her: there were no decent instructional books on nature with which to teach her students. Thoroughly irritated at the lack of useful nature texts, she vowed to illustrate her own set of nature books for schoolchildren. So she bought a ticket to Washington, D.C. She told her boss she was going to a teacher's conference. But once she got there, she sold her return ticket, took a civil service exam, and—wham!—was hired by the General Land Office. She moved to the Forest Service once it was established in 1905 and didn't look back.

While she was a clerk under Pinchot, outside of her normal duties she began illustrating those nature texts she had promised herself, and in 1907 Mosher published her first booklet, *Fruit and Nut-Bearing Trees*. The agency saw the value in her work and supported her, leading her to publish two more booklets, *Our Oaks and Maples* and *Our Cone-Bearing Trees*, both in 1909.

The hallmark of these nature texts was her full-page illustrations, roughly thirty close-up scientific—and just beautiful—drawings. In the text, she mixed in scientific observations and lessons for teachers.

Though she started out wanting to provide schoolchildren with more detailed textbooks, her efforts turned into a larger initiative of sharing with students the idea of conservation as a cultural obligation and an entreaty to protect the forests as a civic responsibility.

And how she accomplished this was to connect literature, poetry, and thoughts about American life with nature. She often used poetry and

verse to set the stage. For example, she begins the booklet on oaks and maples with the poem from William Wordsworth:

One impulse from the vernal
wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil, and of good,
Than all the sages can.⁴

In 1917, she published *Forest Study in the Primary Grades*, the first Forest Service textbook for children that had numerous lessons for schoolteachers, again combining poetry and scientific observations.⁵ I think one of her greatest contributions is her poem that gets children to think about fire prevention long before Smokey ever did:

What do we burn when we burn
our trees?
We burn the home for you and
me,
We burn the carriage house, barn,
and shed,
The baby's cradle, the little boy's
sled,
The book case, the table, the
rocker of ease—
We burn all these when we burn
our trees.
What do we burn when we burn
our trees?
The homes of birds, the squirrels,
and bees,
The home of the brook, and the
cooling spring
Where violets blossom, and
bluebirds sing,
The beauties of nature, so fair to
please—
We burn all these when we burn
our trees.

Through this poem and others in her *Forest Study in the Primary Grades*,

Mosher emphasized that learning forest conservation issues as a young student made children better citizens and people. She argued that, with a love for nature and an understanding of the interconnectedness of forests and humans, children would grow into adults and citizens more apt to solve the pressing issues facing forests and natural resources. Through prose and poetry, she convinced readers to care for and protect forests as a personal responsibility.

Next, I'd like to talk about Daisy Priscilla Edgerton, who worked for the Forest Service Division of Information and Education from 1923 to 1938. In 1931, Edgerton wrote, "There is perhaps no set of women workers in Uncle Sam's army of federal employees more loyal and enthusiastic for the cause and the job" than those in the Forest Service.

In 1927, she authored *The Forest: A Handbook for Teachers*, which proved quite popular. Like Mosher, Edgerton used literature and culture as a means of helping students understand and relate to forestry, but she emphasized a hands-on approach to learning. "The best way to teach the subject is to take the pupils to the woods," Edgerton instructs. "When this is impossible, specimens and exhibits should be brought into the schoolroom for study."⁶ *The Forest* provided information and classroom exercises for grades one through nine that could be carried out over the course of the entire school year. She also authored a textbook in 1930, one of the first of its kind, called *Southern Forests: First Steps in Forest Study*.

"Wherever she goes, young forests begin to grow," a children's newspaper wrote in 1940 of Margaret March-Mount. As the director of Women's Forestry in the Division of Information and Education,

she spoke to thousands of women across the country to convince them of their moral obligation to care for nature and trees. Reading this woman's schedule made me tired. She gave talks to women's clubs, wrote articles, presented lectures, and gave radio addresses. She spoke about conservation programs, planting trees, and fire prevention, and why it all mattered. In particular, she popularized the "Penny Pines" campaign, a children's conservation campaign to encourage students to

fund tree planting on national forests. In exchange for every penny given, the Forest Service planted two or three pine trees. For every four dollars received, the Forest Service promised to plant a thousand seedlings in states where pines would grow. She raised so much money for trees, you can still see her forests across the country today.

In 1942, March-Mount wrote in an article for *American Forests* magazine that "No longer is forestry wholly 'a man's profession.' The wonder-world

of the forest is now a woman's world also."

She outlined that the goal of the Women's Forestry program was to make women into "forest builders" who would protect the forests as their homes. She claimed that women could build careers at home as foresters, working on the "human side of forestry."⁷⁷ March-Mount's program revealed the contrast in men's and women's approach to forest conservation: while Forest Service men predominately viewed timber as a crop to be harvested, women desired to build up forests to enhance American life.

And in the midst of war, she reminded Americans that while bombs explode, trees grow, and from that assurance Americans could find resolve to preserve and protect their forests, homes, and way of life even in uncertainty.

In the tradition of Susan Fenimore Cooper and the nineteenth-century women naturalists, the well-known Dr. Eloise Gerry, the first female research scientist hired in the Forest Service, also connected her scientific findings with community values. In 1924, she wrote a four-part series of short stories for children featured in *American Forests* and *Forest Life* magazine. The "Pine-Burr Stories" followed a child's adventure into the woods to inspect trees with their father or play with cousins, decorate the Christmas tree made from the delights of the forest, and help plant seeds to grow new forests. By



FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTO COLLECTION, FH56859

Eloise Gerry was an accomplished scientist whose field-based studies helped save the naval stores industry in the South.



connecting the stories to the daily lives of children, Gerry showed the importance of large forests and tiny seeds to young children and put a relatable, human face on scientific practice.

These are just a handful of women who carried out the conservation cause through their work and outreach. I've hardly scratched the surface. I could talk all day about lookouts, foresters, librarians, clerks, wives, and more women in research.

I'd like to bring Rachel Carson into the room for a minute. I think she would be in awe at what we're doing here today. Even though she wasn't in forestry, this marine biologist, writer, and conservationist had a profound impact on America's forests with her book *Silent Spring*.

Carson, who was well grounded in science, embodied what might be thought of as the hallmarks of women's environmentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: she brought to scientific resource management a sense of wonder and sentimental appreciation, encouraging parents to share nature with children. "I sincerely believe," said Carson, "that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow."⁸

For women in conservation like Carson, Mosher, Edgerton, and

The writings of Rachel Carson changed how Americans thought and felt about nature. She is seen here at the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania in 1945.

March-Mount, the chief aims were educating Americans about resource issues, taking responsibility for nature, and connecting people with the land.

Women's early conservation cause has taken on a modern appearance as "environmental concern," merging contemporary ecosystem management and new professional and field positions with women's historical approach to conservation—focusing less on timber harvests (as men's forestry generally did) and more on multiple uses, increased diversity in forest planning, wilderness designations, and community-based environmental problems. Women's emphasis on a culturally minded conservation philosophy to preserve American life has been instrumental in helping to redirect forestry and, in particular, the Forest Service's management focus to one more closely aligned with the general public's environmental ethos.

Today, women continue to reflect on that philosophy of a conservation cause. Leslie Weldon, a former deputy chief for the National Forest System and now acting chief diversity and inclusion officer in the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, offered, "I am not alone among women in the Forest Service in sharing a conservation ethic. . . . This commitment has a shared central ethos: that we must work with the people we serve to fulfill our conservation mission."⁹ Grizelle González, director of the International Institute of Tropical Forestry, has observed, "Delivering our conservation mission is about openness and willingness to work [across] multiple disciplines and a diverse community of partners."¹⁰ And I'll never forget what Gloria Brown, the first female African American forest supervisor in the

U.S. Forest Service, once said to me: that the essence of her career was about her relationships with the people she worked with and the land she cared for.

While my research is primarily concerned with women in the Forest Service, there are so many more stories of women in forestry—landowners, private industry leaders, state foresters, to name just a few—still to tell.

But as this congress proves, you're not alone on this journey. You haven't been for over a century.

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NOTES

1. Jackie Heinricher, Keynote Address, Women's Forest Congress, Oct. 17, 2022.
2. All *Rural Hours* quotes are from Susan Fenimore Cooper (1850), *Rural Hours*, ed. by Rochelle Johnson and Daniel Patterson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
3. Mary Austin, *The Young Woman Citizen* (New York: Woman's Press, 1918, Reprint, Fullerton, CA: Designs Three, 1976), 19.
4. Edith R. Mosher, *Studies of Our Oaks and Maples* (Syracuse, NY: C. W. Bardeen, 1909), 3.
5. Edith R. Mosher, *Forest Study in the Primary Grades* (Michigan: State of Michigan Public Domain Commission, 1917).
6. D. Priscilla Edgerton, *The Forest: A Handbook for Teachers*, Miscellaneous Circular 98 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, April 1927), 2.
7. Margaret March-Mount, "Women as Forest Builders," *American Forests* (February 1942): 63–65, 92.
8. Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 45.
9. Leslie Weldon, "Women of the Forest Service: A Shared Land Ethic," *Inside the Forest Service*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/leadership/women-forest-service-shared-land-ethic>.
10. Quoted in Weldon, "Women of the Forest Service."