



The Fight for Conservation (excerpt)
by Gifford Pinchot, 1908

The most prosperous nation of today is the United States. Our unexampled wealth and well being are directly due to the superb natural resources of our country, and to the use which has been made of them by our citizens, both in the present and in the past. We are prosperous because our forefathers bequeathed to us a land of marvelous resources still unexhausted. Shall we conserve those resources, and in our turn transmit them, still unexhausted, to our descendants? Unless we do, those who come after us will have to pay the price of misery, degradation, and failure for the progress and prosperity of our day. When the natural resources of any nation become exhausted, disaster and decay in every department of national life follow as a matter of course. Therefore, the conservation of natural resources is the basis, and the only permanent basis, of national success. There are other conditions, but this one lies at the foundation.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the American people is their superb practical optimism; that marvelous hopefulness which keeps the individual efficiently at work. This hopefulness of the American is, however, as short-sighted as it is intense. As a rule, it does not look ahead beyond the next decade or score of some years, and fails wholly to reckon with the real future of the Nation.

The question we are deciding with so little consciousness of what it involves is this. What shall we do with our natural resources? Upon the final answer that we shall make to it hangs the success or failure of this Nation in accomplishing its manifest destiny.

Few Americans will deny that tis the manifest destiny of the United States to demonstrate that a democratic republic is the best form of government yet devised, and that the ideals and institutions of the great republic taken together must and do work out in a prosperous, contented, peaceful, and righteous people; and also to exercise, through precept and example, an influence for good among the nations of the world.

Danger to the nation comes either from without or from within. In the first great crisis of our history, the Revolution, another people attempted from without to halt the march of our destiny by refusing to us liberty. In the second great crisis, the Civil War, a part of our own people strove for an end which would have checked the progress of development.

In the third great crisis of our history, which has now come squarely upon us, the special interests and the thoughtless citizens seem to have united together to deprive the Nation of the great natural resources without which it cannot endure. This is the pressing danger now, and it is not the least to which our National life has been exposed. A nation deprived of liberty may win it, a nation divided may reunite, but a nation whose natural resources are destroyed must inevitably pay the penalty of poverty, degradation, and decay.

We have a well-marked national tendency to disregard the future, and it has led us to look upon all our natural resources as inexhaustible. Even now that the actual exhaustion of some of them is forcing itself upon us in higher prices and the greater cost of living, we are still asserting, if not

always in words, yet in the far stronger language of action, that nevertheless and in spite of it all, they are still inexhaustible.

The conservation issue is a moral issue, and the heart of it is this: For whose benefit shall our natural resources be conserved—for the benefit of us all, or for the use and profit of a few?

... From sea to shining sea the people are taking a fresh grip on their own affairs. The conservation of political liberty will take its proper place alongside the conservation of the means of living, and in both we shall look to the permanent welfare by the plain people as the supreme end. The way out lies in direct interest by the people in their own affairs and direct action in the few great things that really count.