

Capital News: Defining the Future of the National Forests

Char Miller

What are the purposes of the National Forests? What role should the Forest Service play in public-lands management? These questions were on everyone's minds at the January 2005 Centennial Forest Congress in Washington, D.C., and rightly so: Federal conservationism has long been the source of democratic debate.

So it was when the Forest Service was created in 1905, right after *that* year's Forest Congress, called to lobby for the agency's creation. Gifford Pinchot, who organized the event and would become the first chief, knew he needed to have a galvanizing keynote speaker. Happily, there was one close to hand, the nation's greatest conservationist, President Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was not shy about giving the 1000 delegates their marching orders. "For the first time the great business and forest interests of the nation have joined together to consider their individual and common interests in the forest." One of which was to denounce those who did not share Roosevelt's conviction that conservation was essential to nation's future. "You all know...the individual whose idea of developing the country is to cut every stick of timber off of it and then leave a barren desert for the homemaker who comes in after him," the president declared. "I ask, with all the intensity that I am capable, that the men of the West remember the sharp distinction that I have just drawn between the man who skins the land and the man who develops the country. I am going to work with, and only with, the man who develops the country. I am against the land skinner every time."

Expecting his listeners to share his

outrage, Roosevelt urged the Forest Congress to adopt resolutions advocating the establishment of the forest service and national forests. Its support would pressure the U.S. Congress to pass the requisite legislation—including transferring the forest reserves from the Department of the Interior to Agriculture. The delegates complied with the president's command, and, within a month, so had Congress.

Because of its impact, the 1905 Forest Congress was a watershed moment in conservation history. The same cannot be said of the 2005 Forest Congress, which marked the centennial of the 1905 gathering. President Bush did not address its 600 delegates, though the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior did; the convention did not petition Congress to enact vital environmental legislation; and its debates over the National Forests' future (more recreation and fewer fires) were muted compared to Roosevelt's thunderous pledge to stop those despoiling the public's woods.

These differences aside, many speakers at the 2005 congress updated Roosevelt's land-skinning metaphor. Our analog, Dale Bosworth, current USDA Forest Service chief, declared, is the global deforestation that is devastating the Third-World, a result largely due to the United States' accelerating importation of wood products. At home, our National Forests are also under considerable pressure, a consequence of explosive urban sprawl, increased fire damage, riparian deterioration, and off-road vehicles and invasive species that threaten healthy forest ecosystems. What links these international and domestic threats, Bosworth averred, is that "Americans want it

all," cheap wood and unsullied terrain, clean water and no logging, recreation, access, and open space. "If we truly believe in a land ethic," he concluded, "then we must also demonstrate a consumption ethic." The Forest Service could model the way, but only if it practices "the conservation we preach."



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The demand for a more innovative conservation leadership also had a southern impetus. Participants at the November 2004 Forest Service Centennial Forum in Asheville, North Carolina, for instance, determined that one of the agency's most pressing needs was to redevelop "trust with the public through a redefined 'social contract.'" At the Forest Congress, many agreed. For some, this new compact could be framed around the Forest Service's unique role in conservation education. Drawing off an earlier speaker's observation that "never before have so many been so removed from nature," former chief Mike Dombeck urged the agency to integrate urban populations with rural landscapes through watershed restoration projects or fire-ecosystem management, issues that directly affect city life and livelihoods.

I've my own modest proposal for reasserting the agency's preeminence in environmental protection: Declare that by 2020 all National Forests will be certified under Forest Stewardship Council and American Forest and Paper Association guidelines. Embracing independent, third-party audits would re-establish public trust,

and do so in a bold, creative manner that will enable the agency to reclaim the moral high ground. Such a dramatic declaration would meet Roosevelt's hearty approval and dovetail with Chief Pinchot's charge to his successors: "Our responsibility to the

Nation is to be more than careful stewards of the land; we must be constant catalysts for positive change."

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Making of Modern Environmentalism and co-author of *The Greatest Good: 100 Years of Forestry in America*.

The Pinchot Institute for Conservation gratefully acknowledges the following donors who have made unrestricted gifts of \$100.00 or more in 2004. These supporters contributed as Pinchot Associates. To learn more about this program, please visit our website at www.pinchot.org and click on "donate."

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