

The Weeks Act and the Future of Land Conservation in the United States

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The Weeks Act of 1911 represented a major accomplishment for the national public interest in environmental and natural resource conservation. At its 100th anniversary, the story of the Weeks Act is the story of nearly 25 million acres—an area more than four times the size of New Hampshire, where the idea for the Weeks Act was hatched. Some of the most abused and severely degraded forest the world has ever seen has been healed and restored to become fully functioning forest ecosystems that provide clean water, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and public recreation opportunities. And there is a good chance that at the 200th anniversary of the Weeks Act, these forests will still be meeting the needs of generations unborn. This is the enduring value of the Weeks Act, and the lands it has helped to conserve in perpetuity.

The conservation challenges of the 21st century suggest the need for other strategies as well. In the current economic and political environment, it is unlikely that millions more acres will be added to the public estate for the purposes of conservation. Yet the need to protect critical water resources, wildlife habitat, and biodiversity, particularly in the face of new large-scale threats such as climate change, require new strategies for conserving large landscapes.

This will require very different conservation tools, ones that do not rely solely on traditional national and state forests, parks, and refuges. Forest landscape conservation in the US will depend upon a new level of sustained, productive cooperation among all the federal and state natural resource agencies, conservation organizations, businesses, and families that own and care for the thousands of individual tracts of forest and open space that make up some of the nation's most important landscapes. This represents a profound change from the way we have approached conservation in the US through much of the past century. Much of the existing

institutional, legal, and policy framework for conservation in the US was developed to support the 20th-century approaches to conservation. Public forests, parks, and wildlife refuges constitute one-third of the nation's land. But as climate patterns shift, the ecological communities of plant and animal species they were intended to protect are themselves on the move, migrating to follow their climatic ranges, and away from the fixed boundaries of designated conservation areas.

Shifting climate patterns in the 21st century will challenge conservation not just ecologically, but economically and socially. The prevailing concept of the role of conservation in promoting global sustainability will be turned on its head as the world's ten billion people seek to satisfy their basic needs for food, energy, and housing.

Forest land continues to be lost to development. Since the 1930s, the area of forest land in the United States has remained roughly the same at just under 750 million acres. But this relatively stable national average has masked major differences from one region of the country to another. Losses of forest land to development in some regions of the country have largely been offset in other regions where marginal crop and pasture lands have been taken out of production and reverted to forest. Sometime during the latter years of the 20th century, the tide turned. By this time, much of the marginal agricultural land that could revert to forest had already done so. Forest and open space was being lost to development at an average of 6,000 acres a day by 2000.

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Additional competition for land is now coming from the energy sector. In the aftermath of 9/11 the anxiety over peak-oil, and overextended energy supply lines stretching from increasingly unfriendly regions of the world, led US policymakers to set ambitious new targets for domestic biofuels production. Powerful new financial incentives aimed at

promoting new technologies and greater production capacity increased ethanol production and pushed corn prices to record levels. New varieties of switchgrass, miscanthus, and short rotations of hybrid poplar and willow were found to do well on less productive soils. As a result, forest land is being pressed into service to grow energy crops for biofuels production.

More land is needed for agriculture. Changing patterns of temperature and precipitation at continental scales have introduced new uncertainty to the world's major food-producing regions. In recent years, droughts and floods have devastated yields of wheat and other commodity food crops in China, India, Russia, Australia, and Canada, raising the specter of global food shortages that will only become more acute as populations expand and climate patterns become more unpredictable. According to a February 2011 report from the US Department of Agriculture, crop values are expected to increase 18 percent this year, to \$202 billion. Such rising trends in farm commodity prices make crop and pasture land-use ever more valuable relative to forest land-use.

The combined effect of increased global demand for food, energy, and housing will bring steady, inexorable pressure on US forests.

Where forests will be conserved, it will not be because of the economics. The growing pressures for alternative uses of scarce productive land will relegate forests even more to the category of a residual land use. We may know intuitively that forests are valuable for wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and that crucial, life-sustaining resource—water. But private markets for these “environmental services” from forests have been slow to develop, and it can be difficult to make persuasive financial case for forest conservation to the

majority of practical, tax-paying private land owners.

Fortunately, there are private woodland owners who don't need an economically compelling case to convince them to conserve their forest land. For some it is an aesthetic case, a chance to protect and pass along the incomparable beauty of a forest, blanketing a mountainside or stream valley, and changing with the seasons. For others, it is a moral or ethical imperative, and a sense of stewardship, a responsibility to use the land wisely and pass it along in as good or better condition than it was received. For still others, it is something spiritual, something they may or may not

be able to explain to others or even to themselves. Whatever the reason, they act upon their convictions. They permanently conserve their lands through easements or land donations.



Forest landscape conservation based on a modest government investment leveraging much larger private donations in a landscape that will remain largely in private ownership is a concept that has near-universal


appeal, and has been supported by conservative and liberal policymakers alike. It is a model based on partnerships, on shared conservation values, and on mutual respect and cooperation. This is the model that will most likely define conservation in this country in the 21st century, in much the same way that building systems of federal and state public lands defined conservation in the US in the 20th century.

Is there a place in the 21st century for conservation through new additions of land to national and state forests, parks, and refuges through policies like the Weeks Act? In many instances, there is simply no substitute for public ownership when it comes to conserving special places for the full range of their values—known and unknown, quantified and

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second allows landowners to view estimates of the air quality benefits provided by their trees thanks to the nation's most advanced data from the USDA Forest Service.

The Pinchot Institute is now building on its initial efforts in the Chesapeake region and collaborating with software developer The Other Firm to identify new opportunities across the country. The Other Firm's Ty Montgomery noted, "The possibilities of using this tool for education, outreach, and program eligibility determination on a national level are almost endless. Conservation agencies and organizations are excited when we expand coverage to their state or region." If you are interested in how LandServer can help your region's landowners, please contact Eric Sprague at esprague@pinchot.org.


LandServer was developed with support from USDA Forest Service, Alliance for Chesapeake Bay, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, US Environmental Protection Agency, Sustainable Solutions, Delaware Department of Agriculture and Center for Chesapeake Communities, and Virginia Department of Forestry. 

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2011 Elisabeth S. Mortimer Internship

Karli Scott, an undergraduate at Cornell University, spent this summer at Grey Towers National Historic Site as the 2011 Elisabeth S. Mortimer Horticultural Intern. Ms. Scott worked alongside USDA Forest Service experts in horticulture and landscape architecture to maintain and restore Grey Towers' historic landscape and gardens. She describes the internship as "priceless, and a fantastic way to promote conservation to the next generation of leaders."


The Mortimer Internship, made possible through the generosity of Elisabeth S. and Charles Mortimer and administered by the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, is an opportunity for undergraduates interested in careers related to ornamental horticulture and landscape architecture to gain hands-on experience in a historic garden. The internship aims to challenge and broaden students' knowledge of practical applications of horticultural theory learned in the classroom. For more information about the Mortimer Internship please visit the Grey Towers website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/gt/>) or contact Elizabeth Hawke (ehawke@fs.fed.us). 

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unquantifiable. Passionate debates over the just and proper use of these public lands continue, as well they should in a free and democratic society. Future generations will have their own chance to debate the best use of these lands, because previous generations had the foresight to conserve it in perpetuity.

But in this age of persistent budget deficits, can we afford conservation? Most of the Weeks Act investments were made during the 1930s by a nation in the grips of what is still today the deepest economic depression this country has ever endured. We are the beneficiaries of those investments. Can we in good conscience deny future generations the same consideration?

At its centennial, the Weeks Act can be thought of not just as a historical endpoint, but as a marker in time,

like a leaf floating by on some great river. We honor the commitment and leadership of Congressman John Weeks and his contemporaries in the 20th-century Conservation Movement. We also recognize and celebrate our own generation of conservationists, who are no less committed or far-sighted than their forebears. Partnerships and cooperation based on shared conservation values and a commitment to a sustainable future are still the essential elements of success. 

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