

The Pinchot Institute at 50: A Brief History

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Nearly 50 years after its founding, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation fulfills the unique role within the conservation community for which it was conceived by the Pinchot family, and established in partnership with the USDA Forest Service at what is now Grey Towers National Historic Site. It has been one of the most turbulent half-centuries in the history of conservation policy in the US. With global climate change, the need to find more sources of renewable energy, and the increasing difficulty of conserving biodiversity in a world of nearly seven billion people, the next half-century promises to be even more challenging. Policymakers' needs for the kind of "sound information, objective research, and study" the Pinchot Institute was established to provide are continuing to increase, and these will play a critical role as the basis for more informed and more effective conservation policy. The history of the Pinchot Institute is colorful and varied, but it is the unconventional mix of ideas and perspectives that the Institute brings together that are key to its exceptional insight and unique contributions to environmental and natural resource conservation policy.

Background

The idea for the Pinchot Institute first took shape in 1961 when Gifford Bryce Pinchot, the son of Gifford and Cornelia, proposed on behalf of the Pinchot family to donate the Pinchot estate at Grey Towers to the American people to serve as the home of a new center for environmental education and studies in environmental and natural resource policy.

Grey Towers, completed in 1886 by Gifford's parents, James and Mary Pinchot, would need significant repair and renovation, but it was a magnificent estate with already nearly a century of history as a place where many of the seminal ideas of the Conservation Movement had been formed and shaped through vigorous debate among leading naturalists and policymakers. In partnership with the Conservation Foundation, a leading national environmental nonprofit of the time that has since become part of the World Wildlife Fund, the US Forest Service accepted the Pinchot family's donation of Grey Towers and 102 acres of surrounding woodland overlooking Milford, Pennsylvania and the upper Delaware River valley.

On September 24, 1963, President John F. Kennedy came to Grey Towers to dedicate the Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies as "a living memorial" to Gifford Pinchot's "practical

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idealism” in developing “a professional approach to the management of our nation’s resources.” In words that ring even more true in our own time, Kennedy asserted that “Today’s conservation movement must embrace disciplines scarcely known to its prophets of the past.” “Government must provide a national policy framework for this new conservation emphasis,” he noted, “but government at any level needs sound information, objective research, and study . . . It is this function which the Pinchot Institute can serve most effectively.”

The new Pinchot Institute was led by a board of directors that included Gifford Bryce Pinchot, Forest Service Chief Ed Cliff, Laurence Rockefeller, Fairfield Osborne, and other recognized leaders in the fledgling environmental movement of the 1960s. The Forest Service and the Conservation Foundation appointed the two co-directors of the Pinchot Institute, and set about their initial task of developing a national curriculum for conservation education.

In 1966, Grey Towers was designated by the US Department of the Interior as a National Historic Landmark in recognition of its historical significance as the former home of Gifford Pinchot who, in addition to being an early conservation leader and founding chief of the US Forest Service, also served two terms as Pennsylvania’s governor. It retained this designation until 2004, when Congress officially recognized Grey Towers as a National Historic Site.

In effect, the Pinchot Institute was organized as a three-way partnership among a federal agency with its major interests in the West, a distant nonprofit organization, and a family that no longer lived in the area, so sustaining the original energy and vision for the Institute became a challenge. Following the completion of a national conference on conservation education at Grey Towers in 1965, research programs at Grey Towers were carried out mainly under the auspices of the Forest Service Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. Later, as activities at Grey Towers shifted more toward public visitation and interpretive tours focused on the lives and contributions of the Pinchot family, operations at Grey Towers were administered by the State & Private Forestry branch of the Forest Service.

There were other challenges as well. Being nearly a century old, Grey Towers was continuing to slowly deteriorate physically. A local Friends of Grey Towers group was formed to help raise private funds for essential repairs and maintenance, and to maintain the viability of Grey Towers as a place of interest and an economic asset to the Milford community. Fundraising activities made Grey Towers a focus of local social events, but limited additional private donations were realized, especially in light of the extensive investments that were needed.

The original concept for the Pinchot Institute seemed itself in danger of extinction. In the words of Peter Pinchot, speaking at the 30th anniversary of the Pinchot Institute in 1993, “from a family point of view, the idea that the Institute would help shape conservation policy seemed to recede into the background.” (Pinchot 1993).

Decisive action was needed to sustain the bold vision for the Pinchot Institute described in such inspiring words by President Kennedy at its founding. That action came largely from Ed Vandermillen, the Forest Service director at Grey Towers, who proposed that the Pinchot Institute be reorganized not as a program of other organizations but as an independent nonprofit organization itself. A new board of directors was formed in 1983, with representation from the

Forest Service, the Pinchot family, universities, and national conservation organizations. As its first executive director the Pinchot Institute brought in Jim Giltmier, who had served on the Senate staff for nearly two decades and played an integral role in the development of many of the key statutes governing natural resource conservation, management, research, and education in the US. The Institute initiated a series of national conferences on critical conservation issues, at Grey Towers and at other locations around the country. Peter Pinchot, again speaking for the Pinchot family, noted that “this is what we had hoped the Institute would be used for.”

The Pinchot Institute also expanded private fundraising for Grey Towers to a nationwide audience. In 1980 the Forest Service’s Vandermillen had recognized not only the increasingly extensive repairs needed at Grey Towers, but that some of the repairs carried out earlier by the Forest Service had altered numerous architecturally significant aspects of this National Historic Landmark. The Forest Service, in consultation with the National Park Service historic restoration unit at Harper’s Ferry, developed a plan to restore the house and estate to a condition similar to what it had been when Gifford Pinchot resided there during the first half of the 20th century. The Forest Service brought in a staff with expertise in architecture, historic restoration, and landscaped design, including Vandermillen’s successor as director, Ed Brannon. In all, more than \$16 million in federal, state, and private funds were raised to complete a comprehensive restoration of the historic features and the renovation of other areas of the building and estate for “adaptive re-use” as a world-class conference center. The restored Grey Towers was re-opened for public use on August 11, 2001, the 115th anniversary of the original completion of Grey Towers—and of Gifford Pinchot’s 21st birthday—in 1886 (Miller 2003).

With the completion of the historic restoration, Grey Towers could take its place once again as an iconic symbol of US conservation history, this time as a Congressionally-designated National Historic Site. The 2004 Grey Towers National Historic Site Act, in addition to redesignating Grey Towers, gave Congressional recognition to the successful public-private partnership between the Forest Service and the Pinchot Institute (P.L. 108-477). It further strengthened their shared mission at Grey Towers to continue Gifford Pinchot’s legacy of “practical idealism,” and to carry on Pinchot’s philosophy that in order to be effective, natural resource conservation must be not only ecologically sound, but economically viable and socially responsible.

The Pinchot Institute today

Proving out the wisdom of Ed Vandermillen’s insight, the reorganized Pinchot Institute became increasingly successful in developing partnership programs with the Forest Service, both at Grey Towers and across the country, and in building new bridges of cooperation throughout the environmental and natural resource policy community.

The Institute’s outreach did not stop there, however. In 1990, the Institute brought a group of natural resource professionals together with philosophers and religious leaders for a two-day conference at Grey Towers exploring the moral and ethical underpinnings of natural resource conservation. This challenging and enlightening discussion was captured in a book that received wide circulation (Sample 1990). The book alluded to the many difficult challenges being faced by natural resource managers at the time, when public controversies over forest management effects on wildlife habitat, water quality, endangered species, and the future productivity of the

forests themselves were calling into question the basic stewardship ethic of professional forest managers.

No natural resource agency at the time was more caught up in public controversy than the Forest Service, whose forest management actions were the subject of numerous lawsuits brought in federal courts, and reform legislation enacted by Congress. Controversies over clearcutting and herbicide use were the stimulus for the National Forest Management Act (16 U.S.C. 1600) which restricted Forest Service decision making and required the preparation of detailed resource management plans and environmental analyses with extensive public review. The Forest Service had been successfully sued over shortcomings in their protection of habitat for endangered species, resulting in a 90 percent reduction in wood production from the National Forests. An agency that had enjoyed an unparalleled reputation as a paragon of federal public service for most of the 20th century was now seen by many as a pariah of the environment.

Forest Service leaders began to consider alternative approaches that focused on forests as ecosystems, maintaining key ecological features by managing at the landscape scale. The new approach was not popular with Forest Service field managers, nor with key policymakers in the Administration at the time—even after EPA Administrator William Reilly declared at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro that “ecosystem management” would become the guiding principle in the management of the nation’s public forests, based on recommendations from the Forest Service (Robertson 2004).

In 1993, the Pinchot Institute organized and convened a top-level conference in which Forest Service leaders opened the agency’s fundamental mission and purposes to rigorous review and candid re-examination (Shands et al. 1993). The full range and diversity of views on the Forest Service’s performance were aired in an atmosphere of honest questioning, mutual respect for the legitimacy of different perspectives, and a commitment to the value of civil dialogue on difficult issues of public policy—which set the pattern for Pinchot Institute efforts to come and helped establish its reputation for fairness and openness. The “New Perspectives” conference contributed to a culture change within the Forest Service, elevating ecological restoration of damaged natural systems as one of the agency’s primary purposes and goals, and to greater public understanding and support for a committed public agency working to come to terms with new societal expectations.

This shift in the organizational culture of the Forest Service was particularly challenging for its front-line resource managers and emerging leaders. An array of leadership and executive development programs was developed for both Grey Towers and field locations, led by Pinchot Institute and Forest Service staff and outside experts. Programs were targeted to the needs of new National Forest supervisors, and to senior leaders just rising into the policymaking levels of the Forest Service. Leadership skill-building workshops were offered around the country, based on principles developed by Ronald Heifetz at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (Heifetz 1994), and adapted to the needs and context of public natural resource managers.

Today the Pinchot Institute has grown to be an internationally-recognized organization with programs and projects operating throughout the US and in several countries.

At Grey Towers, the Pinchot Institute has held regional conferences such as a Heinz Endowments-sponsored meeting on sustaining biological diversity in the central Appalachian highlands, national conferences such as the 2004 workshop examining the roles of both forest plantations and protected areas (Price et al. 2006), and international conferences such as the 2005 symposium examining the 200-year divergence and reconvergence of European and American approaches to sustainable forest management (Sample and Anderson 2008). Current efforts at Grey Towers include facilitation of the regional Common Waters dialogue, focused on managing the impacts of urban development on forest conservation, and more recently on managing the impacts of natural gas development on water quality in the upper Delaware River watershed. A Clean Water Fund now being developed in cooperation with the Forest Service, Delaware River Basin Commission, and other partners will create a mechanism by which the 15 million people who depend on the upper Delaware for their water supply will be able to contribute directly to the conservation of private forests that ensure continued clean water in the future.¹

The Pinchot Institute is working across the US to bring together a diversity of individuals and organizations to address important challenges and opportunities in sustainable forestry, such as the utilization of wood biomass to meet ambitious national policy goals for renewable energy production (Sample and Kittler, forthcoming). New web-based tools developed by the Pinchot Institute and numerous partner organizations in the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem are allowing forest owners to quantify the ecosystem services their lands provide, and receive payment for the protection and sustainable management of their forests. The Institute is facilitating the work of Forest Service scientists and resource managers as they seek to understand how National Forests can be managed to mitigate and adapt to global climate change by maximizing carbon sequestration, and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions from wildfires and insect mortality.

In Ecuador, the Pinchot Institute is working with local communities to sustainably manage tropical forests both to provide living wages to impoverished rural communities and to protect the privately-owned buffer forests adjacent to globally-significant biodiversity reserves.

In virtually all of these efforts, the Pinchot Institute has continued to work closely with all branches of the Forest Service—Research & Development, National Forest System, State & Private Forestry, and International Programs—as its primary partner. At the same time, the Institute has been pleased to work in cooperation with universities, businesses, state and local government agencies, and a wide range of national, regional, and community-based conservation organizations. We are grateful that this work has been made possible by contributions from private donors through the Pinchot Associates program, and through major support from foundations that are among the best known and most highly respected for their sustained commitment to environmental and natural resource conservation.

Conclusion

As the Pinchot Institute nears its 50th anniversary, it is still guided in all of its activities by the original intent of the Pinchot family and the conservation leaders who gathered at Grey Towers in 1963 to launch the Institute on its way. The needs the Pinchot Institute was established to address are even greater today. The old challenges of sustainable natural resource management have not gone away. If anything, new concerns over climate change, renewable energy, and how

to meet the burgeoning needs of a global population that is more than four times what it was in Gifford Pinchot's day have only increased the need for an organization like the Pinchot Institute. Looking forward to the next 50 years, the Pinchot Institute will continue to bring together a diversity of the most insightful thinkers and most experienced practitioners to craft new solutions to new challenges in conservation. We will continue to work in partnership with the Forest Service and partners around the world, to help advance science, policy, and practice in environmental and natural resource conservation.

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ⁱ For additional information on current Pinchot Institute programs, please go to the Institute's website at www.pinchot.org.