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Gifford Pinchot's Legacy: America's Great National Forests

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Sunday, August 11, 2019 marked what would have been Gifford Pinchot's 154th birthday. I didn't know what to get the late-great conservationist, and had no way to ask what might have been on his wish list: he died in 1946. Which is too bad because he left us a lot of gifts and it would have been nice to return the favor.

Among the most important presents that Pinchot gave the American people in his capacity as the first chief of the US Forest Service was our remarkable national–forest system, which today encompass upwards of 193 million acres of forests, grasslands, and wilderness.

No state has benefitted more than California from this largesse: it is home to 18 national forests that collectively steward 20 million acres. These public lands are a treasure trove of recreational opportunities for anyone who wants to fish or hunt, hike, camp, ski, or paddle. Want to stargaze? Head up into the Sierra, the Whites, or the Cascades and be enveloped by the Milky Way. Seeking solitude? Listen to snowmelt running downhill—the best white noise around. As for a cleansing breath, nothing beats the aromatic coastal redwoods, giant sequoia, or sunbaked chaparral.

A final everlasting endowment: by design the national forests here as elsewhere were established to protect the headwaters of our rivers great and small, so whenever you wash your hands, irrigate a field, or power a turbine, look uphill. Chances are the water you are daily using finds its source in forested high ground. In a very real sense, the national forests have helped make California a dream state.

The role Pinchot played in setting the conditions for the California Dream may have had its origin in his forestry studies in Europe in the late 1880s, but he when he returned to the United States in 1890 he recognized he had a lot to learn about his native land. Actually, he was blunt about his ignorance, admitting in his autobiography, Breaking New Ground (1946), that he knew next to nothing about "the people, the country, and the trees. And of the three the first was the most important." To rectify that situation, he headed west in March 1891, an epic journey that took him from Arizona to California, Oregon, and Washington, and then home to New York via the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

California in particular rocked his world. In the Southland, he spent several days with Abbott Kinney, leader of the state's forest movement, who in the early 1880s began pressing Congress to create forest reserves throughout state. Kinney's loquaciousness —"Mr. Kinney talks a good deal with his mouth—was counterbalanced by his kindness, his

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eagerness to tutor the tenderfoot Pinchot about "the effects of floods in the San Gabriel Valley and…the erosion problem of the West."

Other important lessons awaited in the Sierra. While tramping through what today are the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests, the future chief of the Forest Service encountered unmistakable evidence of the damage unregulated logging, mining, and grazing could generate. On a pair of makeshift snowshoes he built out of barrel staves, Pinchot slogged uphill across snowfields that, once melted, would run downhill to farms and cities—"making forest preservation a live issue." Burn-scars on giant trees offered a set of clues about the place of fire in the land and its surprising aesthetic: "when the black marks of fire are sprinkled on the wonderfully deep richer ocher of the bark, the effect is brilliant beyond words." Language failed when he entered the Yosemite, too, and although he wished he had seen it before he stood on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon ("everything is tame after that"), his diary is replete with moments of silent awe.

A quick study and an astute observer, Pinchot had gained invaluable knowledge about California and the West and the interconnections between many of the environmental and social issues that would define his future career and activism. "I was like a cat let out of a bandbox," he later wrote. "Whereas I had been blind, I now began to see."

What he saw most of all was that if he entered public service—which he would do in 1898, becoming the fourth head of the Division of Forestry in the USDA—that he could use his position to galvanize public opinion for the protection and management of the nation's natural resources. In many respects, his was a laughable ambition in 1891—few then knew what forestry or conservation was. But by 1905, when the Forest Service was founded, no one would have snickered at Pinchot's aspiration because by then he had collaborated with that most environmentally minded president, Theodore Roosevelt, to make conservation a household word.

However charismatic and effective, Pinchot had detractors. Californians among them. John Muir, with whom Pinchot had hiked, camped, and schemed, was appalled when his protégée proved a key proponent of damning the Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley to provide water for San Francisco. Orchard growers in the Owens River Valley were furious that Pinchot's Forest Service established the Inyo National Forest in May 1907—not in the mountains above the valley, but in the bottomlands bordering the river, from Mono Lake to north of Crowley Lake. They intuited, and the agency admitted, that the forest's designation was to help Los Angeles secure local water rights. "Roosevelt and Pinchot," the *Inyo Register* editorialized, "to help Newell and Lippincott along in their Los Angeles Alliance, overrode the spirit and letter of the Forestry Laws, in blanketing the fertile Owens River Valley with obnoxious reserve."

These controversies are evoked in the location of two commemorations of the nation's first forester—Pinchot Pass on the Pacific Crest Trail and Mount Pinchot in Kings Canyon National Park. Close to the John Muir Wilderness and rising above the Owens River Valley, the pair make a fitting, if ironic, gift for Giff.