

1-1-1999

Grazing Arizona: Public Land Management in the Southwest

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Char. "Grazing Arizona: Public Land Management in the Southwest," *Forest History Today*, Fall 1999, 15-19.

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In February of 1999, the chief of the U.S. Forest Service, Michael Dombeck, placed a moratorium on road building on most roadless areas. In October, President Clinton put forth an initiative to prohibit road building on 40 million acres of roadless area. Such modifications in Forest Service land management decisions is not new as suggested by Char Miller in this look back at early grazing decisions by Pinchot. To be proactive and reactive at the same time in relation to changing social pressures and political realities may be the legacy of the agency.

GRAZING ARIZONA:

PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTHWEST

“**A**ll history consists of successive excursions from a single starting point,” Aldo Leopold wrote in his seminal essay, “Wilderness,” a point to which “man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values.” Although his reference was to human experience writ

large, he could have been speaking of the agency for which he once worked, the USDA Forest Service. Periodically, it has been compelled to reexamine its guiding principles, seeking in new language an old need: to make sense of the present so as to be better prepared for an unknowable future.¹

This reexamination has been especially intense since the 1980s. That is when, in a delayed response to a remarkable set of federal environmental regulations—including the Wilderness Act (1964), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968), the National Environmental Planning Act (1970), and the Endangered Species Act (1973)—that challenged its post-World War Two claims to authority over matters of conservation and natural resource development, the service began to revise the words it had used to define its mission. Whether the rubric employed was “New Perspectives,” or “New Forestry,” or “Ecosystem Management” mattered less than the intellectual effort and professional energy that brought these concepts to life. For each was an attempt to

redefine the agency’s land management practices, to make them more consistent with shifting political realities, competing legal demands, and an ever-more complicated science of the environment. In this volatile context, for instance, it no longer was possible to promise the production of “a completely stable supply of commodities from public lands,” an ambition that a previous generation of federal foresters had rigorously pursued. Such “will never be fully realized given the many natural variables that influence land and resource management,” then-chief Jack Ward Thomas asserted in the mid-1990s; this situation was only compounded farther by “our collective inability to provide firm, fair, and consistent political direction for federal land management.” Nothing more fully captured the paradox within which the agency operated than the title Thomas applied to his musings—“The Instability of Stability.”²

How to locate a different set of values that might make the future more certain, more predictable, maybe even more stable?

BY CHAR MILLER



Dale Robertson, as Chief of the Forest Service, committed the agency to adopting ecosystem management in 1992. Redefining Forest Service land management practices in the face of shifting political realities was a challenge that also faced Pinchot 100 years ago.

Act as Leopold had predicted humans invariably responded when confronted with turbulent times—return to some identifiable past from which to begin anew. Chief Thomas especially pursued this tactic through his evocation of the founder of the agency, Gifford Pinchot. In public addresses and internal memorandum early in his tenure, he suggested that the first chief's vigorous articulation of the Forest Service's mission at the beginning of the twentieth-century was a model for its behavior at century's end. In a vivid reminder of the degree to which images of the past can speak to contemporary contexts, Thomas, in closing an important address to the agency's leadership, quoted extensively from Pinchot's autobiography, *Breaking New Ground*. In particular, he fastened on the story the first chief told of how, while riding his horse through Washington's Rock Creek Park, he came to understand that conservation, broadly conceived, was not just about resource management. This flash of inspiration, Pinchot wrote, "was a good deal like coming out of a tunnel. I had been seeing one spot of light ahead. Here, all of a sudden, was a whole landscape... It took time for me to appreciate that here was the makings of a new policy, not merely nationwide but worldwide in its scope—fundamentally important because it involved not only the welfare but the very existence of men on earth." A similar drama—what Pinchot had described as the "lifting of the curtain on a great new stage"—awaited the late-twentieth century Forest Service, Ward concluded. "We have come again to a point that is both an end and a beginning. It is our time. Let's get to work."³

By this sign of his continued relevance, Pinchot would have been tickled, for he had been intimately involved in the creation of the Forest Service's initial set of core values, and later in the 1920s and 1930s had lashed out at his successors when they drifted away from them; that 50 years after his death he might serve once again as a barometer of the agency's willingness to adapt

is a testament of the durability of his ideas. That he had become part of the story foresters passed down from one generation to the next would have pleased him, too, because that was what he once had done: he had inaugurated this form of institutional memory when he crafted narratives designed to sanction the actions of the Forest Service (and of its predecessor, the Bureau of Forestry), thereby claiming a more permanent role for it in the management of public lands, and elevating its presence on the American political landscape.⁴

"A HIGH OLD SCRAP"

He particularly liked to talk about his experiences in Arizona, a rough and tumble environment that posed potentially devastating problems for the development of a national conservation initiative. At least that is how he framed the tales he told about his visit to the territory in the early summer of 1900. He had headed west with Frederick Coville, a biologist in the Department of Agriculture, to assess the impact of sheep grazing on the high country and its watersheds, and to determine what, and how serious, the downstream consequences might be for those who lived in the valleys below. The relationship between grazing, forest destruction, and irrigation had become what Pinchot described as "the bloody angle," a tense regional conflict between ranchers and farmers that, if it escalated, might derail the implementation of conservative management of natural resources. To defuse these tensions, then, was the goal he and Colville had when they joined with Albert Potter, Secretary of the Eastern Division of the Arizona Woolgrowers Association, and Con Bunch of the Salt River (Phoenix) Water Users, to tour the affected regions.⁵

"...we were faced with this simple choice: shut out all grazing and lose the Forest Reserves, or let stock in under control and save the Reserves for the Nation."

But first he had to endure a number of tests. Ever vigilant about what westerners thought of "Eastern tenderfeet," Pinchot "strongly suspected" that Potter deliberately led the group through some of the roughest, most inhospitable terrain to take his measure of the federal scientists. The forester affected not to flinch, for instance, when deep in the desert the main water keg and individual canteens bottomed out, and Potter guided them to the area's only water source—a "stagnant pool of terrible green water," complete with "rotting carcasses of cattle that had waded in and drunk until they bogged down and died." A thirsty Pinchot downed that rank fluid. Then there was the arduous climb up the White Mountains, at the conclusion of which lay another challenge: somewhere along an unnamed ridge, "in a trackless forest of Spruce,"

Potter lost a much-prized knife. Pinchot knew what to do: he bet he could find it, “Potter was sure I couldn’t,” and so “I took a chance, and by good luck I did find it.” Having passed this testosterone check, Pinchot knew good things would come. Retrieving Potter’s knife “fixed my status as a woodsman. Such things have their value. Stories get around. I had to meet the Western men on their own ground or be lost.” Sometimes you had to backtrack to make a little progress.⁶

The rest of the tour reinforced that lesson. As the small expedition worked its way up and down the Mogollon Mesa, and investigated the White Mountains and other high country meadows, its members confirmed that grazing seriously damaged forest biota: “not only do sheep eat young seedlings, as I proved to my full satisfaction by finding plenty of them bitten off, contrary to the sheepmen’s contention, but their innumerable hoofs break and trample seedlings into the ground.” Their hoofs also tore up the soil, which rainstorms readily washed off the “hillsides where it belongs into streams where it does not belong,” silt that clogged watercourses and reservoirs. For Pinchot, the conclusion was clear: strict regulation was essential to safeguard the land and insure the future (and freer) flow of water for irrigation and human consumption. That said, Arizona’s forests, which contain “much feed that should not be wasted,” nonetheless could be grazed, but not “overstocked”; doing so would destroy the capacity of the forests to regenerate; the conservation of woods and watersheds took precedence. When “young trees are old enough to make it safe, grazing may begin again, but never without careful supervision and control.” Through their scientific analysis of the land and its carrying capacity, Pinchot and Coville crafted what they believed was appropriate public policy to govern future use of these important public lands.⁷

A critical political reality also shaped their conclusion that northern and eastern Arizona was not one of those regions from which sheep should be excluded. “In the early days of the grazing trouble,” he later recalled, “when the protection of the public timberlands was a live political issue, we were faced with this simple choice: shut out all grazing and lose the Forest Reserves, or let stock in under control and save the Reserves for the Nation.” Within this construct, he and Coville acted on behalf of what they conceived to be the greater good, a crucial step in the establishment of broad public support for the initial management and later expansion of the National Forests. In his experiences in Arizona, Pinchot saw the Forest Service’s future.⁸

MOVING ON

That future is now the agency’s present (and also its future): as a traveling Pinchot platted the intersection between upland grazing, flatland irrigation, and urban developmental pressures in 1900, he identified as well many of the issues that have so dominated the southwest in the late-20th century, and will do so for some time to come. The wider region, running from Texas to California, has experienced such enormous population growth since World War II that it is now home to six of the nation’s 10 largest cities. The resultant sprawl in metropolitan areas in Arizona has encroached on once-distant wildlands, generating a host of interrelated problems, including

increased fire dangers and accelerated threats to critical habitats, watersheds, and rivers; moreover, the demand for the preservation of natural beauty is forever tangled up with intense desire for mountain and desert recreational space. Slaking the great thirst of the citizens of Flagstaff, Phoenix, and Tucson only adds to the pressures on regional water supplies, already stretched thin meeting the needs of sensitive ecosystems and the escalating demands of computer chip manufacturers, farmers, and ranchers. Although different in degree from the world Pinchot glimpsed during his month-long journey through the Arizona territory, it is not so different in kind.

The public policy dilemmas he then faced reverberate in the present, too. In 1900, worried that federal forestry would be rendered immaterial in the face of contesting political forces, he sought leverage to give himself room to maneuver. Conservation—a mechanism for mediating between competing needs and conflicting demands—gave him access to the civic arena, where he could meet with the affected communities, negotiate acceptable management strategies, and fashion national policy accordingly. “There are a great many interests on the National Forests which sometimes conflict a little,” he remarked in 1907. “It is often necessary for one man to give a little here, another a little there. But by giving way a little at present they both profit by it a great deal in the end.” This art of compromise, and commitment to consensus building, were essential to insure the democratic character of resource management, he repeatedly argued. “National Forests exist today because the people want them. To make them accomplish the most good, the people themselves must make clear how they want them run.”⁹

When they did, as they had in Arizona, the agency must respond. Upon returning to Washington from his southwestern tour in 1900, Pinchot pushed the establishment of a Branch of Grazing within the then-Bureau of Forestry. Its head, he realized, must be someone with considerable grassroots experience, for grazing “is a primarily a local question and should always be dealt with on local grounds;” it would be unwise to administer the reserves from afar, and “under general rules



Albert Potter, who led Pinchot on an early fact finding expedition on the effects of grazing was Secretary of the Eastern Division of the Arizona Wool Growers Association. Later Potter was to become Associate Forester of the U.S. Forest Service.

FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTO COLLECTION



Sheep grazing in the southwest was a management test for the young Forest Service. Overstocking that led to poor regeneration and erosion challenged public policy. Here, sheep are moved into summer pasture near Santa Fe (1936).

based on theoretical considerations.” Scientific analyses of rangeland were essential, but “[l]ocal rules must be framed to meet local conditions, and they must be modified from time to time as local needs may require.” That being the case, Pinchot knew exactly whom to hire—Albert Potter—a decision he never regretted. His “soft, unemphatic, knowledgeable speech, his thorough mastery of his business [and] his intimate acquaintance with the country and its people” had given him “a standing and influence that were remarkable,” Pinchot later recalled. Potter “was the cornerstone around which we built the whole structure of grazing control,” built, it should be noted, from the bottom up.¹⁰

The need to get closer to the land and the communities that depend on it has led the late-twentieth century Forest Service to adopt Ecosystem Management (ESM) as a guiding principle. Its scientific insights will enable the agency to manage resource uses in a more careful, thoughtful, and decentralized manner, and to react, with greater flexibility, to bioregional or local environmental conditions. ESM holds the key, Chief Thomas argued in 1996, to sustaining biological diversity, supporting social and economic development, and “dampening oscillations in forest outputs.” This new prescription for management has had, and will continue to have, political consequences, too: thinking like an ecosystem compels the service to begin to coordinate its planning with a constellation of forces—congressional conservatives, free-market economists, and local environmental activists, among them—who to one extent or another would like to control or transform the agency’s behavior, and diminish its authority over the public lands. More profound changes may be in the offing, argue forest policy analysts Hannah Corner and Anne Motte: “Adopting the ecosystem management paradigm would mean rejecting traditional resource management policies and practices in favor of policies and practices selected primarily for the purpose of sustaining ecosystem health.” This in turn would require “extensive social and political changes, ranging from redefinition of the values that define relationships among humans and nature, professions and citizens, and government and citizens, to the creation, reform, or even dismantling of traditional resource management institutions...” Through Ecosystem Management, the Forest Service may become an endangered species.¹¹

In this tumultuous, even threatening, environment, it is understandable if some of the agency’s recent leaders occasionally yearn for what they imagine was a simpler moment in the past, a less troubled time when a seemingly aggressive Gifford Pinchot dominated the national stage. He and “our predecessors meant the Forest Service to be a guiding beacon for excellence in land management, research, and assistance to others,” Jack Ward Thomas averred; “I believe that is our heritage and our destiny.” Its future actions, however, depended on securing the necessary funding and policy initiatives that would allow it to seize “‘the Bully Pulpit’ for natural resource management” and execute “a clearly stated national policy.” His aspirations were not fulfilled during his tenure, but his successor, Michael P. Dombeck, has entertained the same prospects, that the agency could once again “lead by example,” and thereby “redeem” its former status as the preeminent conservation agency in the federal government.¹²

But as Pinchot’s experience in Arizona a century ago indicates, the past is a mighty tangled place. In Arizona, and elsewhere, his hands were not unfettered, his leadership not unquestioned. His decision to admit sheep on the public range lands under his agency’s control—which he knew would set the course for years to come—was not taken lightly. Yet he also embraced a participatory form of governance that would lead him to balance, however awkwardly, scientific insights and political exigencies. In acting as an honest broker among rival interest groups, he was at once proactive and reactive, assertive and cautious, principled and pragmatic. That durable set of values still makes good sense. n

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NOTES

1. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 188–200.
2. Paul Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests Since World War Two*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) and Char Miller, ed., *American Forests: Nature, Culture, and Politics*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), p. 195–272 develop some of the changes that buffeted the forestry profession in the post-war era; Jerry Franklin, “Toward a New Forestry,” *American Forests*, November–December 1989, p. 37–44; Jack Ward Thomas, “The Instability of Stability,” *The Pinchot Letter*, Summer 1996, p. 5–6; this is a condensed version of Jack Ward Thomas, “Stability and Predictability in Federal Forest Management: Some Thoughts from the Chief,” *Public Land & Resources Law Review*, vol. 17, 1996, p. 9–23; Michael P. Dombeck, “A Gradual Unfolding of a National Purpose: A Natural Resource Agenda for the 21st Century,” letter to all Forest Service personnel, March 2, 1998, 10 pps. Christopher McGory Klyza, *Who Controls Public Lands? Mining, Forestry, and Grazing Politics, 1870–1990*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) challenges the assumption that the changes in language the Forest Service used to describe its behavior amount to a paradigm shift in values; the agency’s “privilege of technocratic utilitarianism” remains in force, he asserts. Not until a “new world view reintegrating humanity into nature takes root and flourishes” will we demand and obtain “the institutions that could deal with our growing environmental problems.”

Internal reform, by that definition, is a contradiction in terms; p. 107; 160. An even more blunt denunciation of the Forest Service's continued existence appears in Robert H. Nelson, "Rethinking Scientific Management," Discussion paper 99-07, Resources for the Future; Nelson's argument that the agency must change its orientation is predicated on a flawed understanding of its early years; that's when, he says, Pinchot insisted that professional experts and "scientific management" determine all resource allocation decisions free from any political influence, an anti-democratic posture that was sharply at odds with Pinchot's political sensibilities, as is confirmed in his experiences in Arizona, and throughout the west. More nuanced analyses of the Forest Service's late-twentieth century situation include Randy Barker, "New Forestry in the Next West," in John A. Baden and Donald Snow, editors, *The Next West: Public Lands, Community, and Economy in the American West*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), p. 25-44; Hanna J. Cortner and Margaret A. Moote, *The Politics of Ecosystem Management*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999).

3. Jack Ward Thomas, "This Time, Our Moment in History, Our Future," speech delivered to the Forest Service Leadership Meeting, Houston, Texas, June 20-23, 1994, p. 14.

4. On Pinchot's challenges to the Forest Service's behavior and belief, see Char Miller, "Sawdust Memories: Pinchot and the Making of Forest Service History," *Journal of Forestry*, February 1994, p. 8-12.

5. Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, (Washington, D.C.: Island

Press, 1998), p. 177-78.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 178-79.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 180-81.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

9. Gifford Pinchot, "The Use of the National Forests," U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, 1907, p. 25-26; Pinchot's use of conservation to open up a dialogue on resource use in Colorado is discussed in Char Miller, "Tapping the Rockies: Resource Exploitation in the Intermountain West," in Hal K. Rothman, ed., *Reopening of the West*, (Tucson: University Arizona Press, 1998), p. 168-182.

10. Gifford Pinchot, "Grazing in the Forest Reserves," *The Forester*, November, 1901, p. 276; Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, p. 181-82.

11. Thomas, "Stability and Predictability in Federal Forest Management," p.14-15; Cortner and Moote, *The Politics of Ecosystem Management*, p. 50-52; the range and seriousness of the challenges that will arise in the shift to ESM are amply documented in a special issue of the *Journal of Forestry*, "Sustaining the People's Lands: The Committee of Scientists' Report," May 1999.

12. Thomas, "Stability and Instability in Federal Forest Management," p. 18; Thomas, "Comments of Dr. Jack Ward Thomas..." before the National Capital Chapter, Society of American Foresters, September 14, 1994, p. 7; Dombeck, "A Gradual Unfolding of a National Purpose," p. 3, 11.



U.S. FOREST SERVICE PHOTO (497892), BY BLUFORD W. MUJR

The decision to admit sheep on the public range lands would set Forest Service policy for years to come. This photo shows sheep grazing on the only sheep allotment on the Apache National Forest, Arizona. Taken near State Road No. 73, about 5 miles from Greer Junction (1960).