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Conservationists in Chief

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Conservationists in Chief U.S. Presidents and the Environment, Part I

By Brian Flanagan

As the first full month of spring winds down, Americans pause to observe Earth Day and Arbor Day, celebrating a movement that began 200 years ago -- Conservation. In an era when the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of the Interior and its offices -- the National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey -- help formulate much of the country's environmental policy, it is easy to lose track of the role U.S. presidents have played in founding and sustaining the movement.

Theodore Roosevelt is usually recognized as the most dominant participant -- and rightfully so -- but many American presidents, from our nation's founding to present, have played the role of conservationist-in-chief.



+ **Thomas Jefferson, 1801-09**

Thomas Jefferson, like his predecessor George Washington, was very much interested in the wild, unexplored expanse west of the Appalachian Mountains. (Unlike George Washington, he did not have an opportunity to explore it himself.) But he obsessed over the Western terrain, collecting old maps of the region drawn-up by French and Spanish explorers, and he even made some maps of his own based on written accounts of Western excursions.

In 1803, Jefferson enlisted Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the territory west from the Appalachians to the Pacific Ocean, and he instructed them to "take careful observations of latitude and longitude at all remarkable points... as that they may with certainty be recognised hereafter." The assignment took on greater significance when the Louisiana Purchase was finalized that year.

One of the primary purposes of the mission was to observe the environment, and indeed Lewis and Clark's accounts provided the most detailed view of the West available at the time. In his June 20th instructions to Lewis, Jefferson wrote, "[O]bjects worthy of notice will be the soil & face of the country, its growth & vegetable productions, especially those not of the U.S. the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U.S. the remains or accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct; the mineral productions of every kind; but more particularly metals, limestone, pit coal, & saltpetre; salines & mineral waters, noting the temperature of the last, & such circumstances as may indicate their character; volcanic appearances; climate, as characterized by the thermometer, by the proportion of rainy, cloudy, & clear days, by lightning, hail, snow, ice, by the access & recess of frost, by the winds prevailing at different seasons, the dates at which particular plants put forth or lose their flower, or leaf, times of appearance of particular birds, reptiles or insects."

Learn More:

[Discovering Lewis and Clark](#)

[Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail](#)

[Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery](#)

[National Geographic: Lewis and Clark](#)

+ **Zachary Taylor, 1849-50**

By the time Zachary Taylor took the oath of office, the Western expansion of U.S. borders that Jefferson began was complete. In 1848 Mexico ceded its remaining territories, north of its present border, to the United States.

It's no coincidence that the following year, President Zachary Taylor signed legislation creating the Department of the Interior to manage all government business outside the realms of the Departments of State, Treasury, War, and Navy. Included among the responsibilities of the first secretary of the interior, Thomas Ewing, were exploration of the west and management of public parks.

Learn More:

[U.S. Department of the Interior](#)

["The Department of Everything Else" - Origins](#)

+ **Abraham Lincoln, 1861-65** - Yosemite land grant signed

The gold rush during President Taylor's term had increased the non-Indian population in California from below 15,000 the year before his presidency to more than 200,000 four years later. California quickly became a booming state. On June 30, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Land Grant giving California 39,000 acres of the Yosemite Valley for the creation of a state park.

Also, in 1862 President Lincoln had created the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide leadership for farmers and ranchers.

Learn More:

[LOC American Memory on the Yosemite Land Grant](#)

[U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)

[Yosemite National Park](#)

+ **Ulysses Grant, 1869-77** - Yellowstone National Park established

In March, 1872, President Ulysses Grant signed an act into law creating Yellowstone National Park. It was the nation's first national park, and the first of several created before the beginning of the 20th century and before the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. In the 1890 President Benjamin Harrison would sign laws creating three more national parks -- Sequoia, Yosemite, and General Grant National Park -- and William McKinley would sign legislation in 1899 creating Mt. Rainier National Park.

Learn More:

[Yellowstone National Park](#)

[Yellowstone National Park Grant Village Visitor Center](#)

[Yellowstone National Park History](#)

+ **Theodore Roosevelt, 1877** - The Boone and Crockett Club founded

In 1877, future President Theodore Roosevelt and conservationist George Bird Grinnell founded the Boone and Crockett Club to organize sportsmen and conservationists to, as the club advertises today, "provide the leadership needed to address the issues that affect hunting, wildlife and wild habitat."

Learn More:

[Boone and Crockett Club](#)

+ **Grover Cleveland, 1885-89**

In 1883, as governor of New York, Grover Cleveland signed a bill authorizing what would later become the Niagara Falls reservation. In 1886, President Grover Cleveland issued an executive order to preserve ten townships around Crater Lake, Oregon, from public settlement.

Learn More:

[Crater Lake National Park](#)

+ **Benjamin Harrison, 1889-93** - Forest and fish culture reservations established

President Benjamin Harrison accomplished three significant firsts: the first forest reservation, the first wildlife refuge, and the first federally protected archaeological site. In 1891 he issued a presidential proclamation setting aside the Yellowstone Park Timber Land in Wyoming to create the nation's first forest reservation (This was made possible by the General Revision Act of 1891 that empowered the president to create forest reserves -- originally only granted to the U.S. Navy to protect hardwood for ship building.). Later as more reservations were established, the National Forest system evolved.

In 1892 President Harrison issued a proclamation creating the Afognak Forest and Fish-Culture Reserve on a tract of land in Alaska. This was, in effect, the nation's first wildlife refuge. Also, in 1892, Harrison established federal protection of the Grande Ruin in Arizona -- the nation's first archaeological site reserve -- at the advice of the American Forestry Congress. Before the end of his presidency, Harrison would establish more than 13 million acres of forest reserves from public lands in the West.

President Harrison also signed legislation creating the Sequoia and Mount Rainier National Parks.

Learn More:

[Afognak Island State Park](#)

[LOC American Memory on Mt. Rainier](#)

[Mount Rainier National Park](#), Washington

[Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park](#), California

+ **Theodore Roosevelt, 1901-09**

President Theodore Roosevelt was the first American president to lend his vision to the cause of conservation. In his first message to Congress in 1901, he indicated that the creation of forest reserves, wildlife preserves, and irrigation projects in the West would be a cornerstone of his administration: "Forest protection is not an end of itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend upon them. The preservation of our forests is an imperative business necessity."

In his seventh annual message to Congress, President Roosevelt made another strong statement for conservation: "the conservation of our natural resources and their proper use constitute the fundamental problem which underlies almost every other problem of our National life. We must maintain for our civilization the adequate material basis without which that civilization can not exist. We must show foresight, we must look ahead."

During his presidency, Roosevelt appointed three important commissions -- the Inland Waterways Commission to revive navigation of the nation's rivers; the Public Lands Commission to monitor and report on the use of public lands in the West; the Commission on Country Life to research problems associated with rural living and recommend government actions; and the National Conservation Commission to develop policy recommendations for Congress. Toward the end of his presidency, he also organized the North American Conservation Conference with participants from the United States, Canada, Newfoundland, and Mexico. And in 1908, President Roosevelt organized the first ever Governors' Conference to discuss conservation of natural resources. This conference helped bring conservation issues to the public consciousness, and stimulated numerous public and private initiatives.

Roosevelt signed four important pieces of environmental legislation during his presidency. The 1902 Newlands Reclamation Act enabled the federal government to undertake irrigation projects to reclaim marginal lands and sell them to farmers and ranchers. The Alaska Game Act, signed the same year, protected certain game animals in Alaska. In 1907 president Roosevelt signed a bill into law forbidding the expansion or further creation of national forests in six Western states -- but not before hastily identifying and designating sixteen million acres in these states as national forests.

Perhaps the most important legislation signed by President Roosevelt was the American Antiquities Act, passed by Congress in 1906. The act allowed the federal government to prosecute individuals who "appropriate, excavate, injure, or destroy any historic or prehistoric ruin or monument, or any object of antiquity on lands owned or controlled by the United States." But it also allowed "the examination of ruins, the excavation of archeological sites, and the gathering of objects of antiquity on lands owned or controlled by the U.S.," by persons permitted by the government. The act also granted the president authority to establish national monuments for the preservation of scientific and historic sites.

He issued executive orders creating 7 national parks: Crater Lake, Mesa Verde, Mount Olympus in Washington, Platt, Sully's Hill, Windcave in South Dakota, and Yosemite (reacquired by the federal government from the state of California). He also established the nation's first national monuments, 11 in all: Cinder Cone in California, Devil's Tower in Wyoming, Grand Canyon in Arizona, Jewel Cave in South Dakota, Lassen Peak in California, Lewis and Clark Cavern in Montana, Muir Woods in California, Natural Bridges in Utah, Petrified Forest in Arizona, Pinnacles in California, and Wheeler National Monument in Colorado. And he issued an executive orders establishing a 53 federally protected wildlife refuges, including the first national bird preserve on Pelican Island, Florida.

Significant changes to the Department of the interior were made during Roosevelt's term. He created the Bureau of Reclamation in 1902 to construct dams, powerplants, and canals, and he renamed the Bureau of Forestry the Forest Service in 1905, adding control of the nation's forest reserves to its responsibilities. (Eventually the Forest Service would grow to protect 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands.) President Roosevelt worked in cooperation with the Forest Service chief Gifford Pinchot on many of his conservation initiatives.

Learn More:

[LOC American Memories: TR and the Early Conservation Movement](#)

[Crater Lake National Park](#)
[Grand Canyon National Park](#)
[Lassen Volcanic National Park](#)
[Muir Woods National Monument](#)
[Olympic National Park](#)
[Pinnacles National Monument](#)
[Yosemite National Park](#)

[Devil's Tower National Monument](#)
[Jewel Cave National Monument](#)
[Mesa Verde National Park](#)
[Natural Bridges National Monument](#)
[Petrified Forest National Park](#)
[Wind Cave National Park](#)

Links and Sources:

[Chronology of Events and People in the Development of the American Conservative Movement](#)
[Conservation Study Institute](#)
[Environmental History Timeline](#)
[EPA Environmental Progress](#)
[Evolution of the Conservation Movement](#)