

[Documentary Chronology of Selected Events in the Development of the American Conservation Movement, 1847-1920](#) comprises public domain material from the Library of Congress.

Documentary Chronology of Selected Events in the Development of the American Conservation Movement, 1847-1920

1847-1871



The harvest moon, Currier & Ives. [between 1860 and 1870.] LC-USZC2-3259

1847

George Perkins Marsh, then a U.S. Congressman from Vermont, delivers a seminal speech to the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, Vermont, calling attention to the destructive impact of human activity on the land, especially through deforestation, and advocating a conservationist approach to the management of forested lands; some of these insights were elaborated in a work by Marsh's fellow New Englander, George Emerson, in a book published the previous year, *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts*. In 1848, Marsh's speech is published as "Address Delivered Before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, Sept. 30, 1847".

1849

Establishment of the U.S. Department of Interior.

1850s

Beginning around the middle of the eighteenth century, European and American literary figures had drawn increasing attention to the importance of nature; by now, in the mid-nineteenth century, travel literature in periodicals and books joins with this Romantic literary legacy to stimulate a broad popular movement of "nature appreciation."

Throughout the remaining decades of the century, the "nature essay" burgeons as an American literary genre.

Throughout the last half of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, popular interest in ornithology proliferates through books, articles, and local clubs, providing a grass-roots base for support of many aspects of conservation.

Prints, lithographs and engravings of American scenery, especially in the West, receive wide popular distribution between this decade and the turn of the century, stimulating broad interest in and appreciation for the special qualities of the American landscape, including its wilderness.

Francis Parkman begins publishing his landmark histories of America, in which American identity is celebrated in terms of the presence of the wilderness.

1850

The third edition of the *Table Rock Album and Sketches of the Falls and Scenery Adjacent* offers future generations a unique glimpse of mid-nineteenth-century Americans' response to spectacular natural beauty in the form of notations made by tourists in an album at Niagara Falls.

Citing the observations of Alexander von Humboldt and others on the effects of deforestation, Thomas Ewbank, the United States Commissioner of Patents, warns in his two-volume *Report of the Commissioner of Patents, for the Year 1849 (House of Representatives Executive Document No. 20)* that "the waste of valuable timber in the United States, to say nothing of firewood, will hardly begin to be appreciated until our population reaches fifty millions. Then the folly and shortsightedness of this age will meet with a degree of censure and reproach not pleasant to contemplate." In the same document, Ewbank also warns that "the vast multitudes of bisons slain yearly, the ceaseless war carried on against them, if continued, threatens their extermination, and must hereafter cause deep regret;" especially in view of "their great strength and docility, when tamed, and their capacity for being drilled to the yoke,... it should never be said that the noblest of American indigenous ruminants have become extinct." Articles on the long-term harm produced by forest destruction appear in the reports of the commissioners of patents and of agriculture in this decade and during the 1860s.

1851

Henry David Thoreau delivers an address to the Concord (Massachusetts) Lyceum declaring that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World." In 1863, this address is published posthumously as the essay "Walking" in Thoreau's *Excursions*.

1852

In an introductory essay in *The Home Book of the Picturesque*, an important early work celebrating the American landscape through the work of eminent writers and artists, Elias Lyman Magoon argues for the importance of wild nature as a source of moral, spiritual and patriotic inspiration; this reflects the growing concern with nature as a spiritual resource, which becomes one of the definitive themes of the conservation movement.

1854

Henry David Thoreau publishes *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*.

1855

In a letter to *The Crayon*, the artist Asher Durand calls for the creation of a wilderness art.

A popular anthology of American and European poetry on nature themes, *The Rhyme and Reason of Country Life*, reflects the preoccupation with idealized rural life of an increasingly urban and industrial nation, and epitomizes the taste for nature-related literature which was a major aspect of American letters by this time, and which strongly influenced the attitudes undergirding the conservation movement.

1855-1860s

In an early example of the era's great government-sponsored scientific and ethnographic survey reports on the West, the U.S. War Department publishes the multi-volume Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean; these include accounts of surveying expeditions which greatly increase knowledge and interest concerning the Western landscape, documented by illustrations by artists accompanying the expeditions.

1857

Samuel H. Hammond publishes *Wild Northern Scenes; or, Sporting Adventures with the Rifle and Rod*, an important book in the nascent tradition of the hunter-conservationist, which celebrates the beauty and beneficence of the Adirondack wilds and advocates preservation of limited wilderness areas as resources for recreation and rejuvenation.

James Russell Lowell publishes an article in *The Crayon* calling for the establishment of a society to protect American trees such as the recently "discovered" California redwoods.

In an early example of the growing public concern with fish conservation through fish culture, especially at the state level, George Perkins Marsh publishes a *Report, Made under Authority of the Legislature of Vermont, on the Artificial Propagation of Fish*, in

which he also explores the effects of deforestation, agriculture, and industry on fish populations.

1858

Albert Bierstadt first visits the Rockies, and begins to paint grandiloquent images of Western scenery which have broad popular impact.

The commissioners charged with developing New York City's new Central Park as the first major rural park in an American city hold a landscape design competition; the winning entry is the "Greensward" plan created by Frederick Law Olmsted, who had been appointed the new Park's first Superintendent the preceding year, and British architect Calvert Vaux, and Olmsted is also appointed the Park's architect-in-chief. Its realization long hampered by the political infighting and insensitive public management which led to Olmsted's final departure in 1877, the Olmsted-Vaux design nevertheless gives Central Park its enduring identity, and profoundly influences the future course of landscape architecture in the United States.

1859

A letter from Albert Bierstadt to *The Crayon*, recording impressions of Western scenery, is widely reprinted, demonstrating the new fascination with wild scenery as an artistic subject.

Publication of second edition of William Elliott's *Carolina Sports by Land and Water* (first published in 1846), an early example of the hunter-as-conservationist, a phenomenon which became increasingly important for conservationism.

1860

Henry David Thoreau delivers an address to the Middlesex (Massachusetts) Agricultural Society, entitled "The Succession of Forest Trees," in which he analyzes aspects of what later came to be understood as forest ecology and urges farmers to plant trees in natural patterns of succession; the address is later published in (among other places) *Excursions*, becoming perhaps his most influential ecological contribution to conservationist thought.

Frederic Edwin Church paints his masterpiece "Twilight in the Wilderness;" throughout this era, he and numerous other eminent academic artists explore the power of American landscape as symbol and artistic subject in a profoundly influential body of work.

Thomas Starr King publishes *The White Hills: Their Legends, Landscape, and Poetry*, which was quickly recognized as a classic celebration of the White Mountains in the best tradition of mid-century nature-related travel literature.

1860-61

Thomas Starr King publishes a series of articles on Yosemite Valley, California, in the *Boston Evening Transcript* which helps publicize the Yosemite wilderness to Easterners.

1861

In both stereoscopic and mammoth-plate formats, Carleton E. Watkins makes the first important photographic record of Yosemite, a site he photographed repeatedly in the coming decades; Watkins's images circulate widely, especially in stereoscopic form, and do much to publicize Yosemite throughout the nation.

1862

Henry David Thoreau dies in Concord, Massachusetts, at the age of 44.

1864

George Perkins Marsh publishes *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (revised 1874 as *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*), the first systematic analysis of humanity's destructive impact on the environment and a work which becomes (in Lewis Mumford's words) "the fountain-head of the conservation movement."

In precedent-setting legislation, Congress passes a bill granting Yosemite Valley to the State of California as a public park.

Posthumous publication of Henry David Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, in which Thoreau calls for the establishment of "national preserves" of virgin forest, "not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true re-creation."

The *New York Times* publishes an editorial (August 9) advocating state acquisition of the Adirondacks for purposes of preservation.

1865

Frederick Law Olmsted submits a "Preliminary Report upon the Yosemite and Big Tree Grove" to the Commissioners of California's new Yosemite park; this work first systematically establishes the philosophical justification for public preservation of great natural scenery on the basis of its unique capacity to enhance human psychological, physical, and social health.

John Burroughs publishes his first nature essay, "With the Birds," in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

1866

The word "ecology" is coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel.

1867

Ferdinand Vandever Hayden leads his first Federally-sponsored Survey in the West; by the time it ends in 1878, the survey under his leadership has conducted landmark explorations throughout the region and contributed vitally to the scientific, photographic, and artistic representation of the Western landscape.

1869

Inspired by a tour of Yosemite, and perhaps by the ideas of his friend Frederick Law Olmsted, Samuel Bowles publishes *Our New West. Records of Travel between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean*, an influential traveller's account of the wilds and peoples of the West, in which he advocates preservation of other scenic areas such as Niagara Falls and the Adirondacks.

John Wesley Powell leads his first expedition through the canyons of the Colorado, with support from the Smithsonian Institution and private organizations; his formal report on this and subsequent expeditions is published in 1875 as *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries*.

A group of citizens--including Frederick Law Olmsted, Frederic Edwin Church, and Henry Hobson Richardson--begins to work towards the restoration and preservation of Niagara Falls, efforts which finally bear fruit in the creation of the Reservation in 1885.

Publication of William H.H. Murray's *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks*, an important work publicizing the Adirondacks and advocating the use of wilderness as a resource for recreation and personal and spiritual renewal; it does much to open the flood of tourism to the region, but also stimulates the growth of public discussion on the need to preserve the region permanently.

1870

Paralleling the increasing number of state-level measures for conserving supplies of fish and game throughout the nation, Congress passes "An Act to prevent the Extermination of Fur-Bearing Animals in Alaska," the first of numerous Congressional and Presidential efforts in the coming decades to protect the economically valuable Pacific fur seals by regulating their hunting.

Typifying the growing concern over wildlife destruction during the Gilded Age, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* publishes an article by William H. Waddle, Jr., deploring the indiscriminate destruction of American wildlife and advocating stringent legal protection.

1871

Hayden's United States Geological Survey of the Territories explores the Yellowstone region with William Henry Jackson as official photographer and Thomas Moran as accompanying artist; widely-distributed lithographs of Moran's paintings from this expedition help publicize Yellowstone in the East, while Jackson's 1870-1878 work with the Survey quickly becomes the most influential photographic representation of the Western landscape and its natural wonders.

Congress passes a "Joint Resolution for the Protection and Preservation of the Food Fishes of the Coast of the United States," authorizing the President to appoint a commissioner of fish and fisheries to investigate the declining numbers of coastal and lake food fishes, and to recommend remedial measures to Congress.

Clarence King publishes *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, a classic work of travel literature uniting scientific geology and artistic sensibility, which helps stimulate Eastern fascination with Western wilderness.

John Burroughs publishes *Wake-Robin*, the first of many volumes of his extraordinarily popular nature essays.

Henry George publishes *Our Land and Land Policy, National and State*, an influential critique deploring the squandering of the public domain and its natural resources.