

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, "CONSERVATION AS A NATIONAL DUTY" (13 May 1908)

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Abstract: In his keynote address to the 1908 Conference of Governors, Theodore Roosevelt recast conservation as a public (rather than private) and moral (rather than economic) issue. This essay examines Roosevelt's record as a conservationist, shows how his speech to the Governors' Conference linked conservation to the broader themes of civilization and nationalism, and assesses the legacy of the speech, particularly its place in an ongoing debate over "preservationism" versus "conservationism."

Key Words: Theodore Roosevelt, conservation, preservation, Conference of Governors, environmental movement

"It is the chief material question that confronts us, second only--and second always--to the great fundamental questions of morality."¹ For Theodore Roosevelt, who spoke these words in 1908, "it" was the question of conservation. Nature was the great love of his childhood, a source of solace after his first wife's death, and the picturesque backdrop for the "strenuous life" he advocated.² It was hardly surprising that when he gained the highest office in the land, he would make natural conservation one of his top priorities. During his time as president, Roosevelt oversaw the establishment of four national parks and signed the 1906 Antiquities Act, which granted the president the authority to designate national monuments without the approval of Congress. Over the next three years, he personally designated eighteen such monuments, four of which are now national parks.³

It was not enough for Roosevelt merely to set aside land for public enjoyment. He also was concerned with the rapid pace at which the United States was consuming its natural resources, especially its forests. In 1905, at Roosevelt's urging, Congress established the United States Forest Service. By the end of his presidency, Roosevelt's administration had created over forty-two million acres of national forest land, to be managed for the common good by the U.S. government. This "wise use" approach, which treated public land as a resource to be managed rather than exploited, was at the heart of Roosevelt's conservation policy. Yet even these efforts did not satisfy Roosevelt. Each year, in his State of the Union message to Congress, he urged the government to take additional steps toward conservation; every year he complained that Congress had not done enough.⁴ When his efforts to persuade Congress met with opposition, Roosevelt took his conservation crusade directly to the people. The Conference of Governors he called in 1908 was one such effort to focus national attention on the question of

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conservation and to lay out his vision for the "wise use" of the nation's natural resources.

In this essay, I examine Roosevelt's keynote address to the conference. I argue that by linking conservation to the broader themes of civilization and nationalism, he recast conservation as a public (rather than private) and moral (rather than economic) issue. I begin this essay with an overview of Theodore Roosevelt's life and political career, focusing especially on his background as a naturalist and his views on the natural environment. I then discuss the "crisis of conservation" that prompted Roosevelt to call the Conference of Governors. I next show *how* Roosevelt's speech recast conservation as a public and moral concern. Finally, I discuss the legacy of the speech, particularly its place in the ongoing debate over "preservationism" versus "conservationism."

Theodore Roosevelt, the Conservation President

Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-eighth president of the United States, was born on October 27, 1858, in New York City. The second of four children, Roosevelt suffered from asthma so severe that doctors feared at times that he might not live. Still, he enjoyed a fairly lively childhood, traveling with his family to Europe in 1869 and 1870 and to the Middle East during 1872 and 1873. His father encouraged him to build up his strength as a way to combat his asthma; the young Roosevelt took up boxing and other exercise, eventually improving his health and reducing his asthma attacks significantly. He would later point to this sort of "strenuous" effort as vital to the good life, both for individuals and the nation.⁵

As a child and a young adult, Roosevelt was fascinated by nature in spite of his illness. He took many leisurely walks through the woods and hills surrounding the family home on New York's Long Island, learning as much as he could about the flora and fauna. He became an amateur taxidermist, learning to skin and stuff the birds he shot on these walks and during his travels. Roosevelt and two of his cousins formed the "Roosevelt Museum of Natural History," a cabinet (later the family's attic) displaying the many animals and birds they shot and stuffed. Roosevelt would later donate many of his specimens to the Smithsonian, and some are still part of exhibits at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.⁶

Roosevelt entered Harvard in 1876, where he showed the most interest in biology and zoology classes.⁷ Two events during his studies at Harvard profoundly impacted his life: his father's death in 1878, and meeting Alice Hathaway Lee, who would become his first wife after his graduation in 1880. Roosevelt also entered Columbia Law School that year, but dropped out in 1881 to run successfully for New York Assemblyman. As a freshman assemblyman, Roosevelt was a loyal Republican and a hard worker who authored more bills than any other New York state legislator.

In 1884, Alice died suddenly from Bright's Disease, just two days after the birth of their daughter (also named Alice). In a strange coincidence, Roosevelt's mother, who had been with Alice during her labor and sickness, died of typhoid fever on the same day. Roosevelt was inconsolable over the double loss; he turned care of the newborn Alice over to his older sister Anna and fled to a ranch in the Badlands of Dakota Territory (now North Dakota), which he had

purchased after a visit there in 1883.⁸ Mourning his beloved wife and his mother, Roosevelt reinvented himself as a tough man of the frontier. He wrote articles about his cowboy life for magazines, arrested thieves who tried to make off with his river boat, raised cattle, and connected deeply with the wilderness, which he credited with saving his sanity. After a cruel winter in 1885 wiped out his cattle herd, he returned to New York and the home he had built for Alice--"Sagamore Hill." From there he began a successful courtship of his childhood sweetheart, Edith Carow, whom he married in 1886; he continued his political career by launching an unsuccessful bid for Mayor of New York City.

Roosevelt campaigned for Benjamin Harrison in the 1888 election and was rewarded with an appointment to the United States Civil Service Commission. The post was viewed by Harrison's advisors as a way to divert the obviously ambitious Roosevelt into civil service; Roosevelt, however, turned it into a public relations coup by rooting out corruption in the Commission and demanding that civil service laws be enforced.⁹ Grover Cleveland, Harrison's opponent in the 1892 presidential election, reappointed Roosevelt to the same post after his victory. Roosevelt left the position in 1895, however, to serve as president of the board of the New York City Police Commissioners. Roosevelt applied the same ethic to the board that he had to the Civil Service Commission, working long hours and demanding (and winning) reform. In 1897, his reputation won him the post of Assistant Secretary of the Navy--effectively giving him control over the Navy given that Secretary John D. Long was less ambitious than Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was thrilled with his appointment as Assistant Navy Secretary. He immediately set about preparing the Navy for a possible war with Spain; indeed, his critics charged that he was perhaps a little too enthusiastic about the prospect.¹⁰ When that war commenced in 1898, Roosevelt resigned from the Department of the Navy and took a commission as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army. He organized the first U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, recruiting friends in the East and the West (particularly his cowboy comrades) to fill in the ranks of what would become known as the "Rough Riders." After the Regiment's first commander, Leonard Wood, was promoted to a higher post, Roosevelt was promoted to Colonel and given command of the regiment. He preferred to be called "Colonel Roosevelt" or "The Colonel" for the rest of his life. Roosevelt led the "Rough Riders" in two memorable charges on Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill (the battle was named after the latter), becoming famous as a slightly reckless but inspirational leader. He was nominated for the Medal of Honor, but he did not win the award, in part because of his vocal criticism of the administration's management of the war.¹¹

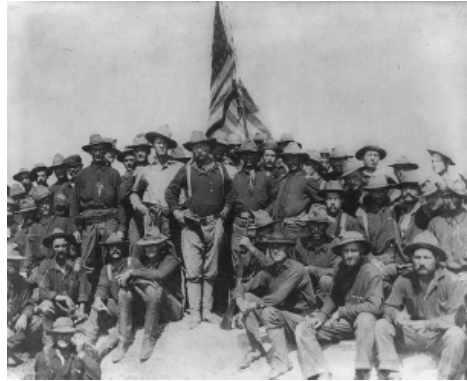


Figure 1. Theodore Roosevelt and the "Rough Riders" on San Juan Hill, Cuba, 1911.¹²

After the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Roosevelt left the Army and campaigned successfully for the governorship of New York. As with his earlier political offices, Roosevelt spent much of his time in the governor's office fighting corruption. His efforts led to his nomination as William McKinley's running mate in the 1900 presidential election--an election in which they won in a landslide. Six months after his inauguration as Vice President, Roosevelt became the youngest President of the United States when McKinley was assassinated by alleged anarchist Leon Czolgosz in September 1901.

During his first term as president, Roosevelt continued McKinley's policies but brought his own "cowboy" style to the office. He earned a reputation as a "trust-buster," bringing 44 lawsuits against major corporations. He won re-election handily in 1904 and promised not to run again in 1908, a decision he later regretted. His other major reforms included the Hepburn Act of 1906, which founded the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate the railways, and the Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Acts of 1906. His foreign policy initiatives included construction of the Panama Canal and the corollary to the Monroe Doctrine that bears his name, which committed the United States to intervention in Latin America if the government determined that the increasing influence of European nations would harm American interests.

Roosevelt enjoyed his tenure as president immensely and was deeply saddened when it came to an end.¹³ In 1909, he went on a safari in Africa, during which he hunted many new animal specimens for the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Roosevelt ran again for president as a third-party candidate in the 1912 election, losing (as did the incumbent, William Howard Taft) to Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt came in second in the election, demonstrating his continuing popularity with the American people. He went on another foreign excursion in 1913-1914, this time to the Amazon jungle, where he contracted malaria and an infection from a leg wound while deep in the rain forest. His health declined until his death in 1919. In history and public memory, Roosevelt is most remembered as a trustbuster, a supporter of American expansion abroad, and as the political father of the modern conservation movement--an issue which would attract his attention throughout his presidency.

The Crisis of Conservation and the Conference of Governors

Upon taking office, Roosevelt immediately set about convincing the public that unchecked consumption of the nation's natural resources could lead to disaster. According to Leroy G. Dorsey, Roosevelt "saw the environment under siege. At the time, one-half of the country's timber had been cut, with the annual use rate at four times the new growth rate. . . . Wasteful mining methods wreaked havoc as well. . . . Finally, animals such as the heath hen, buffalo, fur seal, passenger pigeon, alligator, elk, bear, and bighorn sheep were either wiped out or neared extinction due to profit-minded hunters."¹⁴ Roosevelt was alarmed that his beloved West might soon become a wasteland. Yet from a public policy standpoint, he also recognized the potential economic impacts of exhausting the nation's resources. In his annual messages to Congress (which I discuss later in this essay), he frequently warned of the dire economic consequences of failing to act to conserve natural resources.

Despite Roosevelt's efforts, most Americans were not aware of either the environmental or the economic ramifications of consumption. Daniel O. Buehler writes, "Operating under the myth of abundance, the yeoman farmer and unfettered pioneer heedlessly marched toward the Pacific Ocean, leaving behind a wake of depleted resources and an extraordinarily altered landscape."¹⁵ To the average American, the United States (and the West in particular) seemed a vast land whose supplies of raw materials would never run out. Those who knew better faced an uphill rhetorical battle to convince the American public that steps had to be taken in order to stave off disaster.

Preservation or Conservation?

Although he was the most visible proponent of environmental reform, Roosevelt was hardly the only public figure to realize what was at stake if the nascent environmental movement failed. Preservationist and conservationist leaders were extremely influential in bringing to the public's attention the looming crisis of the nation's forests and waterways. Even though their concerns were similar, the two approaches were very different.¹⁶

George Perkins Marsh was among the first to publish about the ways human action affected the environment. Considered by some to be the father of the conservation movement, Marsh argued in an 1864 book, *Man and Nature*, that cutting down swaths of forest left that land eroded, arid, and sterile. As evidence for such claims, he pointed to the collapse of some ancient Mediterranean civilizations following deforestation.¹⁷ His work had an enormous influence on Gifford Pinchot, who would become Roosevelt's chief environmental advisor and head of the Division of Forestry (later the United States Forest Service).¹⁸ Pinchot championed a utilitarian approach to conservation that sought to protect forestland through "wise use." This policy both provided for current usage of the land and guaranteed that it would remain intact for future needs. "Wise use" meant that land could be used for recreation, logging, wildlife habitat, and mining, as long as those practices were carried out in sustainable ways.¹⁹



Figure 2. Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot on the steamer Mississippi, 1907.

In contrast, preservationists argued that land was sacred and that human action which destroyed the environment was to be avoided at all costs. They campaigned for the "preservation" of public lands, protecting them legally from any human intervention. John Muir, perhaps best known for his advocacy on behalf of Yosemite, spearheaded the preservation movement at the turn of the century. He invited Roosevelt to meet with him in 1903 as part of Roosevelt's Western tour, which included Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, among other scenic areas. The two camped overnight in the Yosemite backcountry, talking late into the night about the need for federal oversight of the valley. Roosevelt was deeply affected by the experience; in a speech in Sacramento, California immediately following his Yosemite visit, he declared, "Lying out at night under those giant Sequoias was like lying in a temple built by no hand of man, a temple grander than any human architect could by any possibility build, and I hope for the preservation of the groves of giant trees simply because it would be a shame to our civilization to let them disappear."²⁰



Figure 3. Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir on Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park, 1903.

Roosevelt's Conservation Rhetoric

Despite his desire to "preserve" the sequoia and redwood groves, Roosevelt was far more influenced by the conservation side of the movement than the preservation side. From the beginning of his administration, he consulted closely with Pinchot and made conservation an important part of his political agenda. Roosevelt identified the depletion of the nation's natural resources as one of the most pressing issues facing the country; he was certain that if the country continued to expend resources without thought for their conservation, it would face devastation within a matter of years. He addressed the issue throughout his presidency, including in each of his State of the Union messages to Congress.

In his first message to Congress after assuming the presidency, Roosevelt tackled the environmental crisis head on, devoting over one tenth of his message to the issue. He wrote: "Public opinion throughout the United States has moved steadily toward a just appreciation of the value of forests, whether planted or of natural growth. The great part played by them in the creation and maintenance of the national wealth is now more fully realized than ever before."²¹ With this statement, Roosevelt laid the groundwork for later messages that would claim a popular mandate for his conservation work. He also publicized the concept of "wise use:"

Wise forest protection does not mean the withdrawal of forest resources, whether of wood, water, or grass, from contributing their full share to the welfare of the people, but, on the contrary, gives the assurance of larger and more certain supplies. The fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use. 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. We have come to see clearly that whatever destroys the forest, except to make way for agriculture, threatens our well-being. . . . The forest reserves will inevitably be of still greater use in the future than in the past. Additions should be made to them whenever practicable, and their usefulness should be increased by a thoroughly businesslike management.²²

Roosevelt here depicted conservation as a sound economic practice. If we use up all the forests, he argued, we deprive ourselves of a resource necessary for the economic health of the country. Daniel Filler writes, "Concerned about the long term well being of the nation, Roosevelt regarded the land as an economic resource which must be conserved and managed to protect the long term economic and political strength of the nation."²³ "Businesslike" protection of the forests, such logic suggested, was the best way to guarantee the perpetuity of this resource and safeguard its economic value.

Subsequent annual messages devoted less space to conservation, but Roosevelt continued to press for legislation promoting irrigation, forest protection, and the proper management of Alaska's resources.²⁴ In the 1904 Message, Roosevelt clearly articulated his

stance on the "wise use" of the forests, arguing that it was the "cardinal principle" of the forest-reserve policy of his administration that the reserves were "for use." He wrote:

Whatever interferes with the use of their resources is to be avoided by every possible means. But these resources must be used in such a way as to make them permanent. The forest policy of the Government is just now a subject of vivid public interest throughout the West and to the people of the United States in general. The forest reserves themselves are of extreme value to the present as well as to the future welfare of all the western public-land States.²⁵

Roosevelt advocated in that message for the creation of a forest service in the Department of Agriculture to consolidate the forestry work then done by three different divisions of the government; he also urged Congress to grant him permission to set aside natural preserves as game refuges. The 1906 Antiquities Act would later grant him this authority.

In the first message of his second term, Roosevelt again addressed the forestry issue and again called on popular support, stating, "The forest policy of the Administration appears to enjoy the unbroken support of the people. . . . Since the consolidation of all Government forest work in the National Forest Service there has been a rapid and notable gain in the usefulness of the forest reserves to the people and in public appreciation of their value."²⁶ His message in 1906, did not address conservation as explicitly as earlier messages had, but Roosevelt again described the benefits of his previous conservation policies, arguing that "no Government policy for the betterment of our internal conditions has been more fruitful of good" than irrigation and forest preservation.²⁷

In 1907 Roosevelt returned again to the topic of conservation, advocating irrigation, the return of a great deal of grazing land to public status, and an end to "wastefulness" in the use of natural resources. In this message in particular, Roosevelt lashed out at those who would exploit the natural resources for their own short-term gain:

But forests, if used as all our forests have been used in the past and as most of them are still used, will be either wholly destroyed, or so damaged that many decades have to pass before effective use can be made of them again. All these facts are so obvious that it is extraordinary that it should be necessary to repeat them. . . . Surely, when these facts are so obvious, there should be no delay in taking preventive measures. Yet we seem as a nation to be willing to proceed in this matter with happy-go-lucky indifference even to the immediate future. It is this attitude which permits the self-interest of a very few persons to weigh for more than the ultimate interest of all our people.²⁸

More than in earlier messages, Roosevelt expressed frustration at what he saw as dangerous, short-sighted greediness on the part of those who he believed should know better. Dorsey notes that Roosevelt accentuated the relationship between the conservation of natural

resources and the "National welfare," which had not yet "dawned on the public mind." Roosevelt also frustratingly "found little congressional support for his conservationist crusade." Indeed, "Congress became increasingly inclined to come between the president and his initiatives, resisting him on almost every major issue regarding conservation," Dorsey concludes.²⁹ To Roosevelt, the facts were, as he stated in his message, "so obvious" that he simply could not comprehend how anyone could fail to see them or to act. His frustration likely played a major role in his decision to convene the 1908 Conference of Governors to address the question of conservation.

The Conference of Governors

Roosevelt wanted all levels of the government involved in the practice of conserving America's resources. In 1908, he convened the governors of the then forty-four states along with experts in natural resources and representatives of national organizations concerned in the development and use of these resources for the first Conference of Governors on the Conservation of Natural Resources at the White House. The participants included members of Congress, the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, and the Inland Waterways Commission in addition to Gifford Pinchot, who organized the conference, noted environmental scholar W.J. McGee, and other conservation (but not preservation) leaders.³⁰ The speakers addressed topics ranging from forestry practices to irrigation to soil conservation. After three days of speeches by attendees, the conference concluded with a garden party at the White House.

Roosevelt saw the conference as a way to finally convince the public of the need for conservation, and he and Pinchot orchestrated the entire event for maximum public relations appeal. Dorsey writes, "Roosevelt left nothing to chance. He not only created a newsworthy event but he also controlled much of what was written about it. His administration overwhelmed newspapers and magazines across the country with volumes of advance material that became the subject of news stories itself."³¹ Indeed, the conference attracted a great deal of attention from newspapers across the country. As an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, declared:

The scope of the subject is unlimited, the proposed method of dealing with it is new and marks a distinct step forward in the political methods of our country. Never before has a President conferred with all the Governors of the States; never before has the White House, with its long record of social and State functions, sheltered a large convention called for the consideration of a great public issue; never before has the question of conservation of the Nation's natural resources been made the subject of consideration by a great deliberative body.³²

Roosevelt's arrival at the conference on the first day was described in the *Lexington Herald* in dramatic, even gushing terms: "With a flourish of trumpets, the President and Vice President entered at 11 o'clock and the conference, the first of its kind in the history of the nation, began.

. . . The Governors arose. They clapped their hands; they shouted. Five hundred others took their cue and the demonstration became tumultuous."³³ These and many more articles indicate that Roosevelt's campaign for the public's attention succeeded. His keynote address, carefully crafted over the preceding weeks and honed to the very last minute, would set the tone of the conference.

Roosevelt's Address to the Conference

Roosevelt opened the Conference on May 13, 1908, at 11:00 a.m. He spoke for approximately fifty minutes from a prepared text in which he deviated several times to expand on illustrations and examples.³⁴ The speech addressed, as he put it, "the question of the conservation and use of the great fundamental sources of wealth of this Nation" (2). Because the public was largely unaware of the need for conservation despite Roosevelt's previous exhortations, Buehler argues that he "confronted rhetorical challenges in persuading his audience to accept his initiative."³⁵ First, he had to create a sense of urgency, convincing his listeners of the need to act. Second, he had to persuade them that conservation was consistent with the values and attitudes they already embraced. Dorsey contends that Roosevelt did so by rearticulating the Frontier Myth in his speech: replacing its traditional hero with the yeoman-farmer, recasting the "unlimited" frontier as finite, and redefining "progress" to mean "conservation of nature through common effort rather than by the exploitation of the environment by individuals."³⁶ By relating conservation to traditional American values, Roosevelt situated conservation within an American narrative of progress and moral authority.

Three main themes are present in Roosevelt's speech. First, he linked conservation to civilization, arguing that it is the duty of civilized man to care for the environment and a sign of civilization that a society decides to do so. Second, he associated conservation with nationalism, arguing that the United States could only become great through careful use of its natural resources. Finally, he contended that conservation was a moral imperative. I examine each of these arguments in greater detail below.

"Every Step of the Progress of Mankind"

For Roosevelt, conservation meant a balance between preserving natural resources and using those resources to benefit the general populace. Roosevelt's stance, echoing conservationists such as Pinchot, was that of "wise use": "The wise use of all of our natural resources, which are our national resources as well, is the great material question of today" (23). Through wise use of natural resources, Roosevelt argued, the nation could continue to prosper in the present while also safeguarding its future. In fact, he contended, such wise use was a condition of greatness itself. Wise use, he argued, was the mark of a "civilized" society (8).

Roosevelt argued that the relationship between civilization and the environment proceeded in three stages. First, he noted, civilization was not possible without exploiting the

earth's resources: the machinery and great cities of the modern world were dependent upon extracting iron, coal, wood, and other resources from the earth. He noted, "Every step of the progress of mankind is marked by the discovery and use of natural resources previously unused. Without such progressive knowledge and utilization of natural resources population could not grow, nor industries multiply, nor the hidden wealth of the earth be developed for the benefit of mankind" (9). Moreover, as civilization expanded, the rate of consumption of resources increased: "In the development, the use, and therefore the exhaustion of certain of the natural resources, the progress has been more rapid in the past century and a quarter than during all preceding time of which we have record" (13). This "progress," Roosevelt suggested, led to prosperity in the short term; the long-term effects, consequently, went unquestioned.

At some point, however, civilization lost its connection to nature, Roosevelt reasoned. As humans moved away from the wilderness and concentrated into cities, humanity risked losing its understanding of the sources of the materials and resources it needed. Roosevelt argued:

Rather curiously, at the same time that there comes that increase in what the average man demands from the resources, he is apt to grow to lose the sense of his dependence upon nature. He lives in big cities. He deals in industries that do not bring him in close touch with nature. He does not realize the demands he is making upon nature. For instance, he finds, as he has found before in many parts of this country, that it is cheaper to build his house of concrete than of wood, learning in this way only that he has allowed the woods to become exhausted. That is happening, as you know, in parts of this country at this very time. (6)

Roosevelt here explained why the public might not have been aware of the emerging crisis of conservation: they were simply too far separated from it. The very civilization that was founded on the use of natural resources now stood between those resources and those who would both use and protect them.

For Roosevelt, the final step in the progress of civilization was therefore recognizing one's connection to the natural world and taking the necessary steps to preserve the balance for the future. He observed, "We can not do any of these things without foresight, and we can not, when the nation becomes fully civilized and very rich, continue to be civilized and rich unless the nation shows more foresight than we are showing at this moment as a nation" (8). He contended that true civilization rested on the knowledge that resources must be used wisely not only to sustain current prosperity but to ensure that future generations will be able to do the same. As Roosevelt declared:

We have become great in a material sense because of the lavish use of our resources, and we have just reason to be proud of our growth. . . . One distinguishing characteristic of really civilized men is foresight; we have to, as a nation, exercise foresight for this nation in the future; and if we do not exercise that foresight, dark will be the future! [Applause] We should exercise foresight

now, as the ordinarily prudent man exercises foresight in conserving and wisely using the property which contains the assurance of well-being for himself and his children. . . . We want to see him exercise forethought for the next generation. We need to exercise it in some fashion ourselves as a nation for the next generation. (31)

"Foresight," then, was the key virtue of civilization: just as civilized individuals worried about their children's future, so too should a civilized nation look to the future rather than focusing merely on the present. Here, according to Dorsey, Roosevelt "redefined progress in America's covenant so as to provide a new purpose for the country in relation to the environment"--a purpose that would demonstrate the true character of civilization in a uniquely American way.³⁷

"The National Honor Unstained and the National Resources Unexhausted"

"Wise use" of natural resources was a condition of American nationalism, according to Roosevelt. He argued that America became great because of its wealth of resources, and it wasted that wealth at its own peril. Roosevelt identified conservation as the next step not only in civilization, but in American history. He spoke first of the formation of the United States, noting that "when our forefathers met in Independence Hall," (16) mining and forestry were carried out much as they had been around the world for centuries. However, with the industrial revolution came new methods, which led to increased prosperity that also threatened to exhaust the natural resources. Speaking of the founders, Roosevelt stated that "though they knew so little of the resources of the country," they "exercised a wise forethought in reference thereto. Washington clearly saw that the perpetuity of the States could only be secured by union, and that the only feasible basis of union was an economic one; in other words, that it must be based on the development and use of their natural resources"-- in particular, the nation's waterways, which at the time were the best avenue for interstate commerce (21). Roosevelt argued that the question of how to best use the other resources of the nation had to be decided by the federal government, not by private interests. Only by doing so could Washington's legacy be carried on. In fact, Roosevelt contended, the Constitution of the United States "grew in large part out of the necessity for united action in the wise use of one of our natural resources" (23). By stating this, Roosevelt portrayed the founders as conservationists and argued that he was merely carrying on their legacy.

National action, then, was needed to combat a national problem. Buehler argues that for Roosevelt, "America's great 'sin' did not lie in individual citizens' failures to domesticate the landscape and advance civilization; rather, he felt that America's great misdeed lay in the absence of a single, coherent plan that efficiently managed the nation's natural resources."³⁸ Yet Roosevelt turned to a single example of an American citizen to illustrate his point: "Every one knows that a really good farmer leaves his farm more valuable at the end of his life than it was when he first took hold of it" (33). Similarly, Roosevelt argued, the nation should "earnestly desire and strive to leave to the next generation the national honor unstained and the national

resources unexhausted" (41). Roosevelt returned to the "farmer" example several times throughout the speech, arguing that national conservation practices were the same as the practices any good farmer would undertake to ensure the continued fertility of his land. Similar to the "good citizen" whom Jon Paulson argues served as a representative anecdote in Roosevelt's 1902 tour of New England, the "yeoman farmer" here stood as a paragon of American virtue--provided, of course, that he safeguarded America's future through conservation.³⁹ To do so was no easy task, but that made it all the more worthwhile. True patriotism included safeguarding the future of American resources for the good of all--what Roosevelt called in his conclusion "the patriotic duty of insuring the safety and continuance of the Nation" (54).

"The Weightiest Problem Now Before the Nation"

Despite stating that the topic of his speech was "second only--and second always--to the great fundamental questions of morality" (3), Roosevelt clearly considered conservation to be a moral issue. This theme was intertwined with the previous two: to be civilized and to be American meant, to Roosevelt, making moral choices. He argued, "As a people we have the right and the duty, second to none other but the right and duty of obeying the moral law, of requiring and doing justice, to protect ourselves and our children against the wasteful development of our natural resources, whether that waste is caused by the actual destruction of such resources or by making them impossible of development hereafter" (40). It is clear from this and similar statements that Roosevelt viewed conservation as the just and moral way to safeguard America's future. As Paulson writes, "Roosevelt remains most famous as a man of action, but it was not his willingness to act by itself that made Roosevelt significant [as] a leader and as a rhetor: he was also a man of ideas who took the moral and philosophical underpinnings of his rhetoric most seriously. In fact, it is this intimate connection between the moral ideal and pragmatic action that drove Roosevelt's rhetoric."⁴⁰ It seems that Roosevelt felt strongly that conservation was a moral imperative, and that is what drove him to act.

It was not enough, though, for Roosevelt to make his own moral choices. Rather than a private or religious morality, Roosevelt presented conservation as a *public*, communal morality. He stated, "This public interest is omnipresent wherever there is a State, and grows more pressing as population grows. Not as a dictum of law, which I cannot make, but as a dictum of moral, I wish to say that this applies to more than the forests and streams" (48-49). He labeled the "exhaustion" of natural resources "the weightiest problem now before the Nation" (5). As Dorsey argues, "For Roosevelt, a progress defined by common effort versus individual profit and realized through conservation represented one of the highest moral laws a community could obey."⁴¹ In proposing conservation to the nation at large, Roosevelt provided a way for the United States to demonstrate that its own shared moral commitment to conservation outweighed the pursuit of personal profit.

Roosevelt's philosophy of "wise use" also reflected a perspective grounded in morality: "wasteful" use was immoral, whereas "wise" use was moral. Again, such use was defined in

public rather than individual terms: "I have asked you to come together now because the enormous consumption of these resources, and the threat of imminent exhaustion of some of them, due to reckless and wasteful use, once more calls for common effort, common action" (23). In contrast to his earlier frustration over congressional inaction, as displayed in his State of the Union messages, Roosevelt here appeared confident that America would act. Yet the message was still the same: wasteful (immoral) practices threatened America's future.

Conservation: A Public Concern

By linking conservation to themes of civilization, American patriotism, and morality, Roosevelt turned the conservation issue from one of private use of resources into a public concern about the future of the United States. Dorsey dubs Roosevelt's view of conservation a moral imperative, explaining, "Embracing his role as a rhetorical leader, he took his case to the public to infuse a sense of vision into conservation."⁴² Buehler adds that by linking America's rise to national greatness to its natural resources, Roosevelt "converted the process of civilizing the land into a subject for critique."⁴³

When presenting conservation as a matter of public interest, Roosevelt vested the power of conservation oversight in the office of the presidency. In her analysis of Roosevelt's rhetoric on the Brownsville raid of 1906, Mary Stuckey argues that one way that the presidency became entrenched as "articulator and definer of national identity" was by "instantiating important elements of national identity in ways that increased both the cultural power of those definitions and the institutional power of the office."⁴⁴ In the case of conservation, Roosevelt worked to educate the U.S. public about the depletion of natural resources and simultaneously defined the president as the chief inventor of such public solutions. In the process, Roosevelt made himself the primary spokesman for the larger public interest in conserving natural resources.

Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Legacy

Roosevelt would continue his conservation crusade throughout his administration. In his final State of the Union Message to Congress, Roosevelt again devoted a great deal of time to his views on conservation. In this message, we see the completion of his shift from an economic argument (resources must be conserved for the future business needs of America) to a moralistic one (it is our duty as civilized, patriotic Americans to leave a better future for our children). He wrote:

If there is any one duty which more than another we owe it to our children and our children's children to perform at once, it is to save the forests of this country, for they constitute the first and most important element in the conservation of the natural resources of the country. . . . Any really civilized nation will so use all of these three great national assets [the soil, the rivers, and the forests] that the

nation will have their benefit in the future. Just as a farmer, after all his life making his living from his farm, will, if he is an expert farmer, leave it as an asset of increased value to his son, so we should leave our national domain to our children, increased in value and not worn out.⁴⁵

In this message, Roosevelt repeated many of the themes (and words) of his address to the Conference of Governors earlier that year.

The conference itself, according to Paul R. Cutright, had several "immediate and far reaching" effects.⁴⁶ The governors present signed a unanimous declaration supporting Roosevelt's view of conservation, thirty-six state conservation commissions were formed, and a National Conservation Commission was organized. Cutright argues that the conference and its outcomes "gave the conservation movement a prestige and momentum previously unknown and raised it to a plane that enabled it to survive the various reversals it later suffered as a consequence of periodic shifts in the political climate."⁴⁷ Subsequent presidents may not have shared Roosevelt's commitment to conservation, but the policies he set in motion continue to influence both preservation and conservation efforts today.

The modern environmental movement draws inspiration from the themes Roosevelt introduced in his many conservation speeches. For example, Roosevelt is listed as a "hero" on the Audubon Society's "100 Years of Conservation" page.⁴⁸ Roosevelt's photo also appears prominently on the website of the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization of hunter-conservationists.⁴⁹ The Sierra Club, founded in 1892 with John Muir as president, devotes a section of its website to "Honoring the Conservation Legacy of Theodore Roosevelt."⁵⁰ The club continues to advocate for preservation of the world's wild places. Echoing Roosevelt's call for "foresight" on behalf of generations to come, the Sierra Club's website tells would-be members, "Your voice will be added to those of more than 1.3 million of your fellow Americans who are committed to leave our children a living legacy--clean air, clean water, and natural grandeur."⁵¹ Both preservationists such as the Sierra Club and conservationists such as the Boone and Crockett Club derive authority from Roosevelt's image and name.

However, some organizations which purport to uphold Roosevelt's legacy take the "practical" end of conservation much further than he ever did. Indeed, proponents of the self-labeled "Wise Use movement," which several scholars have identified as an "astroturf" movement promoting corporate interests in the environmental debate, took their name directly from Roosevelt's rhetoric and claim to uphold Roosevelt's more practical approach toward environmentalism.⁵² In recent years, even oil and automotive companies have begun to "greenwash" their images by claiming (legitimately or not) to aspire to environmentalist ideals. Shell and Chevron proclaim their commitment to alternate energy sources, while Subaru touts its new manufacturing plant in Lafayette, Indiana as a model of green construction.⁵³ That companies such as these--technologically and historically associated with the use of fossil fuels--would make conservation part of their public image speaks both to the power of conservation rhetoric and to the danger of such rhetoric being co-opted by so-called "astroturf" movements, or phony grassroots movements.

Politicians on both ends of the political spectrum likewise lay claim to Roosevelt's legacy. The Bush administration, which the Sierra Club claims weakened protections on as many acres of land as Roosevelt originally set aside, included Roosevelt in a photo essay on the White House's 2007 holiday website. Celebrating "Holidays in the National Parks," the website pictured Roosevelt during his visit to Yosemite with John Muir; curiously, Muir--the avid preservationist--was absent from the photo.⁵⁴ Like Roosevelt, former Vice President Al Gore cast environmentalism as a public, moral issue, albeit in a global rather than a national context. The moralistic tone of his film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) directly echoed Roosevelt's rhetoric.⁵⁵ In accepting the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, which he received for his own efforts to educate the public about a looming environmental crisis, Gore said, "When we unite for a moral purpose that is manifestly good and true, the spiritual energy unleashed can transform us."⁵⁶

Roosevelt's legacy also lives on in the lands he set aside for public use. In addition to the approximately 230,000,000 acres that Roosevelt placed under public protection, two of his homes are now under the protection of the National Park Service and a national park in his beloved Dakota Badlands bears his name.⁵⁷ Many of the United States' best-known natural landmarks, including Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon National Parks, were created or expanded by Roosevelt. His mark on the American landscape is clear.

Theodore Roosevelt used the power of the presidency to articulate a conservationist ideal based on the virtues of civilization, patriotism, and public morality. His address to the 1908 Conference of Governors on the Conservation of Natural Resources eloquently expressed this ideal, providing a roadmap for the nation's future conservation efforts. As a 1908 *New York Times* article proclaimed, "Much as Mr. Roosevelt has done, we are inclined to think that this will go down in history as his greatest service to the Nation."⁵⁸ Today, many leaders of the environmental movement would certainly agree.

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Notes

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, "Conservation as a National Duty," in *Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House, May 13-15, 1908* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3-12, paragraph 3. All subsequent quotations from Roosevelt's speech before the Conference of Governors are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text that accompanies this essay.

² See, for example, Paul Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Conservationist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Cutright suggests that one of the best ways to understand Roosevelt's character is through his relationship to nature, and specifically to the

Western frontier.

³ Petrified Forest, Lassen Peak (now Lassen Volcano), Grand Canyon, and Mount Olympus (now Olympic) National Parks all had their origins as National Monuments designated by Roosevelt. See: "Theodore Roosevelt and Conservation," *National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/thro/historyculture/theodore-roosevelt-and-conservation.htm>. (Accessed on December 1, 2007.)

⁴ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*. See especially chapter 15 for a discussion of Roosevelt's clashes with Congress.

⁵ See: Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911); and Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁶ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 51, 136, 252.

⁷ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 103-110.

⁸ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 144-149.

⁹ See: Dalton, *A Strenuous Life*, 128-130; and William Henry Harbaugh, *Power and Responsibility: The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Farrar, Strau & Cudahy, 1963), 77-83.

¹⁰ See: Dalton, *A Strenuous Life*, 163-169; and Harbaugh, *Power and Responsibility*, 98-101.

¹¹ It was awarded posthumously in 2001.

¹² This and other images in this essay are courtesy of the Library of Congress and are in the public domain.

¹³ Dalton, *A Strenuous Life*, 348.

¹⁴ Leroy G. Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt's Campaign for Conservation," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 6.

¹⁵ A "yeoman farmer" was someone who owned and worked land, as opposed to a plantation or ranch owner who might hire (or own) others to work it for him. Daniel O. Buehler, "Permanence and Change in Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Jeremiad," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, (1998): 440.

¹⁶ For an excellent narrative of one of the early clashes between preservation and conservation in the case of the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in California, see Roderick Nash, "John Muir, William Kent, and the Conservation Schism," *The Pacific Historical Review* 36 (Nov. 1967): 423-433. See also Christine Oravec, "Creation vs. Preservationism: The 'Public Interest' in the Hetch Hetchy Controversy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 444-458; Christine Oravec, "Science, Public Policy, and 'The Spirit of the People': The Rhetoric of Progressive Conservation," in *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*, edited by J. Michael Hogan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 85-112.

¹⁷ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 3-8.

¹⁸ There is evidence in Roosevelt's rhetoric that he too had read this text: "All serious students of the question are aware of the great damage that has been done in the Mediterranean countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa by deforestation." Theodore Roosevelt,

"Eighth Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29549&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

¹⁹ Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001), 167-168.

²⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "Address at the Capitol Building, Sacramento, California," *California Addresses by President Roosevelt* (San Francisco: The California Promotion Committee, 1903), 140.

²¹ Theodore Roosevelt, "First Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29542&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

²² Roosevelt, "First Annual Message."

²³ Daniel Filler, "Theodore Roosevelt: Conservation as the Guardian of Democracy," <http://pantheon.cis.yale.edu/~thomast/essays/filler/filler.html>, Yale University. (Accessed on December 10, 2007.)

²⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, "Second Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29543&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>, and Theodore Roosevelt, "Third Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29544&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

²⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, "Fourth Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29545&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

²⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, "Fifth Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29546&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

²⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, "Sixth Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29547&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed August 22, 2008.)

²⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, "Seventh Annual Message," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29548&st=theodore&st1=roosevelt>. (Accessed on August 22, 2008.)

²⁹ Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 2.

³⁰ For an examination of McGee's impact on Roosevelt's conservation policies, see Christine Oravec, "Presidential Public Policy and Conservation: W. J. McGee and the People," in *Green Talk in the White House: The Rhetorical Presidency Encounters Ecology*, edited by Tarla Rai Peterson (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 62-81.

³¹ Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 12.

³² "Governors Will Consider Issues," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 10, 1908, 4.

³³ "Roosevelt Urges Guarding of Nation's National Resources," *The Lexington Herald*, May 14, 1908, 1.

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- ³⁴ See textual documentation for a description of these changes.
- ³⁵ Buehler, "Permanence and Change," 441.
- ³⁶ Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 3.
- ³⁷ Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 6.
- ³⁸ Buehler, "Permanence and Change," 442.
- ³⁹ Jon Paulson, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Citizenship: On Tour in New England, 1902," *Communication Quarterly* 50 (2002): 123-134.
- ⁴⁰ Paulson, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of Citizenship," 124.
- ⁴¹ Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 14.
- ⁴² Dorsey, "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric," 3.
- ⁴³ Buehler, "Permanence and Change," 440.
- ⁴⁴ Mary Stuckey, "Establishing the Rhetorical Presidency through Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt and the Brownsville Raid," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 289.
- ⁴⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, "Eighth Annual Message."
- ⁴⁶ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 229.
- ⁴⁷ Cutright, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 229.
- ⁴⁸ "Historical Highlights: The Heroes," *Audubon Society*, <http://web4.audubon.org/centennial/heroes.php>. (Accessed on November 30, 2010.)
- ⁴⁹ *Boone and Crockett Club* website, <http://www.boone-crockett.org/>. (Accessed on November 30, 2010.)
- ⁵⁰ "Honoring the Conservation Legacy of President Theodore Roosevelt," *Sierra Club*, <http://www.sierraclub.org/wildlands/antiquities/>. (Accessed on December 10, 2007.)
- ⁵¹ "Why Join the Sierra Club?" *Sierra Club*, http://action.sierraclub.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Why_Join. (Accessed on December 10, 2007.)
- ⁵² See Andrew Austin, "Advancing Accumulation and Managing its Discontents: The US Antienvironmental Countermovement," *Sociological Spectrum* 22 (2002): 71-105; John McNutt and Katherine Boland, "Astroturf, Technology, and the Future of Community Mobilization: Implication for Nonprofit Theory," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 34 (2007): 165-178; Jennifer A. Peeples, "Aggressive Mimicry: The Rhetoric of Wise Use and the Environmental Movement," in *The Environmental Communication Yearbook*, vol. 2, edited by Susan L. Senecah (New York: Routledge, 2005): 1-17; and Samantha Sanchez, "How the West Is Won: Astroturf Lobbying and the 'Wise Use' Movement," *The American Prospect* 25 (1996): 37-42.
- ⁵³ See, for example, "Shell Renewables - Alternative Energy Sources," *Shell.com*, http://www.shell.com/home/content/rw-br/about_shell/other/other_energy_0616.html. (Accessed February 12, 2008.); "Chevron - Chevron Stories: Renewable Energy," *Chevron.com*, http://www.chevron.com/stories/#/stories/re_geo/geo_ov. (Accessed on February 12, 2008.); "Subaru and the Environment," *Subaru.com*, <http://www.subaru.com/sub/misc/environment/index.html>. (Accessed on February 12, 2008.) Each of these corporations has also recently (as of February 2008) aired television commercials touting these "green" credentials.
- ⁵⁴ "Holiday in the National Park," *The White House: President George W. Bush*,

<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/holiday/2007/photoessay/nationalparks/index.html>. (Accessed on November 30, 2010.)

⁵⁵ *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim (Los Angeles: Paramount, 2006).

⁵⁶ Al Gore, "Nobel Lecture," *The Nobel Foundation*, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2007/gore-lecture_en.html. (Accessed on December 11, 2007.)

⁵⁷ "Theodore Roosevelt," *Theodore Roosevelt National Park*, <http://www.nps.gov/archive/thro/trcons.htm>. (Accessed on December 11, 2007.)

⁵⁸ "The Waste of Resources," *New York Times*, May 15, 1908, 8.