

The North American Wildlife Conservation Model: Triumph For Man and Nature

by Shane Mahoney

Editors' note: In the 19th century, North American hunters and anglers awakened to the fact that expanding human settlement, industry and outright exploitation were driving fish and wildlife to extinction and destroying their habitat. They launched an unprecedented grassroots crusade to conserve wildlife and perpetuate hunting and fishing for future generations. Thanks to their efforts, we now have large public forest and wildlife "preserves," many wildlife populations recovered to levels approaching those of pre-Columbian abundance, and the legal principle that wild animals and fish belong not to private individuals but to all of us—the people as a whole. This is the essence of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Because of it, we now enjoy the most democratic and abundant hunting and fishing opportunities on earth.

This is the second in a series of articles dedicated to helping hunters appreciate our own history of achievement in wildlife conservation and to encouraging greater commitment to the cause.

Early Leaders

It is possible to draw from the well of people who have contributed to wildlife conservation a small number whose influence remains strong, whose stature remains undiminished. For all of us who thrill to the feathered rainbow that is the pheasant's rise, or to the effortless leaps of whitetails crossing misted fields at dawn, these giants of conservation are heroes whose names we must remember, whose stories we must know. Because of them we live in a time and place of wild abundance. Every day afield is owed to them; every fireside reflection should include them. To begin, let us consider:

George Perkins Marsh and the book that changed the world.

On August 11, 1886, a 21-year-old Gifford Pinchot celebrated his birthday with family and friends. The man who would 12 years later become the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service was presented that day with a copy of one of the most influential books ever written on the subject of nature conservation.

When published in 1864, few would have

predicted that *Man and Nature* would become a best seller within a decade and remain relevant and widely read 140 years later. While Gifford Pinchot was to call it "epoch making," George Perkins Marsh himself did not expect his work to have the impact it did. His thesis, after all, was that by tampering with nature man might destroy himself.



This was hardly a commonplace notion at a time when North American society still believed deeply in manifest destiny and the inexhaustibility of resources. Marsh was so far ahead of his time in describing the scale and consequences of human destruction of the natural environment, he could only be described as prophetic.

Born in 1801 in Woodstock, Vermont, Marsh was the fifth of eight children fathered by the brilliant and sardonic lawyer Charles Marsh, who served as district attorney under John Adams and as a congressional representative during the War of 1812. Frail and bookish by nature, George Marsh was afflicted as a child by a serious eye ailment which impaired his reading but may have trained his prodigious memory, and certainly appears to have accentuated his empathy for nature. By his own emphatic admission, trees, flowers and animals were persons to him, not things.

Graduating from college at the head of his class and fluent in six languages, Marsh tried teaching as a profession but hated it, and quit after one year, and later in life turned down a chair at Harvard. He trained for the bar, became an awkward lawyer but a successful politician. He was elected to Congress four times, and while aloof from the political society of Washington he did help found the Smithsonian Institute. Eventually he was appointed U.S. minister to Turkey and thereafter, for 21 years, was U.S. minister to Italy, a position originally appointed by President Lincoln. In diplomatic circles he was highly regarded.

Marsh's business interests were eclectic—newspaper editor, sheep farmer, mill owner, railroad investor, marble dealer and lecturer—and he proved successful in all. He invented tools and designed buildings, including the Washington Monument. A renowned linguist, he eventually mastered 20 languages, wrote a definitive text on the origin of the English language, and was considered the foremost scholar of Scandinavian culture in North America. In addition he possessed serious knowledge of reptile biology, engraving, music, geography and the propagation of fish. Clearly a genius, Marsh's intellect put him in touch with other scholars around the world, and all admired him for his versatility.

Marsh was not only encyclopedic, but also innovative and independent in his thinking. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in his desire to see history as the story of the common man and not just of wars and kings. Indeed it is this tendency to compile diverse thoughts and to reflect on every man's future that may, as much as anything, have led him to write his great book. Indeed, long before its publication, Marsh was expressing concern over land clearing practices in Vermont and the erosion and water quality problems that followed. His diplomatic appointments and opportunities to travel in the Mediterranean further energized his environmental awareness and sense of history. As always, Marsh studied, recorded and committed to memory the things he observed.

Here his intelligence and ever-increasing concern for man's attack on the environment were confronted with historical profiles, experiments really, demonstrating the very outcomes he feared. Civilizations had indeed been undermined by human activities that disregarded nature! In Africa, Europe, Asia and North America, the pattern was

the same—cultures cut down all the trees, bringing massive erosion and sending once lush ecosystems sliding toward deserts. Most great civilizations have failed, ultimately, not because of political upheaval but lack of water.

He also gathered information on how such effects could be remedied, once the processes of nature were deciphered and analyzed. He was particularly intrigued by timber harvesting's impacts on alpine forests, and by the relationship between resource shortages and economic difficulties. Thus did *Man and Nature* take shape in his mind. Drawn from lessons around the world, Marsh's book brought to North America a hope that the grave environmental and social consequences suffered by the first great civilizations would not be repeated here.

In Marsh's work we see the seminal ideas that were to become benchmarks for the North American Conservation Model: *Nature is not limitless; man's take must be controlled; and vested self-interest ought to prevent shortsighted squandering of resources.* While Marsh chronicled man's destruction of nature and portrayed the natural world as vulnerable to human technologies and greed, he condoned human intervention in natural systems and the use of resources, within reasonable limits. This is essentially the hunting- and angling-based model of wildlife and fish conservation today. Marsh's view was one of conservation through sustainable practices, and he offered a workable relationship between human industry and nature's capacities.

Man and Nature was an instant best seller and came to have enormous influence on how wild resources were developed and managed in North America. It powerfully defaced the prevailing notions that all human endeavour was good and man's impact on the natural world was negligible. By exploring the lasting impacts of nature's decline in ancient civilizations, it proved false the notion that nature can always heal herself. Sometimes the losses to man and nature were irreversible. The New World's wild abundance could indeed be squandered and lost forever. But, Marsh suggested, this need not be the way of things. Faced with these facts man would, in rational self-interest, act to prevent such calamities and could, through science, achieve greatly expanded and sustainable use of natural resources.

In its acknowledgement of the need for science

and its message that future generations are deserving of a natural inheritance undiminished by present generations, *Man and Nature* was a profoundly modern text and profoundly New World. Are we not the inheritors of an ideal that says we can shape the future, that we are indeed responsible for it? This was not the outlook of Europeans when Marsh penned his famous text. But it throbbed in the hearts and minds of the rising cultures of Canada and the United States. Furthermore, isn't science a fundamental principle of our thinking on resource conservation? Absolutely! Indeed both notions figure prominently in the North American Model and further signify the immense influence Marsh had on conservation thinking in the New World.

Man and Nature quickly affected forest policy in particular. In the United States its arguments had great impact on the decision to establish government forest reserves. Its influence on the forestry movement would eventually link it to powerful champions of wildlife conservation in the United States, including President Theodore

Roosevelt. Europeans too adopted Marsh's ideas, and not just in forestry. The great geologist and good friend of Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, said it changed his views concerning man's impact on the earth.

Indeed it changed all our views. Never before had the world been faced with such a compelling argument that we must find a new way of working within nature. George Perkins Marsh, while giving this idea to the whole world, also gave clear direction to a founding movement for the conservation of waters, forests and wildlife—a movement which would coalesce to become the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. A true giant in conservation, Marsh lies buried in Rome, but his ideas encircle the globe.



A riveting orator, passionate hunter and widely respected scholar, Newfoundland native Shane Mahoney has lectured extensively in North America and Europe on wildlife conservation and nature.



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Sportsman's Warehouse	July 9 - 10	Spokane, WA
Sportsman's Warehouse	July 16 - 17	Salem, OR
Sportsman's Warehouse	July 23 - 25	Missoula, MT
Galyan's	July 30 - Aug. 1	Broomfield, CO
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 6 - 8	Dallas, TX
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 13 - 15	Springfield, MO
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 20 - 22	Oklahoma City, OK

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