

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE WITH DAVE FOREMAN "THE ARROGANCE OF RESCURCISM"

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I've stirred up the anthill by warning that worldviews and policies of resourcism and enviro-resourcism are undermining and weakening certain conservation organizations and the whole conservation community. In the next issue of "Around the Campfire," I'll look at the bedrock of the conservation mind—that when we really dig down deep, Nature conservationists believe that wild species and places should be protected for their own sakes. First, however, we need to understand the mind of resourcism, which has been remarkably consistent for the one hundred years since Gifford Pinchot set up the United States Forest Service and on into today's era of "sustainable development" and "working forests." I think you will be impressed by how up-to-date some of the early resourcist writing sounds.

Gifford Pinchot's "conservation" or resource conservation was more accurately renamed *resourcism* by human ecologist Paul Shepard in 1967 in his first book *Man in the Landscape*.¹ One of my campaigns is to get resourcism widely adopted by conservationists as a replacement for resource conservation. Resourcism is consciously and enthusiastically part of humanism. Humanism is the secular religion of the modern (and postmodern) world. In his no-false-gods book, *The Arrogance Of Humanism*, ecologist David Ehrenfeld defines humanism as "a supreme faith in human reason—its ability to confront and solve the many problems that humans face."² Similarly, philosopher Max Oelschlaeger

¹ Paul Shepard, Foreword by Dave Foreman, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 2002 (1967)), 236-237.

² David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance Of Humanism* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1981), 5. The aspect of humanism that stands for freedom and freethinking is not what I'm criticizing here.

writes that modernism is the hope “to transform a base and worthless wilderness into industrialized, democratic civilization” and that it “underlies the emergence of a profound homocentrism...which may be characterized as *the ideology of man infinite* or the rise of *Lord Man*.”³ Humanism makes Man the measure of all things, the vessel of all values. Humanism is engineering—of machines, society, individuals, and Nature. Resourcism is Humanism applied to Nature (or “natural resources,” in the jargon of resourcism).

The Resource Elite

Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement 1890-1920, by historian Samuel P. Hays, is the best source for understanding the origins and ideology of what he calls the Progressive Conservation Movement and what I call Resourcism.⁴ Hays writes, “Its essence was rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources. The idea of efficiency drew these federal scientists from one resource task to another, from specific programs to comprehensive concepts.”⁵

Hays shows how these resource scientists in Theodore Roosevelt's administration believed that emerging science and technology were opening up “unlimited opportunities for human achievement” and thus they were filled “with intense optimism.” While they worried some about possible resource shortages in the future, “They emphasized expansion, not retrenchment; possibilities, not limitations.” These professional men who claimed the mantle of conservation did not believe in the preservation of the land. “In fact, they bitterly opposed those who sought to withdraw resources from commercial development.”⁶

So much, then, for a single conservation movement fighting nineteenth-century landscaping, so much for a sense of humility before the workings of Nature, so much for allowing some land to have its own

³ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea Of Wilderness* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1991), 68-69.

⁴ Hays is one of the great land historians and someone whom I consider one of my teachers. Much of this discussion is drawn from his trailblazing study, though here and there I take a different track than his.

⁵ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement 1890-1920* (Atheneum, New York, 1979 (1959)), 2.

⁶ Hays, *Conservation and Efficiency*, 2.

will. From 1900 on there has been a chasm between resourcism and conservation. What these two movements have really shared is opposition to landscalping and support for public lands.

A professional, scientific *managerial elite* was deeply rooted in the resourcism movement. Hays says that this elite believed, “Since resource matters were basically technical in nature...technicians, rather than legislators should deal with them.” And, “Conflicts between competing resource users...should not be dealt with” by the political process, but rather by professional resource managers coolly making “rational and scientific decisions.” They had a vision of a school of resource management “guided by the ideal of efficiency and dominated by technicians.”⁷

The resource managers' emphasis was oriented toward a reductionist, engineering version of science—how to manipulate Nature. In his illuminating book on the history of natural science, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Donald Worster sees “two ways of reasoning, two moral allegiances.” One is “Arcadian” science, which tries to understand the world around us; the other is “imperialist” science, which is the “drive for the domination of nature.”⁸ Resourcism was and is solidly in the imperialist tradition.

Hays writes that the early resource elite “maintained close contact with the four major engineering societies”—Civil, Mechanical, Electrical, and Mining.⁹ Indeed, resource managers formed their own professional societies, modeled after those of engineers. The Society of American Foresters and the Society for Range Management were and are professional associations more for engineers than for scientists. The Wildlife Society draws both wildlife biologists and wildlife engineers; its history shows a struggle between the two.

Gifford Pinchot and the other resource engineers sought not only professionalism in managing “resources,” but also a new social order, “based on cooperation instead of monopoly, on sharing instead of grasping, and that mutual helpfulness will replace the law of the jungle.”¹⁰ Note that phrase “law of the jungle”—it shows the dislike held by the

⁷ Hays, *Conservation and Efficiency*, 3.

⁸ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992), xi.

⁹ Hays, *Conservation and Efficiency*, 123.

¹⁰ Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (Island Press, Washington, D.C., 1987 (1947)), 509.

resourcists for self-willed land. Aldo Leopold biographer Curt Meine explains Pinchot's attitude: "Nature unmanaged was ruled by unbridled red-in-tooth-and-claw competition. It was a world, in the end, of constant struggle for existence, a wild world that should and would be civilized through the application of human managerial skill."¹¹ In other words, resourcism could tame landscaping, but the goal would still be the same: to squeeze as much wealth out of the land as possible. To tame the land.

Pinchot offered a new Platonic vision of society. Instead of a philosopher king, he proposed an engineer king.¹²

The professional resource managers

Pinchot seems the designer and spark plug of the resource engineering movement, and the United States Forest Service seems the outstanding organizational vehicle for it. Before Pinchot, however, came John Wesley Powell, a one-armed Civil War major (he lost his arm in battle), who led two long, harrowing explorations down the largely unknown Green and Colorado rivers in 1869 and 1872. Powell is widely, and properly, celebrated as a hero, the last great explorer of the West, and the godfather of recreational river runners today. He stakes a strong claim to coming up with resourcism before Pinchot, as Karl Hess, Jr., shows in his idol-shattering "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement."¹³

After his explorations, Powell became head of the Geological Survey in the Department of Interior from 1881 to 1894. Although he was an advocate for dams and irrigation in the West, he became hated by the boomers when he told the second International Irrigation Congress in Los Angeles in 1893, "I tell you gentlemen you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation over water rights for there is not sufficient water to

¹¹ Curt D. Meine, "The Oldest Task in Human History," in Richard L. Knight and Sarah F. Bates, eds., *A New Century for Natural Resources Management* (Island Press, Washington, D.C., 1994), 23.

¹² I am not criticizing engineering or even resource management as thoroughly bad practices. Nor am I criticizing engineers. I am criticizing engineering as a worldview or organizing principle of civilization.

¹³ Karl Hess, Jr., "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," in Philip D. Brick and R. McGreggor Cawley, eds., *A Wolf In The Garden: The Land Rights Movement And The New Environmental Debate* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, MD, 1996), 161-183.

supply the land.”¹⁴ They didn't want to hear about limits then; they don't want to hear about limits now.

Pinchot and the other resource professionals believed that just as science could guide management and use of forests and rivers, so it could guide livestock grazing. Pinchot, in fact, led the campaign to allow commercial livestock grazing in forest reserves, to John Muir's great disappointment. Pinchot believed grazing on the public lands, like other uses, should be managed as “a limited permit, [with] prompt use, and a user fee,” and “should not exceed the carrying capacity of the land.”¹⁵ Despite the best intentions of scientific resource management, cattle growers were a lawless bunch and resisted any management by the government. Standard issue for forest rangers was a .45 pistol. More than one shoot-out between rangers and ranchers took place before permits and fees were grudgingly accepted. By 1910, range management had become a “science” taught at cow colleges and researched by the Forest Service.¹⁶

Despite Pinchot's bluster about the carrying capacity of the land, the early Forest Service used deliberate overgrazing by sheep and cattle to remove the grass understory in forests so that natural fire would not spread. Cows and sheep were the first Forest Service fire crews.

Scientific management of the wildlife “resource” came late. Aldo Leopold wrote the first textbook, *Game Management*, in 1933, and was the first professor of wildlife management (at the University of Wisconsin). He wrote, “The central thesis of game management is this: game can be restored by the *creative use* of the same tools which have heretofore destroyed it—axe, plow, cow, fire, and gun.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, game management often degenerated into game farming of a few “good” species (deer, pheasant, brook trout, and the like) by state game and fish agencies. Leopold went the other way to a more ecological, evolutionary, humble approach.

By no means was the ideology of resourcism restricted to North America. It has been a key element of modernism around the world. In 1905, Sir Charles Eliot, Commissioner of the East Africa Protectorate (British Empire), wrote, “Marshes must be drained, forests skillfully

¹⁴ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 132.

¹⁵ Hays, *Conservation and Efficiency*, 71.

¹⁶ Meine, “The Oldest Task,” 16.

¹⁷ Aldo Leopold, *Game Management* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1986), xxxi.

thinned, rivers be taught to run in ordered course and not to afflict the land with drought or flood at their caprice; a way must be made across deserts and jungles, war must be waged against fevers and other diseases whose physical causes are now mostly known.” Historian John MacKenzie comments, “It is a fascinating statement....he applies the language of discipline and training to nature in the same way in which it was invariably used of indigenous peoples. Natural forces, like people, were to be acculturated to the modern world.”¹⁸ The will of the engineer had to replace the will of the land. This is the same idea being applied today, albeit in politically correct and anticolonialist language, by the social and land engineers of sustainable development and poverty alleviation. Have we learned nothing since 1905?

I cannot say, however, that resourcism lacked high ideals. Soldiers in its army have believed they were improving the world and the lot of humankind. Many have sacrificed much, some even their lives. Hubris is always based on high ideals—but also, alas, on a dollop of madness.

The Ideology of Resourcism

Resourcism had its roots in the sky's-the-limit euphoria that came with the beginnings of modern science, engineering, and technology. It also had roots in Prussia where scientific forestry was born. Pinchot built his Forest Service on a military model—uniforms, a rigid hierarchy, bureaucratic forms, standardized operations, discipline, unit cohesiveness, and organizational loyalty. There was a can-do spirit and a Dudley Do-Right kind of fresh-scrubbed integrity among the first generation of forest rangers. If you got with the program, you had a home. And you were the Future.

The ideology of resourcism has had a number of interlocking pieces throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. I would line them up as follows:

1) Professionalism—Trained experts are best qualified to manage natural resources and public lands.

2) Progressivism/Optimism—Progress as a secular religion of material, informational, moral, and organizational advances is key to

¹⁸ John M. MacKenzie, “Empire and the ecological apocalypse: the historiography of the imperial environment,” in Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds., *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Melbourne University Press, 1997), 217.

resourcism, as is an intensely optimistic view of the future benefits of wise management.¹⁹

3) Engineering—The science behind resourcism is manipulative and controlling—not pure science, but rather technology and engineering.

4) Resources for people—Resource management by experts is to result in benefits for everyone. (In principle this standard is still touted; in practice it is corrupted in favor of those with wealth and political power.)

5) Multiple Use—Properly managed lands can produce multiple uses of timber, minerals, forage, water, wildlife, and recreation, often on the same acre.

6) Sustained Yield—Lands are to be managed for the maximum they can produce on a sustained basis without harming the future productivity of the land.

7) Utilitarianism—Resources and the land are here to be used to produce goods and services for humans.

An illustrative statement of this dogma came from the president of the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1908 when he told an engineering convention a story about Lord Kelvin. The great physicist had been asked how the natural beauty of Niagara Falls would be harmed by waterpower development. “His reply was that of a true engineer: ‘What has that got to do with it? I consider it almost an international crime that so much energy has been allowed to go to waste.’”²⁰ There you have it. The view of a true engineer, indeed. Or that of a true resourcist. In a pamphlet prepared for the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, the Bureau of Land Management expressed the same sentiment in a less bombastic way: “Your lands are not idle lands. They are bountiful as well as beautiful. Each year, they produce a steady stream of goods and products that enrich the lives of all Americans.”²¹ In other words, self-willed land is idle. The human will of resource management will stand it at attention and get it working. Pinchot said it succinctly when he wrote, “Forestry is Tree Farming.”²² No room there

¹⁹ For the influence of optimism, see Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy Of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994).

²⁰ Hays, *Conservation and Efficiency*, 127.

²¹ “Public Lands, USA: The Story of America's Public Lands,” GPO: 1987 0, 173-639.

²² Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 31.

for self-willed land. No room, indeed, for anything but the Will of Man.²³ Put that 1976 BLM boast up alongside recent statements from The Nature Conservancy, for example, about “working forests.”

This is partly why I worry.

In the next issue of *Around the Campfire*, I will contrast the conservation mind with the resourcist mind given here.

Dave Foreman
Snowy Salamander Meadows
Jemez Mountains

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²³ This notion that wildland is idle land comes through today, for example, in the political blather about “working forests” in New England. Ecologist Steve Trombulak of Middlebury College in Vermont has demolished this idle lands myth in “Wild Forests ARE Working Forests: Some Thoughts on the Language of Despoilment,” *Wild Earth*, Fall 1998, 73-76.

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