

Conservation and Soft Diplomacy: Engagement Abroad Brings Benefits at Home

Brent A. Mitchell

I AM WRITING FROM FLORENCE, ITALY, having just returned from a visit to Villa Arrivabene, the home of George Perkins Marsh. Marsh served as US ambassador¹ to Italy for 21 years until his death in 1882. Turin was the capital when the Kingdom of Italy was unified in 1861, but four years later the capital was moved to Florence. It was here that Marsh extensively revised his first edition of *Man and Nature*, expanding it in response to unexpected popularity.

My journey to Italy is a pilgrimage of sorts, an opportunity that fell into my lap at just the right time. I had been invited to Europe on several projects just as my wife, Jessica Brown, was teaching a course in Rome for ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. Much earlier, I had volunteered to edit this issue of *The George Wright Forum*, celebrating the seminal conservation work of a man who spent much of his long career as a statesman and diplomat. The visit to Italy provided an opportunity for research and also a bookend to my long partnership with the National Park Service. I have frequented Marsh's childhood home in Woodstock, Vermont, ever since it was established as a national park in 1992. The park is home to the Stewardship Institute, created by the National Park Service to enhance leadership in conservation, and in which my organization is a founding partner. I have often stood at Marsh's boyhood home, and so it was very meaningful for me to step into the building where he lived his last days, 4,000 miles away from Vermont.

Conservation benefits—at home and abroad

George Perkins Marsh was not the first to speak out about forest practices in the US, but he was the first on record to go beyond utilitarian concerns and make ecological connections, several years before the term *ecology* was coined in Germany. Marsh's disquiet about defor-

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Left: George Perkins Marsh seated in his library at the Villa Forini (a.k.a. Villa Arrivabene) in Florence, Italy, photographed by Schemboche, 1875. Courtesy of Billings Family Archives. Right: Villa Arrivabene today, with a photo of George Perkins Marsh in the same room when it was his residence. © 2015 Brent A. Mitchell.

estation, erosion, and destructive human land uses did not start abroad but at home. Many mark the beginning of the modern American conservation movement with his 1847 speech to the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, Vermont, long before he ever left the country.² Thus the seeds of Marsh's ideas were homegrown, but germinated on foreign soils. *Man and Nature* was compelling because Marsh catalogued centuries of land abuse around the Mediterranean, and drew a line to the then-current practices in land clearing he had been witnessing in New England.

In this, his experience is somewhat akin to Charles Darwin, his contemporary. In contrast to the popular image, Darwin did not sail to the Galapagos, look at the finches and declare, "Eureka, they have evolved!" Darwin knew about evolution before he ever boarded the *Beagle* in 1831. Even his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had written about evolution or, as it was called at the time, transmutation of species. What was missing was the mechanism, the process, and Darwin spent the next 28 years gathering evidence. It is the weight of evidence gathered around the world that made *On the Origin of Species* so difficult to refute. Darwin almost missed his chance to sail on the *HMS Beagle*, and I often wonder how delayed science might have been had he stayed at home.

Marsh's first boat was a sailing packet en route to Constantinople, via France. Like Darwin, he was seasick the whole voyage. He had sought an appointment in the foreign service, expecting to be posted in northern or central Europe, owing to his skills in Scandinavian and Germanic languages. Instead, he was appointed minister to the Ottoman Empire. He spent five months crossing Europe to arrive in the Ottoman capital. Already in financial trouble from investments at home, he hoped his fortunes would improve abroad. But rents at his new post were exorbitant, and thus, partly to save money, he spent many months traveling throughout the empire, which then stretched from Tunis, across Egypt, most of the

Middle East, all of present-day Turkey, and the Balkan peninsula of Europe (except Greece and Montenegro).

Power of place

One could argue that it is no longer necessary to travel, as Marsh did, to engage internationally. Technology makes it easier than ever before to communicate with and understand the wider world. Video allows us to travel virtually, even in real time. With the click of a button we can share everything from scholarly work and case studies to quick questions and quicker opinions.

But there is also great power in being in a place, to seeing landscapes with one's own eyes, to talking directly with those most familiar with issues. And understanding deepens with time in a place and its society.

One should not visit Florence without seeing Michelangelo's statue of David. The sight is powerful. We have all seen many images of the statue, from fairly accurate photos, to countless replicas. But only in seeing the real thing could I appreciate it— absolute perfection, fashioned out of solid stone. As the great art biographer Vasari described it, "After seeing this no one need wish to look at any other sculpture or the work of any other artist."³ We spent a long time with the *David* and, after a time, began to observe other people in the room. The Galleria dell'Accademia was crowded, as expected, even in late October. A few people were taking long looks at the statue, clearly in awe. But the attention of most was not on the marble but on their mobile device, being photographed in front of the masterpiece, either by others

Four-hundred-year-old fresco from Villa Arrivabene showing a "skirmish" between Christian and Turkish forces along the Danube. © 2015 Brent A. Mitchell.



or by their own hand. After they had put themselves in the picture, or otherwise bagged the trophy, they moved on.

Of course, people were unobservant long before selfie sticks. Even in Marsh's time: "We live in a day of expedients, of short-hand processes and labor-saving contrivances."⁴ Keen observation was perhaps Marsh's greatest talent, and one he valued highly in himself and others. "Sight is a faculty, seeing is an art. To the natural philosopher, the descriptive poet, the painter, the sculptor, and indeed every earnest observer, the power most important to cultivate, and at the same time hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him."

Marsh distilled insights from copious reading, observation, and discourse. As Lowenthal states, Marsh had "remarkable talent in fusing myriad aspects of landscape into descriptive unity—a talent rare among those trained in narrow specialties, that would become rarer still as what was called natural history gave way to increasingly narrow disciplines."⁵ What Marsh achieved required talent, but also time. Obviously, Marsh's travel speeds were limited to the transportation of his day, but he was also further slowed by illness, sometimes his own but often of his family's; and this offered more time for observation and contemplation.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

— *T. S. Eliot*

Value to soft diplomacy

Back in Villa Arrivabene, Marsh's home in Florence, I immediately recognize from a photograph the room that once served as his salon. (That photograph now hangs above the fireplace in the very room it depicts.) The villa, restored in the 1980s, is now a municipal office for District 2, called *Campo di Marte*, and the former salon is now equipped as a conference room. Though all of Marsh's books which lined the room are gone (Frederick Billings purchased Marsh's library and repatriated the books as a gift to the University of Vermont), the original 17th-century frescos depicting military scenes still line the upper walls. The 13th-century building had been transformed into a "palazzo" in 1615 by the Bourbon del Monte family, who had had a long military history connected to the Florentine Republic and Medici family. Thus, the US ambassador was surrounded by reminders of Machiavellian times. (*The Prince* was published in 1513.) The many scenes depicting battles and naval warfare against the Turks might have particularly interested Marsh, given his service as minister to the Ottoman Empire from 1849 to 1853.

Marsh's library "is described as containing twelve thousand volumes, some miscellaneous and modern, 'many rare, valuable, ancient, and curious.'"⁶ It seems an odd counterpoint to have images of war decorating the library of a consummate bibliophile (Marsh's reading habits led to temporary blindness as a child). However, Marsh was not a dove. A fervent republican and unionist, he advocated for military action against the forces of rebellion and slave aristocracy in the Civil War; on a few occasions he counseled a show of force abroad; and he himself traveled to many of his assignments on warships. But as the longest-serving chief of mission in US history, Marsh was practiced in all kinds of diplomacy.

Marsh did all the things an ambassador does: represented American interests with foreign governments, defended individual Americans abroad, assessed political situations in reports to Washington, arbitrated and adjudicated disputes, entertained visiting dignitaries. But he also engaged in “softer” forms of diplomacy, providing suggestions and materials that were not directly related to his mandate as the president’s man in Rome or Constantinople. Given his strong interest in forestry, he regularly consulted on the topic. In a practice we would no longer condone, he gave seeds and plantings of American species for introduction abroad. He maintained regular correspondence with diplomats of and in other countries on questions of philology and linguistics, and collected many specimens for the new Smithsonian Institution, of which he had been a regent. All of these activities contributed to mutual understanding between the US and the countries where he served.

Soft diplomacy continues to this day. The book tour/conservation dialogue described elsewhere in this publication, hosted by the US delegation in Italy, is a specific example. Many embassies have a cultural attaché on staff, host programs, and even support cultural centers. The US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs promotes mutual understanding by sending Americans to conduct research abroad, and *vice versa*, through Fulbright scholarships and other programs. Over 200,000 Americans have served their country [*sic*] through the Peace Corps over the past 50 years. My own five-year Peace Corps experience gave me insights and skills that have proved invaluable throughout my career.

Marsh was closely connected to the Forest Institute of Vallombrosa, the only one of its kind in Italy. He died there in 1882. Below: Active forestry in Paneveggio Nature Park in the Dolomites. © 2015 Brent A. Mitchell.



Our US conservation and land management agencies all have international programs of one kind or another, and all at different scales. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has clear authority to act internationally by virtue of a variety of species conservation acts and international conventions to which the US is a signatory. The US Forest Service is quite active internationally, and is a well-recognized partner, particularly in the Americas. The National Park Service also has a number of international programs, but lacks clear authority to cooperate internationally. None of these programs emphasize long-term, professional development, and none are sufficiently funded.

Such engagement is seen in terms of one-way US aid to other countries—a common problem in garnering budget support for our federal agencies to work internationally. The prevailing conception is that while the US may have skills and experience needed in other countries, the same resources are needed at home, therefore funding international work is a drain on US resources. “Why should we spend money in other countries, when our parks at home have a maintenance backlog?” (or variations thereof) is a common refrain.

But the story of how *Man and Nature* came to be tells us that we have as much to gain as to give in any equation of international conservation commerce. For example, as the area, number and variety of protected areas has grown exponentially around the world, various countries have devised new solutions to their conservation. Thus, the world has become a rich laboratory for protected areas innovation, for integrating conservation and development, for shared governance of resources, and for sophisticated cultural expressions of stewardship. We see community conserved areas in Africa and India, for example; privately protected areas across Latin America; restoration of indigenous management of resources around the world. The US stands to benefit from learning from these many laboratories of management practice outside our borders. As National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis has said on many occasions, “We originated the national park idea, it went around the world, and it came back different.” We can learn a great deal from those differences, but to gain full advantage we have to be deeply engaged with these new takes on the national park idea. Rather like visitors viewing Michelangelo’s *David*, we have to take the time needed to truly *see* what we are looking at—to use, as Marsh said, our faculty of sight as an art unto itself.

Every year we send hundreds of thousands of Americans in uniform overseas. Deployments to combat zones naturally dominate the headlines, but most service men and women are in permanent stations in more than 150 countries, or 75% of the world’s nations. The scale and cost for maintaining such military presence overseas is unprecedented in the history of the world. The wisdom of our military posture is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that often our armed services provide humanitarian services: disaster relief, infrastructure development and maintenance, etc. So, with so much investment in sending American men and women in uniform overseas, why shouldn’t a few of those uniforms be those worn by National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Forest Service professionals? Why shouldn’t more of those services be in conservation, potentially reducing future disasters? Why do we not exploit the inherent value of conservation assistance as a profitable exchange of intellectual capital and a means to achieve our foreign policy ends?

Stewardship in the national interest

Over the past decades, international travel and exchange programs for federal agency conservation professionals have been regarded as extravagant and irrelevant and have been progressively cut. (This is true not only of international engagement, but also of cognate domestic activities, including even professional conferences, where the benefits to skills development and information exchange should be obvious.) More troubling, our agencies have become self-limiting, increasingly concerned about the “optics” of foreign engagement or international projects. But if we view such intercourse as a foreign policy imperative rather than a burden on domestic programs, the true value comes into sharper focus.

Furthermore, conservation as diplomacy isn’t necessarily “soft.” Military personnel are advising counterparts in countries all over the world. Meanwhile, the Pentagon recently reported that climate change is an “urgent and growing threat to our national security” and blames it for “increased natural disasters” that will require more American troops designated to combat it.⁷ Why shouldn’t we send experts from other areas of our government—our conservation agencies—to “combat” these threats as long-term advisors in our national interest?

One of our earliest conservation documents, Frederick Law Olmsted’s Yosemite Report of 1865,⁸ makes a comparison to national defense and high public purpose:

It is the will of the nation as embodied in the act of Congress that this scenery shall never be private property, but that like certain defensive points upon our coast it shall be held solely for public purposes.

This “will of the nation,” articulated in 1864—the same year Marsh published *Man and Nature* and in the midst of civil war—has resulted in a system of national parks that not only protects but projects our best ideals. What we choose to preserve, and the stories we choose to tell, say a great deal about who we are as a nation. They are a reflection of our national identity and public memory. Some of this memory is the struggle for human rights in places like the former internment camps at Manzanar, Minidoka and Honouliuli; at Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad, Brown v. Board of Education, and Trail of Tears; and, most recently, Pullman and César E. Chávez—all now part of the national park system.

Opportunities for the National Park Service to engage abroad may be particularly wide in scope given the agency’s near-unique mandate among its global counterparts in care for both natural and cultural resources. Here is just one example of an opportunity:

Angry mourners recently forced Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić to flee commemorations in Srebrenica marking the passage of 20 years since thousands of Muslim men and boys were slain there during the Bosnian war. The US National Park Service has made great strides in learning how to interpret difficult history and manage sites of conscience. What a service it would be to help the region with reconciliation through designating and developing sites of memory addressing the war and its causes. For the US, this would be both a learning exercise and an insurance payment: the US (rightly) invested heavily in the military response that ended the Balkan Wars. Effective interpretation is a cost-efficient hedge against future conflict.

Final resting place of George Perkins Marsh in Rome, Italy. © 2015 Brent A. Mitchell.

Worlds away

Shortly before traveling to Europe I was in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (5,000 miles from Vermont), staring at a painting in the Museum of Fine Arts. The painting showed a romantic scene of a forest and stream, not unlike the Hudson River School paintings that now hang in residence at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Park. A striking difference is that the nature view in



the Brazil painting covers only half the canvass. The other reveals a scene of devastation of the Atlantic Forest, with men chopping the few remaining trees. I was struck by the title of the painting, *Vista de um mato virgem que se está reduzindo a carvão* (*View of a Virgin Forest Being Reduced to Charcoal*), and especially the date, 1843. I found the painting significant for two reasons. First, it is dated four years before Marsh's first speech about forest practices in New England. (I am starting to learn about Brazilian debates on forest clearing that appear to predate similar attention in the US, but do not yet know if they offered ecological insights similar to Marsh's.)⁹ Second, and more to the point of this essay, the painting was by Félix Émile Taunay, a Frenchman who moved to Brazil at the age of 21. Thus he had the perspective of a foreigner.

George Perkins Marsh is buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome, also the final resting place of John Keats, Percy Shelley, William Wetmore Story, and many other artists and notable figures. Now near the center of modern, expanded Rome, the graveyard was outside the city walls when burials began in the early 1700s. Catholic law dictated that Protestants (mostly foreigners) be buried separately from consecrated ground, and often at night. Beyond the walls, out of sight. As talk again turns to building walls around the United States, literally and figuratively, George Perkins Marsh and his *Man and Nature* remind us—especially those of us in conservation—of the importance of direct, in-depth engagement with the wider world.

Endnotes

1. Technically, Marsh's title was that of "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary." The US Government began to upgrade heads of diplomatic missions to "Ambassador" five years after he died.
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