

Man and Nature at 150: Reflections in Contemporary Conservation

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Preface

MAN AND NATURE; OR, PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY AS MODIFIED BY HUMAN ACTION heralded the beginning of the conservation movement in the United States. It marks the turning point in perception of a planet divinely ordained to be controlled by man to a dawning recognition that human use is veering out of control. Variouslly described as “epoch making” and “the beginning of land wisdom in this country,” it establishes Marsh as both “pioneer” and “prophet of conservation.”

For its impact and insights, *Man and Nature*, and its author, George Perkins Marsh, ought to be at least as well known as Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*, and Aldo Leopold with *A Sand County Almanac*. Alas, it and he are not. This issue represents one small effort at remedy by exploring ways in which Marsh’s treatise is still relevant today, 150 years after it was first published.

Why care about Marsh?

Why should we care about G.P. Marsh? Isn’t he just another “dead white male”? In presenting these reflections on his writings, are we not perpetuating the “great man” approach to history, now discredited in some circles? Perhaps, but our modern norms and cultural views should not discount the achievements of a man in his time. Certainly, it would have been difficult or impossible for Rachel Carson to have achieved similar fame had she been born in 1807 rather than 1907, and we should celebrate today’s progress towards equal opportunity of gender, race, and religion while we strive to achieve it fully. But that does not disclaim the importance of Marsh nor negate the value in studying *Man and Nature* and how it came about.

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Marsh's biographer, David Lowenthal, points out that "Marsh himself stressed that humble and unsung lives were as deserving of memory as those of the great, and collectively of far more consequence for both human and earth history. Yet for the insights he signally added to our world view Marsh's own life is unusually worth study."

We study and remember Marsh not because he earned our attention, but rather because he still has much to teach us. Quoting Lowenthal again, from the preface to his biography, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, "It would be an error to enlist Marsh in support of any current environmental credo. He was a man of his time, his perceptions like his concerns may yet inspire us, but they are bound to be anachronistic. . . . Yet Marsh's resonance remains potent; he faced human dilemmas that strike us as both familiar and novel."

It may be particularly appropriate to celebrate George Perkins Marsh in these pages. He was a multilingual student of the natural world who, entirely through his own initiative, researched and wrote a publication that would change the course of conservation for succeeding generations. Thus Marsh's story holds a few parallels with that of another George born a century later: George Melendez Wright.

Lastly, we often understand history best when it is told through the personalities that lived it. In every human endeavor we hold up heroes, if for no better reason than to put a singular face on complicated events despite awareness that they involved many different people. For those of us working in conservation as we know it today, Marsh was the first of those heroes.

How the pieces tie together

A distinguished group of authors contributed to this issue: historians, writers, scientists and conservation practitioners. All are highly accomplished, but I have to acknowledge that here Professor David Lowenthal is the first among equals. No one has studied Marsh in more detail and with greater scholarship. Marsh's obituary from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences includes the line, "We look with desire for a full account of his life from some hand competent to the grateful task." Seventy years later, Lowenthal took up the challenge, and succeeded brilliantly.

Without Professor Lowenthal's work the story of Marsh's contributions might have been largely lost to us. All the authors are indebted to Lowenthal's most authoritative biography, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, and other writings. Among those writings he has kindly added the centerpiece to this issue.

Rolf Diamant describes how Marsh's insights still redound today through the writings and lectures of Lowenthal. Diamant recalls an exchange to Italy with the biographer, a book tour and roving conversation about contemporary stewardship organized by the US Embassy in Rome. My own essay stresses the need for more such international, professional exchange. Marsh built most of his arguments for conservation on observations abroad as an ambassador; I build on that to argue for expanded application of our federal conservation partners as a form of soft diplomacy.

Unlike Lowenthal's biography, Marsh's original writings are not an easy read. The very title *Man and Nature* may be mildly offensive to some today with its seeming gender bias.

John Elder gives guidance on how to read Marsh, how to navigate the dense language and a writing style now out of fashion, giving encouragement that reading the original text will reward the reader's effort.

Not out of fashion is Marsh's strong belief that conservation and environment should not be left to experts. He considered himself an amateur—most of his scholarly interests (of which there were many) were pursued as pastime, not profession. As described in the article by Nora Mitchell and Rolf Diamant, he “preached the necessity of informed public participation . . . as well as the necessity of stewardship.”

That public can be inspired by the same landscape that shaped Marsh's relationship to the natural world. Christina Marts writes from Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park to describe how the National Park Service is encouraging new generations of stewards.

In writing *Man and Nature*, Marsh was primarily responding to the greatest environmental threat of his day, rapine deforestation. Nicholas Fisichelli, Gregor Schuurman and Edmund Sharron are three among many responding to the greatest threat of our time, climate change. Though Marsh could not have anticipated the mechanisms and scale, he would have discerned its root causes.

Our time in history

In our decimal accounting of time, we take centennials and sesquicentennials as opportunities to reflect on the past and consider the future. It has been just over 150 years since George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* was published. This is also the 150th anniversary of Frederick Law Olmsted's landmark report on Yosemite, which declared the establishment of parks and reservations as a duty of republican government. And, of course, we will soon mark 100 years since the National Park Service was formed under director Stephen Mather. Marsh turned the conception of our relationship with nature on its head. Olmsted championed park-making and a profession of landscape architecture. Mather melded an ad hoc collection of parks into a system, albeit an inchoate one. All were bold in their visions. They not only broke new ground, they reset the playing field. In today's parlance, they were game changers.

What can we learn from these origin stories? How can our generation spark a new age of environmentalism?

As Lowenthal points out, discussing the impacts of Marsh's first edition in 1864 and the second in 1874, “Radically changed was not this 1874 revision, however, but how somberly Americans were by then reassessing their environmental prospects.” In short, a fundamental shift had occurred in that decade. Are we fully alert to major shifts in thinking that are occurring, or need to occur to meet modern challenges? How do we turn threat into opportunity? Again, Lowenthal: “Central to Marsh's alarms and reform agendas was his view that ecological and societal problems and solutions were entwined and must be tackled in tandem.” Have we bridged the nature/culture divide? Can we assure that conservation is not something that is set apart but centrally relevant to modern life? Do we fully affirm that [hu-]Man and Nature are one?

Purpose

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Our purpose in compiling this theme issue is not unlike that of Marsh himself, as expressed in his preface:

...[in writing *Man and Nature*] I address myself not to professed physicists, but to the general intelligence of educated, observing, and thinking men; and that my purpose is rather to make practical suggestions than to indulge in theoretical speculations.... In these pages, as in all I have ever written or propose to write, it is my aim to stimulate, not to satisfy, curiosity, and it is not my part to save my readers the labor of observation or of thought.

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