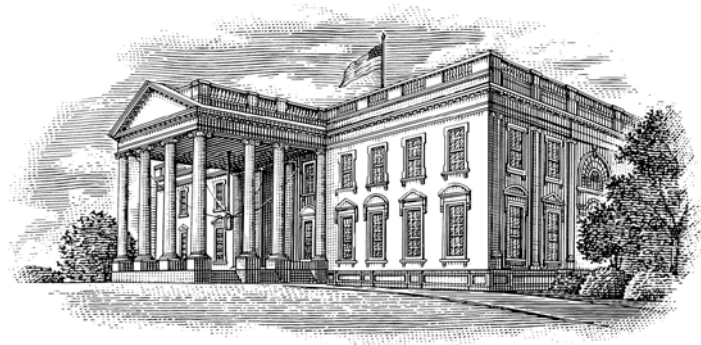


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## The President and the Power to Conserve the American Frontier

By the end of the 19th century, explorers had largely measured the landscape that defined the American frontier. The once boundless land was now comprehensible, and the natural resources that could be extracted from it were beginning to be calculable. At the same time, between approximately 1880-1920, other forces were working together to create the beginnings of the conservation movement in America. Travel and leisure were on the rise, as was the notion that America's open spaces provided an antidote to the perils of city life.

Equally important was the progressive political philosophy, personified by President Theodore Roosevelt, that the federal government must take an active and aggressive role in planning the wise use of natural resources.

The passage of the 1906 Antiquities Act was a landmark in the conservation movement. It provided the president of the United States with the authority, at his discretion, to set aside for federal protection large tracts of land as national monuments. Since 1906, presidents have used the Antiquities Act almost 100 times, protecting millions of acres of public land. Sometimes these decisions have angered landowners, who argued that they have been left out of the decision-making process and, thus, have had little control over local land use issues.

In 1872, Congress ordered that the Yellowstone country of Wyoming and Montana be set aside "as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." In the next several decades, Congress created other national parks, such as Yosemite and Mount Rainier. Congress was motivated by two goals, which were not seen at the time as necessarily conflicting: preserving nature and promoting tourism.



Theodore Roosevelt in California, c. 1903. Library of Congress.

In addition to Congress, presidents also participated in the effort to preserve nature. Between 1891 and 1901, presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland and William McKinley had transferred 50 million acres into forest reserves, the precursor to national forests. President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) appointed Gifford Pinchot as chief of the Bureau of Forestry and followed Pinchot's advice to place another 150 million acres into reserves. As a young man, Roosevelt had operated a cattle ranch in the Dakota Territory. His love of the outdoors combined with his political belief that the federal government should be the major force behind

conservation. More so, he came to wield the executive authority of the presidential office with great energy. In 1903, he asked, "Is there any law that will prevent me from declaring Pelican Island [Florida] a Federal Bird Reservation? . . . Very well, then I so declare it!" By executive order, he created the first of 51 national bird sanctuaries. Not everyone was pleased with what were viewed as the president's near-dictatorial powers. Roosevelt claimed: "I did not usurp power, but I did greatly expand the use of executive power. . . I acted for the common well-being of all our people."

American Indian sites came to be just as endangered as nature. During the late 1800s, numerous World's Fairs and museums featured exhibits on Indian life, displaying artifacts dug up by archaeologists. As the demand for Indian artifacts grew, Indian sites began to suffer from looting and vandalism. Teams of scientists began to document the destruction and called for federal protection.

In 1906, Congress enacted the American Antiquities Act with virtually no debate and no opposition. The Antiquities Act strove to protect "any historic or prehistoric ruin or monument, or any object of antiquity" on federal lands, providing the president with the authority to declare national monuments those historic landmarks which he deemed worthy. It reflected the broader shift in power from the Congress to the president - a shift that more or less dominated 20th-century American politics.

#### *A White House Conference*

In May 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt sponsored a three-day conference of governors at the White House. For the first time in American history, representatives from the states met together to discuss the nation's natural resources. The White House Conference on Conservation has been called "a seminal event in the history" of the conservation movement. One of the results of the meeting was the creation of the National Conservation Commission, a group of state and federal representatives who sought to calculate the nation's natural resources and make recommendations for their future use.

After the National Conservation Commission met, it submitted a report. President Roosevelt wrote a message to Congress that introduced the report. This message summarized the findings and recommended actions to conserve water, forests, land and minerals.

The full text of the Report of the National Conservation Commission can be found [here](#).

*Right:* Report of the National Conservation Commission, 1909. Library of Congress.



Explorer John Muir (left) and Theodore Roosevelt at Yosemite, c. 1906. Library of Congress.

