

Gifford Pinchot Biography

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Contents

Gifford Pinchot Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), American conservationist and public official, was chiefly responsible for introducing scientific forestry to the United States.

Gifford Pinchot was born in Simsbury, Conn., on Aug. 11, 1865, the scion of an old Huguenot family of moderate wealth and high public spirit. He graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University and studied forestry in Europe on his own. After successfully instituting the first systematic forest program in the United States on the Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina, he served in 1896 on the National Forest Commission. Two years later he became head of the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture.

Pinchot's influence increased enormously during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. He was influential in Roosevelt's decision to transfer millions of acres of forest lands to the reserves. He devised a system for controlled use of waterpower sites, and, above all others, he shared responsibility with Roosevelt for the notable advances in forestry and conservation between 1901 and 1909.

Unlike some ultraconservationists, Pinchot distinguished between the utilization and the exploitation of natural resources. Controlled use was the key to his philosophy. To this end he opened forests to selective cutting and leased the grasslands within them for grazing. He also converted some of the country's greatest lumber interests to the selective-cutting principle of "perpetuation of forests through use."

A driving, zealous man, Pinchot made many enemies and was attacked fiercely by western interests and anti-intellectuals in Congress. Yet he won the steadfast devotion of his subordinates. After Roosevelt left office, Pinchot fumed over the apparent slowdown in conservation under President William Howard Taft. Finally he charged Taft's secretary of the interior, Richard A. Ballinger, with a "giveaway" of valuable lands in Alaska. The charge was an exaggeration, and Taft subsequently dismissed Pinchot from the government. The publicity given the incident, however, made Taft more sensitive to conservation during the remainder of his administration.

Pinchot ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate on the Pennsylvania Progressive party ticket in 1914. He later returned to the Republican party and served two terms as governor of Pennsylvania (1923-1927 and 1931-1935). Both terms were marked by controversy and highlighted by enactment of considerable Progressive legislation. In 1914 he had married Cornelia Bryce, by whom he had one son. Pinchot died on Oct. 4, 1946.