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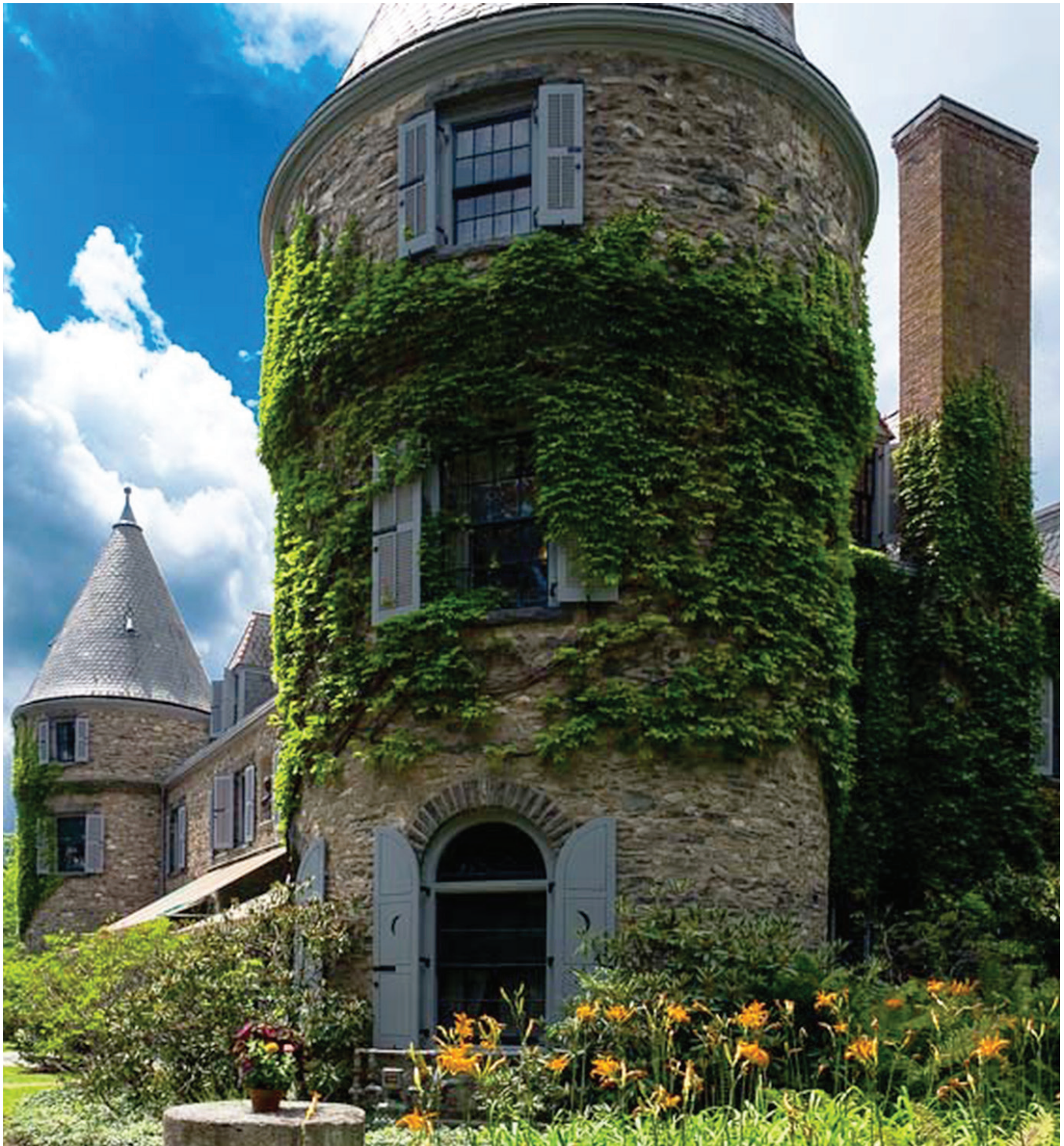
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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Refounding National Public Lands: The Future of Place-Based Conservation of National Forests

EDGAR BRANNON

INTRODUCTION

Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, was charged with reorganizing the nation's natural resource agencies into a single department in 1935. He hoped to persuade Forest Service Chief Ferdinand Silcox, a progressive Republican, to lead it under the secretary of the interior. The Forest Service was viewed as the model, and Ickes wanted to wrap the other agencies into the Forest Service as a new, more effective Department of Natural Resources. Silcox balked and instead recruited the Forest Service's founding chief, Gifford Pinchot, to oppose the plan. Decades later, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter,² and Ronald Reagan all tried versions of the same idea, but those efforts pale beside the Trump administration's actions. Can Humpty Dumpty be put back together? Can the Forest Service be built back on the existing legal foundation and mission? If not, who decides? What would happen to the century of laws tying the Forest Service specifically to the Department of Agriculture?

My response to *refounding* is rooted in my experience as a forest supervisor and line officer—someone who worked in the trenches for 40 years. I dealt firsthand with the daunting challenges of coping with external and internal demands, and at times, dysfunction in the Forest Service. The agency had, and still has, things that work, and others that do not, which is not unusual for a federal agency. The administration has decided to approach the government's reorganization with a chainsaw. The United States Forest Service is in crisis as a result. It is looking to me like a major rebuild will be needed. My questions: What matters? What should be brought forward, what needs to change, how should it be done, and who should do this?

TO BEGIN: MARSH'S INFLUENCE

Shortly after arriving as director of Grey Towers National Historic Site, and its associated Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies, I found myself alone in the library. I lifted from the shelf Pinchot's copy of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. First published in 1865, Marsh's work is regarded by historians as "the fountainhead of conservation."³ Pinchot took Marsh's observations and further defined *conservation*, in part by situating forestry at its center. Through skillful public relations, Pinchot placed Conservation, with a capital C, into the public lexicon.

Marsh described conservation's central challenges: *overcoming ignorance* and *overcoming greed*. His work resonated deeply with Pinchot, who often referred to *Man and Nature* in his early lectures. Pinchot added a third warning, a moral and ethical imperative: confronting the *evils of concentrated wealth*. He grew up in

the Gilded Age. To him, the federal government's work was not just scientific or administrative; it was ethical and moral. Modern forestry rests on a belief system. That belief system gives the profession its motivation and, I believe, its *esprit de corps*. I believe that spirit remains in place—damaged and dinged up, perhaps, but still there.

My approach is to ensure that decisions, to the extent possible, be grounded in science, scholarship, and experience and be substantiated by data whenever possible. We must use the best science and scholarship available. The process must be transparent, open to review, and amenable to change. These are public lands, and the public must have a role in deciding how they are managed. Career civil servants—not political appointees—should lead the agency. We learned this lesson more than a century ago. The administration sets direction and priorities; Congress appropriates funds, writes laws, and provides oversight; and, in the end, courts adjudicate disputes.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE INSIDE

My experience tells me that the conservation of national forests, grasslands, monuments, and historic sites depends on *how* it is carried out and *who* carries it out. As important as organizational models are, the credibility of outcomes is not determined by organization structure. Countless officials have focused on organization charts as if they were the determining factor. The culture of an institution has more impact than its structure. In the end, it is the people who do the work and form relationships with the public and partners that make the most difference.

A few observations from my experience:

1. Over the past 30 years, the agency assumed that consolidating national forests and ranger districts would save money and allow needed staff specialist positions to be filled. Money was a problem, and often the driver. However, there was a non-monetary cost. An unintended consequence of ranger district and national forest consolidation was, in my opinion, the *loss of one-on-one connections with many communities*. The agency moved out of small towns across the country. This needs to be fixed in the present and future Forest Service. The public is more supportive when they understand the reasons for actions.
2. *We live in an increasingly interconnected world. Every land manager knows forest ecosystems are the lungs of the planet, and in more ways than I can define, provide for the quality of human existence.* What we do in North America affects the Earth's ecosystems, and what happens elsewhere affects the United States. We are isolated only by limited thinking. We must remain active participants in the worldwide forest management community. The Forest Service role in land stewardship is extensive—so much more than the national forests—and includes 138 million acres of urban forests whereby most of our “lungs” live.
3. *Forest research is a long-term, not short-term, commitment.* Knowledge matters. Our research advances and complements what others are learning. It shapes decisions at all levels. Moving scientists a thousand miles away to a “centralized” location “to be more efficient” undermines the quality and usefulness of research for scientists and resource managers alike. The notion that small units are costly is false.
4. *Supporting state foresters and private forest landowners is not “nice to have”; it is essential.* Teamwork has made a profound difference. A few states have strong forestry organizations and capable staffs, but many operate with skeleton crews. I hosted many meetings and workshops with state foresters, and I witnessed the benefits of their interacting with

their counterparts and federal officials. Without the Forest Service leading and convening, it would not have happened. The proposed elimination of the state and private forestry component of the Forest Service mission will prove to have serious negative consequences to forestland stewardship.

NUTS AND BOLTS

If an almost complete rebuild is needed, what changes make sense? Here is my short list—not a blueprint etched in stone, but a starting point for rebuilding an agency whose strength has always depended on professional judgment, public trust, and durable connection to place. The goal should not be to rearrange boxes on an organizational chart to appear bold. It should be to restore capacity where it matters, clarify accountability, reduce unnecessary layers, and protect the work from day-to-day political interference that thwarts the greater good.

- Political oversight belongs in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) secretary's office, not inside the agency's chain of command. The Forest Service chief's relationships with elected officials, non-governmental organizations, other agency heads, and the secretary's staff are essential. Success is based on trust relationships, built personally over time.
- If the Forest Service is put under another department, such as Interior, then almost every law for the past 125 years needs to be re-written. Nice idea, but a political non-starter in my opinion. The agency's mission reaches far beyond timber production, though timber remains important in some places. Its work sits at the intersection of water, fire, climate, biodiversity, rural economies, recreation, Tribal relations, and community safety. A Department of Natural Resources could make sense, but only if it strengthens professional independence rather than creating another political perch.
- The chief and the national headquarters must be in Washington, DC. The chief's office sets national policies, defends administrative policies, and advances the mission by building support with

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Congress. It is not meant to manage every national forest from a distance. Decisions made closer to the land and affected communities are more likely to be understood, tested, and improved. The chief and senior leadership need regular access to elected officials, the secretary's staff, other agency leaders, non-governmental organizations, and the broader policy community. That will not happen by walking the streets of Salt Lake City. It is not the chief who needs to be closer to the people and resources, but rather district rangers and forest supervisors. The chief needs to be closer to the secretary and Congress as well as national interests that influence policy decisions.

- The National Forest System has four line-officer levels: chief, regional forester, forest supervisor, and district ranger. The Trump administration is moving to close Regional Offices, but the key question is how their essential functions would be replaced. Regional Offices are costly, and many forest supervisors and district rangers would welcome a smaller regional layer—or none at all. But if regional foresters are eliminated, their responsibilities do not simply disappear. Budget coordination, litigation support, fire and aviation coordination, engineering, human resources, civil rights, grants, quality control, and technical review must be preserved in a form that serves the field units and adds consistency as well as efficiency.
- Local support is earned over time through action, not pronouncements. District rangers and forest supervisors therefore determine much of the agency's success. In his autobiography, Pinchot noted that field leadership depended less on technical knowledge and more on personal character: "Thenceforth, the success or failure of Forest Reserve administration would be almost entirely in the hands of the Supervisor and his Rangers, where it properly belonged. It was radical, but it was right, and it worked." He added, "the first condition of success in any job is not brains but *character*. Over and over again I have seen men of moderate intelligence come to the front because they had courage, integrity, self-respect, steadiness."⁴ Rather

than pulling decisions upward to headquarters, the agency's historic bias was to push them down to the lowest competent level.

- Every national forest has a role in State and Private Forestry, the Forest Service's extension arm. Every national forest can support cooperative forestry, fire assistance, watershed work, urban forestry, forest health, and support for private landowners. The Forest Service has made major contributions to urban forests—Central Park in New York City, Chicago Wilderness, and World Trade Center memorial plaza tree planting are contemporary examples of an expanded role. These are not side assignments; they are connective tissue between federal lands and the larger landscape. It is the State and Private Forestry programs that have linked up all firefighting agencies. The coordination efforts have evolved, and the mechanisms are tested and proven. The focus has always been competence, fairness, justice, equality, and I would add, compromise.
- Research positions should be, as they have been, primarily co-located within universities and tied closely to experimental forests and working landscapes. Forestry research requires a long view. Short-term studies matter, but the most valuable knowledge often comes from decades of observation: fire behavior, watershed response, silviculture, regeneration, insects and disease, carbon sequestration, recreation impacts, and climate change. Once dismantled, that capacity cannot be rebuilt easily or quickly. The importance of keeping Forest Service researchers connected to independent scholarship, graduate education, field application, and the next generation of conservation professionals cannot be overestimated.
- I served on a ranger district that had fewer than six full-time employees and a dozen seasonal workers. That district was later consolidated with two others and its headquarters moved. Now these communities no longer personally know the district ranger—or any employee. As forest supervisor, I solved more public issues at Rotary Club than in formal meetings. Forest supervisors and district rangers need protection from political pressures



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and special interests, not the public.

- Lastly, the administration's actions to stand up a new federal agency that would be responsible for all firefighting is a huge mistake. The problem is not, and has never been in my opinion, the organization.

WHO WILL DO IT, AND HOW WILL IT BE DONE?

The task of refounding the Forest Service is too large and complex to be done by the agency itself, the current administration, or a congressional committee working through ordinary partisan machinery. Maybe what is needed is a 9/11-style bipartisan commission with the credibility, independence, and patience to do the hard work. There may be no perfect answers, but there are better answers, and the country should insist on finding them. The principal laws affecting national forest management now fill a book four inches thick in tiny type face. I do not know enough about the law to prescribe every answer, but as a field manager I know where the problems live. Field officers must be trusted, and they can and should be held accountable. That balance—trust with accountability—is exactly what a serious refounding effort must restore.

We must guard against political and economic interests that seek to turn the mission away from the common good and justice for all. We assumed protections were in place; we were wrong. In a matter of months, the Trump administration has ignited a crown fire that is burning through century-old policies and norms. A line scratched in the dirt is not enough.

The American public, in my opinion, does not realize what an outstanding civil service it has at present.

Edgar Brannon retired in 2005 as director of Grey Towers National Historic Site, Milford, Pennsylvania, after a 40-year career with the USDA Forest Service.

ENDNOTES

1. According to the Kübler-Ross model of grief, the stages are “denial,” “anger,” “bargaining,” “depression,” and “acceptance.” I had hoped to reach “acceptance” before writing. I keep lapsing back to “anger.”
2. See Dennis LeMaster, *Decade of Change: The Remaking of the Forest Service Statutory Authority During the 1970s* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 1984).
3. David Lowenthal, “Marsh’s *Man and Nature* at 150,” *The George Wright Forum* 32:3 (2015): 227.
4. Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1998; first published 1947).
5. As of July 1, 2026, according to the Office of Personal Management.

Most are unaware of the work done, how it benefits them, how much effort goes into every decision, how dedicated so many of the civil servants are, how they protect us, and maybe as important, how they protect our world for future generations. Does anyone know we have 138 million acres of urban forests and that the Forest Service has a role in Central Park and the 9/11 Memorial? How about the urban wood waste program in Baltimore or a huge role in the Chesapeake Bay?

Prior to the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, every new administration was staffed based on patronage and political loyalty. Corruption was the norm, and public service was at best a secondary consideration. Do we really want to go back? Assertion of a manipulative un-elected *deep state* is, frankly, a myth. There is no such thing. To claim otherwise mischaracterizes the work of professional civil servants.

We live in a country with more than 300 million people. We have a non-military federal civil service workforce of 2 million employees.⁵ Treating our public workforce as expendable chattel will only discourage our most talented and capable individuals from choosing challenging careers in public service where their skills are most needed. Nowhere is this more critical than in the Forest Service and other agencies that sustainably manage the nation’s natural resources for essential goods and services, for this and future generations.

America has always risen to meet difficult challenges, and we can do so again. But we must be measured and thoughtful. This current haphazard approach will haunt us for decades to come.