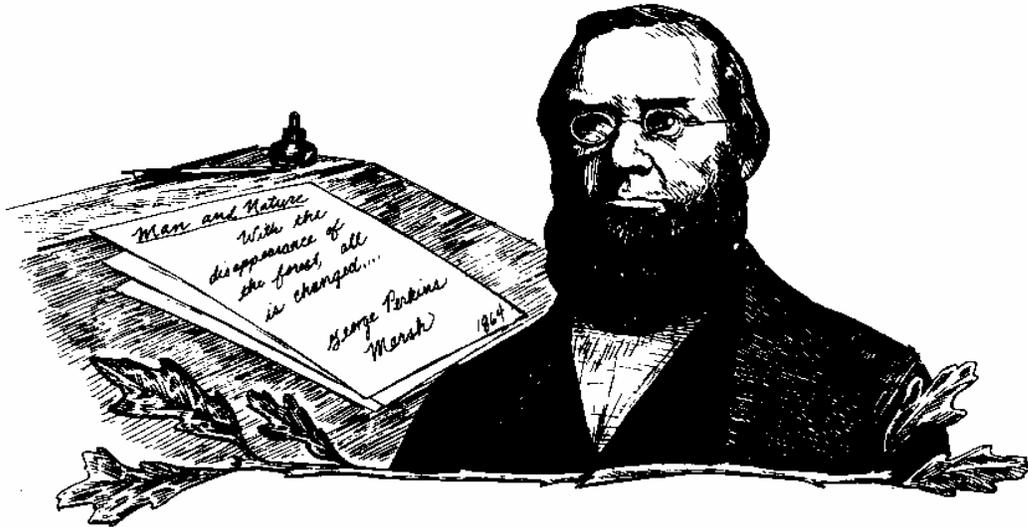


United States Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
FS-518

**CENTENNIAL  
MINI-HISTORIES  
OF THE  
FOREST SERVICE**

**The First Environmental History**

# 1 The First Environmental History



Over 100 years ago, on March 3, 1891, Congress empowered the President to set aside forest reserves out of public lands. This mini-history tells of one aspect of the origins of the conservation movement that led to this legislation.

The book *Man and Nature*, which was published in 1864 by **George Perkins Marsh** (1801–1882), can be called the first environmental history and one of the sources of the conservation movement. Marsh drew on the past to illustrate how human actions had harmed the earth and led to the demise of earlier civilizations. Marsh wanted not only to warn his contemporaries against this fate but also to inspire measures to prevent it. One prevention measure that Marsh advocated was forest protection.

Marsh's concern for nature first arose during his childhood play in the forests near Woodstock, Vermont, where he was born in 1801. He was a bookish youth who was plagued with eye problems that forced him to cease reading for periods throughout his life; nature thus became his other teacher. Born to a well-to-do family, he was educated at Harvard and Dartmouth and spent his life in public service; he served as the U.S. Representative for Vermont (1843–49), Minister to Turkey (1849–53), Fish Commissioner of Vermont (1857–59), and Minister to Italy (1861–82).

Marsh was a wide-ranging scholar who relied on common sense observations in his work. His first-hand observation of the rapid harvesting of Vermont forests led to his blaming the decline of fish upon this practice. Thus he began to note the relationship of soil, water, and plant cover that he wrote about later in *Man and Nature*.

Within two decades of the book's publication, several scientific activists advocated establishing Federal forest reserves to conserve timber and reduce floods. Among these influential lobbyists of Congress was Bernhard Fernow, the drafter of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891.

**Reference**

Marsh, George Perkins. 1864. *Man and nature*. [reprinted 1974. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.]