

How the eastern US National Forests were formed

Christopher Johnson and David Govatski: Forests for the people: the story of America's eastern national forests. Island Press, Washington, DC, 2013, 23 cm. ISBN-13: 978-1-61091-009-5, \$35

Louis R. Iverson

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As a landscape ecologist conducting research on eastern forests for the US Forest Service (e.g., www.nrs.fs.fed.us/atlas), I was eager to learn about how the eastern National Forests came to be, as these forests now play such an important part of the natural world and provide a large carbon sink. The book did not disappoint and I'm confident that it will be informative and interesting to a large swath of people with interests in the eastern US landscape or environmental history.

The book is divided into two parts: (1) how the eastern National Forests were established and (2) discussion of key issues facing these forests today. In the first, the authors do an excellent job of presenting the history of deforestation in the East, the consequences of such rapid deforestation including raising alarm to some key people, and the movement to create national forests out of the ruins.

Of course the difference and difficulty in creating national forests in the East as opposed to the West was the fact that land in the East was primarily privately owned—in 1870, 75 % of the timber in the East was publicly owned, but by 1911, 80 % of the timber had gone into private lands, mostly by timber barons determined to profit from 'cut and run' timber harvesting.

Some key events leading to the establishment of the national forests

1861: George Marsh wrote "Man and Nature" with the statement "Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste". Usufruct meant that humans had the right to use nature's gifts for its needs, but did not own those gifts or have the right to destroy them. Marsh's book had a large impact on many, including Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot.

1870–1883: Several major scientific and conservation organizations were founded, including the American Fisheries Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Ornithologist Union (leading to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1885).

1885: The State of New York formed, by constitutional statute, the Adirondacks Forest Preserve to be "forever kept as wild forest lands".

1891: The Forest Reserve Act was passed, which gave the President the power to 'set apart and reserve' any public lands bearing forests under the Department of Interior. Immediately President Harrison set aside the first reserve, the Yellowstone Timberland Reserves, and an additional 13 million acres in the West. President Cleveland then reserved another 21 million acres in the West during the last 10 days of his administration in 1897.

1897: The Forest Management Act (also known as the Organic Act) created guidelines for the administration of the federal forest reserves.

L. R. Iverson (✉)
Northern Research Station, US Forest Service, Delaware,
OH 43015, USA
e-mail: liverson@fs.fed.us

1898: Gifford Pinchot named as head of Division of Forestry. Pinchot aggressively pursued putting the forest reserves into the Department of Agriculture with the Transfer Act in 1905. Pinchot also wrote ‘where conflicting interests must be reconciled, the question will always be decided from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run’.

1901: Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson expressed alarm in a report on the condition of the southern Appalachians: only 7.4 % of the land was still in virgin timber, and there was an estimated 6 million cubic miles of soil erosion following the deforestation.

1901: President Teddy Roosevelt said in the State of the Union address “the fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use. Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend upon them”.

1901: The first attempt to create, by federal purchase, a national forest in the East, in western North Carolina. However this action failed as did related bills over the next 8 years because of outspoken opposition and majority party control by Republican House Speaker Joe Cannon.

1902: The nucleus of the Chippewa National Forest in Minnesota was established by diverting the sale of the dismantled Ojibwe Indian Reservation to a federal forest reserve.

1906: El Junque National Forest was established in Puerto Rico; it was originally preserved by the King of Spain so it was already in the public domain as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898.

1907: The Monongahela Flood caused severe damage in the central Appalachians. Deforestation in the region was implicated in the resulting devastation.

1910: The Weeks Act passes after 10 years of political struggle, setting up a procedure for surveying, recommending, and purchasing of federal forestlands to protect headwaters. Henry Graves appointed to replace Pinchot as US Forest Chief (Pinchot was fired by Taft for insubordination because he went public against Interior Secretary Ballinger for giving Alaskan coal-mining rights to buddies).

1911–present: The Federal government purchases large acreages, plants millions of trees, and

implements sound principles of forestry. Multiple objectives for the purchase of lands included: improve the flow of rivers and streams, prevent soil erosion on mountain sides, prevent forest fires, manage and protect the supply of timber, and protect the beauty of forestlands for recreation and other leisure pursuits. Purchase units were created but in the eastern US these zones today are typically a patchwork of public and private lands.

1930, 1975, 1983: Various wilderness acts pass which designate wilderness areas in eastern locations.

1974, 1976: The Resources Planning Act and National Forest Management Act are implemented to provide more guidance in management of the national forests.

Throughout this inaugural time of forest reserves in the Eastern US, the authors emphasize the extremely important role that ordinary citizens contributed to the conservation movement and the pressure they provided to move legislation through Congress. Many citizens, organizations, and business and political leaders pressed the wheels of government to establish the forest reserves and make the follow-on reforms a reality.

In the second part of the book, the authors present eight regional case studies which collectively describe and analyze most of the key issues facing forest management in the eastern US forests today. These case studies include the transition from a timber focus to a landscape-scale and interdisciplinary management system in Mississippi; the implementation of prescribed fire as a key management tool in Florida; the carving out of wilderness areas by the Monongahela NF in West Virginia; the preservation vs. multiple use competition leading to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota; and problems associated with ‘loving the forests to death’ in Vermont and North Carolina as millions of people stream to the national forests to recreate in or reside near to the national forests. At the end of each case study, the authors provide ‘lessons learned’ that can be applied broadly across the world’s forests.

Overall, the book nicely traces the challenges faced and perseverance required to move the political will of a country towards a major environmental legacy. For me, it provides hope that, with perseverance and knowledge gained by scientists across the globe, we will move down the path of sustainability so desperately needed.