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978-0-521-85270-8 - This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal

Sarah T. Phillips

Excerpt

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Introduction

It is impossible to imagine the Great Depression in the United States without envisioning the era's environmental tragedies. Seared onto the national memory by novelists, filmmakers, and government photographers, portraits of uprooted and impoverished people mingle with images of scarred land, abandoned farms, and swollen rivers. Dust clouds darken the Great Plains and move threateningly toward the nation's capital. A lone, broken windmill looms over parched cattle and crumbling fields. Migrants, fleeing dirt and drought, trek along Route 66 to California's unwelcoming fruit orchards. A black sharecropper stands helpless beside the deepening gully that has stolen his farm's precious topsoil. Clutching their few belongings, refugees race the rising water and watch from a nearby hill as the river claims their homes.

These images of environmental disaster are matched by equally familiar stories of state-sponsored environmental renewal. The president dedicates a new national park with a stirring address. Young men receive jobs battling soil erosion, replanting damaged forests, and constructing campgrounds. The federal government builds new farms for some and manages migrant camps for others. High dams rise along the Tennessee and the Colorado. "Your power is turning our darkness to dawn," sings Woody Guthrie, "so roll on, Columbia, roll on." Despite the indisputable importance of these episodes, however, historians have never made them central to their interpretations of the New Deal, nor to their analyses of American political development. Such stories provide a colorful sideshow, and they often serve as evidence for the government's increased inclination to intervene, for good or for ill, in economic or environmental affairs;

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but resource conservation never stands alone as an essential component of American liberal ideology.

This Land, This Nation combines political with environmental history to present conservation policy as an arm of New Deal economic reform, one that embodied the promises and limits of New Deal liberalism. During the Depression of the 1930s many Americans felt betrayed by the sudden economic collapse, and they decided that a more interventionist federal government might provide some degree of protection from the unregulated free market. Though this ideological turn had been well under way for decades, the New Deal sealed the shift and ushered in the modern liberal state. Franklin Roosevelt transformed the political party system by assembling a “New Deal coalition” composed of groups that supported an active government, such as farmers, urban workers, African Americans, and capital-intensive businesses. For the first time, Americans received direct aid in the form of welfare benefits and work relief, farm subsidies, and retirement pensions. Less successfully, the Roosevelt administration also attempted to introduce more far-reaching institutional and regulatory reforms.

At the center of the New Deal’s attempts at recovery and reform were the conservation programs of the 1930s and 1940s. These programs introduced a set of federal strategies aimed at rehabilitating the economies of agricultural areas. Industrial America had not yet vanquished its agrarian past. In 1933, farmers still constituted nearly one-third of the nation’s workforce, but rural incomes lagged far behind urban incomes. Farm prices had swung wildly during the 1920s, plunging to levels below those required to maintain operations – never mind to turn a profit, to pay taxes, or to repay a loan. Unlike large industrial concerns, most individual farmers produced for volatile commodity markets they could neither control nor predict. What could correct the crippling disparity between the country and the city? What could make farming more secure?

For many of the politicians and policymakers who launched the New Deal, rural parity required that natural resources be distributed more equitably and used more sustainably, a vision that required a repertoire of tools far broader than the commodity price supports usually assumed to represent the entire farm program. These New Dealers argued that rural poverty was caused by poor resource use and unfair resource distribution, and they set out to rebuild rural life and to raise rural incomes with measures tied directly to conservation objectives – land retirement, soil and forest restoration, flood control, and cheap hydropower for farms and new industries.

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Believing that farmers' low living standards helped trigger the Depression, the New Dealers assumed that when farmers achieved an "American standard of living," they would be able to purchase manufactured goods and maintain employment for industrial workers. Industrial recovery, in other words, was initially assumed to depend on the revival of *agricultural* purchasing power. Economic formulations of national underconsumption began with the farmer and radiated outward to include the factory laborer and urban worker. Consequently, once this question of national responsibility for improved rural living standards gained a foothold, it required consideration of the renewable natural resources upon which farming depended – soil and water primarily, though forested land could be included as well. Such resources were not just renewable but improvable, and theoretically capable of supporting a permanent farm culture. Behind much of what we can call New Deal conservation lay the assumption that the sustainable and equitable use of these rural resources would help agricultural America "catch up," thereby bringing the country into economic balance with the city and preventing future depressions.

Conservation policy was never the only answer offered for the farm crisis, of course, nor was it intended to work independently of the other farm recovery programs. Still, the inclusion of rural resource issues within a growing state apparatus signaled an important shift. For the first time, national administrators linked conservation with agricultural programs, and considered environmental planning vital to the nation's economic renewal and long-term vitality. In building both rural and urban support for the conservation initiatives, a new policy community of natural resource administrators and their political allies established the justification for an expanded federal reach and an enlarged federal government. Alongside the federal government's regulatory initiatives, its recognition of organized labor, and its commitment to social insurance, the natural resource agencies functioned as engines of government growth and as instruments of voter realignment.

This process was critical to the Democratic Party's transformation during the 1930s – to its success in fusing farmers and industrial workers into a new coalition in support of active, redistributive government. And even though many farmers returned to the Republican fold once good times returned, the New Deal initiatives created a set of permanent institutional structures, administrative mechanisms, and liberal assumptions about the necessity for government-sponsored farm support and rural industrialization that have escaped serious partisan debate. While the predominant approach to rural development would shift by the 1940s,

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and while the new Democratic coalition would lose its Depression-era strength, the majority of Americans never lost faith that federal resource policy could and should equalize rural and urban incomes. The principle that national welfare required rural welfare underlay both New Deal and postwar liberalism, and also inspired American efforts to build an international framework for assisted modernization in the developing world. In short, the new patterns of environmental regulation introduced during the 1930s and 1940s formed the lasting model for federal resource management and decisively shaped the evolution of the modern American state.

One reason for the absence of environmental policy from interpretations of the New Deal era is that historians still tend to view each conservation project as a discrete episode. As a result, the attention paid to these individual events detaches them from each other and masks consideration of the larger national and political context for the conservation initiatives. The assumption that resource policy was peripheral rather than central to the New Deal's political importance has also reinforced the historiographical tendency to define state development solely in terms of government-business relations and the provision of social welfare. For the most part, state influence is measured by inspecting the extent of the federal government's regulatory reach, its relationship with organized labor, and its commitment to social insurance. By focusing on the weak American state, and by asking why it differed from its stronger European counterparts, historians have indeed compiled a convincing story of intellectual and political constraints. But in doing so they have overlooked natural resource policy as a decisive force in shaping the contours of American government.¹

¹ For a small sample of this vast literature, see Edwin Amenta, *Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy* (1998); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (1995); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago* (1990); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Moral Responsibility and the Liberal State* (1991); Marc Allen Eisner, *From Warfare State to Welfare State: World War I, Compensatory State-Building, and the Limits of the Modern Order* (2000); Louis Galambos, *The Rise of the Corporate Commonwealth: United States Business and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (1988); Neil Gilbert, *Transformation of the Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (1997); Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920–1935* (1994); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890–1935* (1995); Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (2002); Ellis Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (1966); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit*

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This absence is all the more puzzling considering the widespread influence of a pathbreaking monograph on federal resource policy and Progressive-era state building published over forty years ago. Samuel P. Hays's *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* offered an unprecedented and persuasive fusion of environmental and political history. Taking as his *bête noire* the idea that Progressivism could be best explained as a struggle between the people and concentrated business power, Hays argued that the conservationists were motivated not by the desire to rein in the power of the trusts, but by their loyalty to the ideals of the emerging scientific professions. Battling big business, after all, cannot have been the primary aim of planners and administrators who often collaborated with large cattle and lumber companies and who incurred the wrath of small proprietors. Instead, a new spirit of efficiency required expert personnel and administrative methods that bypassed the "irrational" and "unscientific" practices of pressure-group politics and congressional logrolling. Housed within a more protected executive setting, a new professional class of foresters, hydrologists, and geologists attempted to protect the supply of the nation's natural resources while harvesting those resources for sustained economic growth. Of course, some critics have pointed out that the gospel of efficiency cannot by itself explain the intellectual and political

of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America (2001); David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (1996); Jill S. Quadagno, *The Transformation of Old Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State* (1988); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (1991); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (1992); Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1977–1920* (1982); Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (1988). To be fair, certain works have examined the importance of agriculture and natural resource policy to American political and organizational development; in addition to works cited in subsequent notes see Louis Ferleger and William Lazonick, "The Managerial Revolution and the Developmental State: The Case of U.S. Agriculture," *Business and Economic History* (1993); Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol, *State and Party in America's New Deal* (1995); Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (1966); and Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (1999). Daniel Carpenter's *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (2001), includes an examination of natural resource administration; also see Donald J. Pisani, "The Many Faces of Conservation," in Morton Keller and R. Shep Melnick, eds., *Taking Stock: American Government in the Twentieth Century* (1999). Taking a global perspective, James Scott views resource conservation policy as essential to twentieth-century state power: *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998).

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complexity of Progressive environmental thought, and others have noted that Hays failed to look at how national policy actually affected the landscapes under consideration. Yet any serious student of American political history must be familiar with Hays's analysis, for he brilliantly demonstrated that resource policy was inextricably bound with changing conceptions of federal responsibility.²

Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency, however, proved in some ways too influential. Instead of serving as a model for those wishing to revisit the character of New Deal liberalism, Hays's interpretation worked instead to convince both political and environmental historians that the major intellectual framework for resource conservation had been constructed in the early twentieth century. Because the grand projects of the 1930s appeared to represent the fulfillment of Progressive-era dreams, they were assumed to have sprung from the exigencies of the Depression and from the coffers of a more sympathetic federal government, not from new ideas or new reform movements. Recent work on the environmental ideas of the 1920s has begun to challenge such assumptions, but the dominant picture has not yet been overturned.³ It is still assumed that continuity of purpose and rationale, not alterations in the intellectual or political climate, explains the pattern and timing of the first half century of federal conservation policy.

Hays is not to be faulted for the subsequent assumption of continuity, because his work helped initiate a much-needed reorientation of American political history. For many years, most observers had assumed that political change in the United States was fueled by the persistent struggle between liberals and conservatives, and that in this struggle liberals occasionally gained the upper hand and initiated periods of progressive reform. Since the 1970s, however, historians have argued that the guiding

² Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (1959). Recent challenges to Hays's interpretation include Brian Balogh, "Scientific Forestry and the Roots of the Modern American State," *Environmental History* 7 (2002); and Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (2002).

³ See Kendrick A. Clements, *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (2000); Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (2002); and Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (forthcoming). On the missing historiography of the interwar years, see Paul S. Sutter, "Terra Incognita: The Neglected History of Interwar Environmental Thought and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 29 (2001). A new anthology also promises to fill the gap: Henry L. Henderson and David B. Woolner, eds., *FDR and the Environment* (2005).

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political force of the twentieth century has been not waves of reform but rather the growth of large-scale, national institutions such as the modern business corporation, the professional organizations, and the administrative state. Like Hays's conservationists, the organization builders prized efficiency rather than equity, and they favored bureaucracy over democracy. In other words, too single-minded a focus on the rhetoric of reform and reaction had obscured other, more continuous influences: technological change, the gradual mobilization of scientific and social scientific expertise, the cozy cooperation between business and government, even – as a persuasive new book argues – consumer and labor mobilization for a low-price, high-wage economy. The previous attention to reform movements and traditional reform periodization now appears antiquated, more a testament to the liberal assumptions of past historians than an accurate reflection of political reality.⁴

Environmental historians have also accepted a picture of continuity. For the most part, their work has cast American environmental sentiment as a duel between two competing worldviews: conservation and preservation. “Conservation” is often used interchangeably with “environmental protection,” but the two ideas have different meanings for environmental history. Conservationists, such as those who staffed the U.S. Forest Service under Theodore Roosevelt and those who built Hetch Hetchy Dam in Yosemite National Park, believed that natural resources should be managed professionally and scientifically for the public good. Represented most prominently by Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's chief forester, conservationists thought natural resources should be used, developed, even commodified, just not wasted. The preservationist outlook, usually traced to John Muir in the late nineteenth century, encompassed a wider appreciation for the intrinsic value of natural and scenic places (or at least an appreciation for how mankind might benefit from the uncultivated landscape). Public manifestations of preservationist thinking included the establishment of national parks, the movement for wilderness

⁴ On the organizational synthesis, see Louis Galambos, “The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History,” *Business History Review* 44 (1970); Galambos, “Technology, Political Economy, and Professionalization: Central Themes of the Organizational Synthesis,” *Business History Review* 5 (1983); and Brian Balogh, “Reorganizing the Organizational Synthesis: Federal-Professional Relations in Modern America,” *Studies in American Political Development* 5 (1991). The “persuasive new book” that fits somewhat into the trend is Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (2005). Jacobs emphasizes a more continuous force – the high cost of living – but also elegantly captures the way modern state building required debates about the equitable distribution of profit, not simply its efficient management.

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areas, and the ecological attitudes of the modern environmental movement. Because most environmental historians have cast their lot with John Muir rather than with Gifford Pinchot, they view the history of twentieth-century resource policy as a battle between development and preservation, and see both Progressive and New Deal conservation as dominated by the similar impulse to use and to exploit the nation's natural resources.⁵

In short, political and environmental historians have failed to join together to reexamine the New Deal and its lasting effects on American institutions and public policy. While a few political historians have continued to emphasize reform movements, many others have placed reform on the back burner and examined the developments that appeared more influential: big business, expert management, public-private collaboration, and technological change. While recognizing that New Deal liberalism constituted a significant departure from the past, they have downplayed its differences from the "conservative" 1920s and portrayed the New Deal as the interplay of more continuous forces. Environmental historians have also understood that the Depression prompted a greater number of conservation initiatives, but they too have assumed these projects represented the final outcome of unchanging desires to control and develop the country's rivers and its land. More continuous forces have appeared at work here as

⁵ The most influential work on conservation in the 1930s analyzes New Deal policy as a missed opportunity to restrain capitalist exploitation: Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979). For an overview of the environmental literature, see Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (1985). On conservation versus preservation, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967); and Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (1981). This is not to say that environmental historians are unaware of the limitations of the conservation/preservation distinction. Clayton Koppes has replaced this dualism with a tripartite model, arguing that three shifting emphases can explain twentieth-century environmental policy – efficiency, equity, and esthetics. I enthusiastically concur that this additional category ("equity") should be included in order to analyze the distribution of benefits among social and economic classes. See Koppes, "Environmental Policy and American Liberalism: The Department of the Interior, 1933–1953," *Environmental Review* 7 (1983), and "Efficiency/Equity/Esthetics: Towards a Reinterpretation of American Conservation," *Environmental Review* 11 (1987). Char Miller's work on Gifford Pinchot also offers a more nuanced interpretation of conservation ideology: *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (2001). Neil Maher and Paul Sutter have begun the much-needed task of reexamining the New Deal era; see Maher, *Nature's New Deal*; Maher, "Crazy Quilt Farming on Round Land": The Great Depression, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Politics of Landscape Change on the Great Plains During the New Deal," *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (2000); and Sutter, *Driven Wild*.

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well: capitalist expansion, technological development, and government-booster collusion.

While we have learned much from these new scholarly directions, the assumptions about continuity, efficiency, and exploitation have acted as a powerful barrier to historical inquiry. For the most part, scholars have failed to imagine the possibility of meaningful reform, or to look again at the New Deal as a struggle over the equitable division of economic resources. We have also become blind to the possibility that resource conservation could have meant anything but capitalist exploitation. Despite all the familiar images of environmental tragedy and government action, despite all the pictures of human desperation and state-sponsored renewal, we have missed an essential concern of New Deal environmental policy. It was poverty – in particular, rural poverty.

New Deal conservation was new because it linked natural with human resources, and took as its foremost concern the environmental imbalances of inhabited rural areas. The policy intellectuals who designed and implemented the programs believed that the free market had failed: unabated individualism had yielded an overinvestment in agriculture but an underinvestment in agriculturalists. Farmers continued to till eroded and exhausted land, leaving the nation pockmarked with chronic rural poverty. The New Conservationists concluded that land and water resources should therefore be protected and developed not just for efficiency's sake but to raise the living standards of the people living nearby. And the federal government, they insisted, had an obligation and a mandate to expand the economic and political opportunities of rural people by means of conservation policy.

The favored methods for rural rehabilitation changed during the course of the New Deal and World War II. Tension had always existed between those who believed that farmers had to “get big or get out” and those who claimed that more could be done to help farmers remain on the land. The onset of the Depression tipped the balance in favor of the latter – those whom this study terms the agrarians. Between 1933 and the early 1940s, federal programs aimed to sustain the rural way of life and to help people remain on the land. The lack of alternative employment opportunities during the Depression provided the immediate context for this agrarian strategy, but the industrial slump simply provided a window of opportunity, not the underlying rationale. More important was the New Dealers' belief that all farmers, rich and poor, might find security of tenure and income when a region's natural resources were used properly and distributed fairly. This ideology inspired substantial achievements; it also

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helped the Democratic Party to build a new rural constituency. With government assistance, farmers received inexpensive electricity and altered destructive land use practices. They also asked to be included in resettlement communities and to take part in tenant-purchase and farm security programs.

Ultimately, however, the balance of power shifted toward those who believed that there were just too many farmers. Planners and policymakers began to wonder whether the very poorest rural people would be able to compete, economically and politically, with those farmers best able to stay on the land and to expand their operations with government assistance. Several groups – both liberal and conservative, and both from within and from outside the administration – also began to argue that only industrial jobs yielded sufficient incomes, and that small and marginal farmers might be best served by policies that encouraged out-migration, industrialization, and urbanization. Almost by accident, World War II provided exactly this opportunity. As a coalition of wealthier farmers and conservative congressmen from the South and West extinguished New Deal efforts to assist tenants, sharecroppers, and migrant workers, liberal conservation policy helped to bring about an alternate solution to the problem of the rural poor. Large, multipurpose dam projects powered war factories, drew migrants from the farms, and served as catalysts of regional and industrial growth.

To be sure, use of the word “solution” denies the complex and often disastrous results of government policy. Federal policymakers did not “solve” the problem of rural poverty: country migrants suffered unjustly when they entered an urban-industrial order rife with racial discrimination and segregation. Nor did policymakers ever seriously challenge the most egregious instances of agricultural class stratification. At best, federal aid in places like Mississippi or California served as a Band-Aid during hard times; at worst, it reinforced an exploitative and racist system of wage labor. The rural poor, as historian Anthony Badger has noted, “suffered from the failure of national farm policymakers to understand that agricultural relations on southern plantations and on western factory farms were not the same as relations on the family farms of the Midwest.”⁶ The lack of understanding, however, can explain only so much. Liberals also suffered from a lack of capacity, for the economics of race and region often precluded political solutions. “The problems facing the various sectors of the American farm economy were institutionalized,” as the late Theodore Saloutos has remarked, “and overcoming them in a democratic

⁶ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (1989), 184.