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## Business Support for Nature Protection in the Nineteenth Century

**Abstract:** This article explores the role of business in supporting and benefiting from nature protection during the second half of the nineteenth century. It begins with the support of business for protecting scenic wilderness in California and the creation of Yellowstone, as well as the role of the railroads in encouraging easterners to visit to the nation's western national parks—all designed to create economic value by promoting tourism. It then examines the efforts of a wide range of business interests to protect the White Mountains of New Hampshire and the Adirondack forest in New York State. The later effort was led by business interests from New York City who worried that deforestation would impair freight traffic on the Erie Canal and Hudson River as well as endanger the city's water supplies. This article compliments Hay's research on business and conservation during the Progressive Era by demonstrating that business also played a critical role in supporting wilderness and forest protection.

**Keywords:** business, environment, railroads, national parks, forests, wilderness, tourism

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines the historical role of business in both its support for and benefit from environmental protection. The claim that many firms have both supported and profited from government regulation is not novel. The extensive economics literature on rent seeking describes industries that advocated for and profited from various government regulations. Nor are political divisions among firms over public policies unusual: many public policies, most notably trade and antitrust policy as well as many economic regulations, politically divide business firms and associations.

However, the extensive literature on business and environmental policy has primarily focused on conflicts between business interests on one hand and advocates of environmental protection on the other.<sup>1</sup> The private sector is typically described as opposed to public policies that increase the supply of environmental goods. Accordingly, the greater the political influence of business, the more likely that environmental laws and policies will be weakened or not enacted in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

But there are also important exceptions to this pattern, some of which this article explores. Some public policies have created both private *and* public goods: they have both improved environmental quality *and* economically advantaged segments of the business community.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, some environmental policies have divided the business community, pitting firms and industries that support regulations—often allied with citizen groups—against businesses that are opposed to them. In other cases, policy makers have cooperated with business firms to advance policies that benefit both private firms and the public.

This article specifically explores the role of business actors in shaping—and benefiting—from wilderness and forest protection policies during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It begins with the protection of Yosemite and other wilderness areas in California and then turns to the creation and promotion of national parks in other western states and forest protection in New England and New York State.

## YOSEMITE STATE PARK

The creation of the first protected wilderness in the United States was largely initiated and motivated by commercial interests. Yosemite is a spectacular glacially carved enclosed valley in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It features sheer granite walls, which display a variety of dramatic rock formations as well as five waterfalls that cascade down its cliffs. The valley was “discovered” by a group of soldiers in 1851, the year after California become a state. The first group of tourists visited Yosemite in 1855, and descriptions of its “wild and sublime glamour” became widely circulated in national magazines. Drawings published in these magazines “dramatized the height and perpendicularity of Yosemite’s walls,” and a lithograph based on an artist’s drawing of the valley’s unique rock formations and waterfalls made a visual image of Yosemite available to the general public.<sup>4</sup>

In 1859 the first photographer visited the valley. His pictures on grass plate negatives illuminated “the varied texture of its rock and tress and the variety of

its granite forms.”<sup>5</sup> Yosemite’s national visibility was further enhanced by the newspaper editor Horace Greely, who visited Yosemite in 1859 and published his account of what he had seen in the *New York Tribune*, one of the nation’s most influential newspapers. Urging the paper’s readers to visit Yosemite, Greely promoted it as “not merely a local curiosity but a scenic treasure of the nation well worth preserving for the ages.”<sup>6</sup> By the 1860s Yosemite had become as prominent as Niagara Falls, then the nation’s most visible and widely known natural tourist attraction.

Thinking ahead, “Advocates for the Central Pacific and Union Railroads ... guessed that, once a steel track spanned the nation, tourists would clamber aboard trains to confirm for themselves the dazzling reputation of the Wild West,” whose most prominent natural feature was clearly Yosemite.<sup>7</sup> However, it was the recently formed Central American Steamship Transit Company, whose twenty-three steamships traveled between east coast ports and San Francisco, that would immediately benefit from attracting more visitors to San Francisco and Yosemite.

Like others who had visited Yosemite, Captain Israel Ward Raymond, an executive with the steamship line, had been struck by the dramatic vistas he witnessed and its potential for increasing traffic on the firm’s ships. But he also worried that the trees on the valley’s floor would be cut down for building materials and that this would pave the way for grazing sheep. This would reduce Yosemite’s attractiveness as a tourist destination. Raymond was reportedly well aware of what had become known as “the Shame of Niagara,” a popular phrase that referred to the unchecked commercialism that had damaged the appearance of the American side of the falls.

For many, Niagara Falls had become a prime illustration of how *not* to manage a beautiful natural resource. The Falls were the nation’s most preeminent natural tourist attraction in the first half of the nineteenth century—especially after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Niagara attracted visitors from throughout the United States and abroad and was the most popular destination for honeymooners. “A Niagara visit was almost requisite for the American middle class.”<sup>8</sup> However, during the 1830s, not only had the land around the falls become filled with private parks and amusements, but because mills could take advantage of the Fall’s waterpower, industry had developed along the American side of the waterfront. “Niagara had become so cluttered and unattractive that tourism suffered. Tourists still came ..., but they stayed only briefly, taking in the falls and, often, expressed dismay at the condition of the area.”<sup>9</sup>

For many visitors, the profusion of shops, aggressive guides, souvenir sellers, and photographers had spoiled their pleasure of visiting the Falls. In short, the “negative” example of Niagara Falls demonstrated that an attractive natural setting was not sufficient to make it appealing to tourists. Unless it was properly managed, its economic value as a tourist destination could be impaired.

Raymond was “determined not to let that happen to this still unspoiled Western wonder.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, on February 20, 1864, he wrote a letter to John Conness, a United States Senator from California. Raymond asked Senator Conness to introduce legislation that would “let the wonders of Yosemite be inalienable forever.”<sup>11</sup> Senator Conness agreed and introduced legislation deeding more than 60 square miles of federal land in the Sierra to the state of California. This land would be withdrawn from settlement, protected from “devastation and injury,” and thus, preserved for public use and recreation.<sup>12</sup> This land grant included both the Yosemite Valley and the adjacent Mariposa Grove of sequoia redwoods.

In arguing in favor of the legislation, Senator Conness assured his colleagues that protecting Yosemite would not interfere with the west’s economic development, as the valley was “for all public purposes worthless.”<sup>13</sup> By this he meant that it was not suitable for mining or agriculture, then the two most important sources of wealth in northern California. But this statement was disingenuous. For Conness was well aware that protecting Yosemite would increase travel to California on Raymond’s steamships. Moreover, roadbuilding firms and railroads also supported the legislation because they were “strongly interested in tourism, settlement and the development of the Far West.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Frederick Law Olmsted, “pecuniary advantages” were an important motivation for the legislation. He predicted that just as the Alps had generated important wealth for Switzerland so Yosemite would “prove an attraction of similar character and a similar source.”<sup>15</sup> In short, “The Yosemite legislation supporters and enthusiasts were not anti-development preservationists. On the contrary they represented a wide range of political and development interests” who stood to financially benefit by making Yosemite available “for public use, resort and recreation.”<sup>16</sup>

Conness’s legislative proposal was approved by Congress and signed by President Lincoln on June 30, 1864, making Yosemite the first protected wilderness area in the United States and the predecessor of the nation’s national parks. It also marked the first federal western land grant for wilderness preservation.

## YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

John Muir had visited Yosemite in 1868. In 1873, Muir moved to Martinez near the San Francisco Bay and began to write for eastern literary monthlies. His articles, which were based on the notebooks he had kept while he was working in Yosemite, made Muir into a literary celebrity and the most nationally recognized voice for “nature” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> But when Muir returned to Yosemite in 1889, he was shocked by how poorly the valley had been treated. Instead of protecting the Valley’s natural beauty, “the state-appointed Yosemite Commission had allowed the extraordinary place to deteriorate into an overgrazed, overcut, overbuilt shamble.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the area around the Valley had become defaced by sheep grazing and logging.

Working closely with Robert Johnson, the editor of *Century Magazine*, where much of his earlier work had been published, Muir urged the federal government to create a much larger national park that would surround the 60 square miles deeded to the state of California. But now the interests of business in wilderness protection were divided. Muir’s plan faced strong opposition from local cattlemen, sheepherders, and lumbermen who wanted to be able to continue to log the surrounding forests and graze their livestock. In fact, some California developers, inspired by Niagara Falls, proposed converting the valley itself into a kind of gaudy tourist attraction. A Department of Interior investigation confirmed Muir’s charges against the state’s management of Yosemite, reporting that “timber had been cut indiscriminately, the valley fenced with barbed wire and planted to grass and grains, and most of the wild flowers grazed over or plowed under.”<sup>19</sup> California Senator George Hearst agreed to back Muir’s proposal, as did Los Angeles Congressman William Vandever. However, the legislation they introduced fell short of Muir’s goals, as it excluded the Tuolumne River watershed.

But Muir’s plan attracted an important business ally—namely, the Southern Pacific Railroad (SP), the largest and most politically powerful business in California. The SP’s President, Collis Huntington, instructed the railroad’s lobbyists in Washington to support as large a national park as possible to attract more tourists to California and increase traffic on its lines. The proposal to create Yosemite National Park was also backed by California’s other senator, Leland Stanford, a SP founder and executive. W. W. Snow the SP’s chief attorney told the state’s congressional delegation that “they must see that the bill for a National Park around Yosemite Valley went through.”<sup>20</sup>

Although business opponents of expanding wilderness protection in the Sierra worked hard in Congress to kill the legislation, the railroad's lobbying proved decisive. Muir later recalled, "Even the soulless Southern Pacific R.R. Co, never counted on for anything good, helped notably in pushing the bill for this park through Congress."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, due to the efforts of Daniel Zumwalt, a land agent for the SP, the legislation signed by President Harrison in 1890 created a national park that was five times the size of Vandever's original proposal. Sheep herders and lumbermen would no longer have access to fifteen hundred square miles of the Sierra that surrounded the land deeded to the state of California.

### PROTECTING YOSEMITE—AGAIN

Muir's attention now turned back to the Yosemite Valley—the state park that was now surrounded by a much larger federal park. Because California had not provided sufficient funds for the management of the park, conditions had deteriorated. "Much of the valley floor was cluttered with fences to hold horses, or meadows where hay was grown to feed them." While just outside the park, miners, cattle, and sheep further threatened the park's physical integrity.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Muir began a campaign to have the state park transferred back to the federal government—an effort that became known as "recession."

California business interests were again sharply divided. On one hand, the stagecoach companies and hotels that did business in the valley opposed the land transfer because they would lose influence and access to the valley once control of Yosemite was transferred to the federal government. On the other hand, the California Board of Trade, which was comprised of representatives from leading business organizations from around the state, supported recession in order to promote tourism to California. Recession was also supported by a number of civic organizations, who regarded the overlap of federal–state authority over Yosemite as inefficient.

What tipped the scales was the backing of the important financier Edward H. Harriman of New York. In 1901, he had incorporated the SP into his national railroad network. Harriman's backing of recession "fit nicely into his overall business strategy ... a blend of conservation and commerce."<sup>23</sup> Thanks to his firm's lobbying, recession passed by one vote in the California State Senate. In explaining its passage, Muir acknowledged that as vested interests were so deeply entrenched, "we might have failed to get the bill through the Senate but for the help of Mr. Harriman," adding that "of course his name or

his company were never in sight throughout the fight.”<sup>24</sup> Muir wrote to Harriman “Many thanks for your Sacramento Yosemite Work.”<sup>25</sup>

However, the federal government also had to agree to add the state-owned lands to the surrounding national park. Recession faced strong opposition in Washington from state business interests who included lumbermen, cattle growers, and valley concessionaires, all of whom would be disadvantaged by returning the management of Yosemite Valley to the federal government. In fact, they came to Washington, DC with a very different agenda: they wanted to shrink the boundaries of the national park and reduce the supervisory role of the federal government.

Once again, Harriman, who promised Muir that “I will certainly do anything I can to help your Yosemite Recession Bill,” played a critical role<sup>26</sup>. Legislation expanding the size of Yosemite National Park to include the original federal land grant to California was signed into law by President Roosevelt in June 1906. “Granting Yosemite Valley National Park status was one of the great triumphs of the Roosevelt conservation era.”<sup>27</sup> After 42 years of state control, Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Tress would now be administrated by the National Park Service. Following the completion of a railroad from Merced in the Central Valley the following year, Yosemite became much more accessible to the general public.

## THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD AND WESTERN WILDERNESS PROTECTION

The SP’s support for the creation and expansion of Yosemite National Park was not anomalous. Its officials also played a critical role in the establishment of the Sequoia National Park, the protection of Lake Tahoe, and the creation of the Big Basin Redwoods State Park and the Crater Lake National Park. The firm’s support for the creation of the Sequoia National Park, in which Zumwalt again played a critical role, was similar to its interest in protecting Yosemite. The sequoias—the world’s largest and oldest trees—had become a major tourist attraction—and the SP wanted to protect them in order to promote traffic on its lines. Congress created the Sequoia National Park in the same year that it created Yosemite National Park and again, thanks to Zumwalt’s lobbying, the former’s size was tripled.

The effort to protect Lake Tahoe was led by the SP’s vice-president and land agent William Mills. The large demand for lumber and fuel from the Comstock Lode silver mine in western Nevada had led to extensive deforestation of the lake’s steep slopes and the surrounding central Sierra Nevada

range. This had undermined the attractiveness of one of the west's most important lakes and scenic attractions. Legislation to create a Lake Tahoe National Park was introduced by Nevada Senator William Stewart, one of the SP's most important spokesmen in Congress. Such a large national park would protect not only the Lake Tahoe basin but also the headwaters of the American and Feather rivers in the Sacramento valley from further development.

But this plan met with strong and effective opposition from local land-owners who feared that it would constrain their ability to develop their property. Although this legislation was defeated, Mills and Stewart kept the issue before Congress and the public, and in 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt signed a proclamation that created a Forest Reserve that covered the entire central Sierra region. The president subsequently created four additional adjacent forest reserves. The railroad also supported the creation of a large Sierra National Forest between Sequoia and Yosemite National Park and led the effort to stop the U.S. Reclamation Service from converting Lake Tahoe into a service reservoir for a proposed dam on the Truckee River. All told, the SP played a role in placing more than three hundred miles of the Sierra Nevada range under federal protection. Outside of California, SP vice-president E. O. McCormick was instrumental in the creation of the Crater National Park in Oregon, which was served by two of the firm's rail lines.

In summary, the Southern Pacific was "one of the most vigorous sponsors of natural scenery in general and West Coast national parks in particular."<sup>28</sup> It was "the railroad's identification with the long-term public interest that led it also to support many conservation programs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."<sup>29</sup> The SP's economic interest in protecting the west's scenic wilderness areas often pitted it against other businesses that had a different—more short-term—view as to how the west's natural resources should be most profitably developed. The SP's considerable financial resources and political influence often enabled its policy preferences to prevail, much to the satisfaction of advocates of wilderness protection and to the benefits to the public.

## YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

California was not the only western state with an attractive natural site to attract visitors. Six years after Yosemite State Park was established, in 1870, reports of Yellowstone's distinctive landscape with its geysers, mud volcanoes, boiling sulfur springs, and castellated cliffs led to a major expedition to explore the region. Two of the expedition's members were Nathaniel Langford who



had been appointed as territorial governor and Cornelius Hedgers who was the U.S. district attorney in Montana. Although it was clear that Yellowstone would soon become a fashionable resort, the question was how it would be developed and by whom. After spending a month visiting the region, Langford and Hedgers feared that without federal protection it would turn into another Niagara Falls. Nor was this outcome hypothetical. In fact, a hotel and several bath houses had already been built at Mammoth Hot Springs to accommodate those who wanted to access the healing properties of Yellowstone's waters. Other hot springs had become privately claimed, and hotels had been built near them to cater to the infirmed.

Once again, business backing for nature protection was critical. In this case support for creating the Yellowstone National Park came from Jay Cooke and Company. The firm had financed the Northern Pacific (NP) Railroad, which would run through Montana just north of Yellowstone. In October 1871, a Cooke representative wrote to Ferdinand Hayden, the director of the Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, suggesting that "Congress pass a bill reserving the Great Geyser basin as a public park forever—just as it has reserved the far inferior wonder of Yosemite and big trees"—the latter phrase indicating the interest of the NP in competing with the SP to attract western tourism.<sup>30</sup> NP President Jay Cooke was an active supporter of protecting Yellowstone because, when completed, the railroad would be the line nearest to this public park, thus giving the firm a *de facto* monopoly on traveling to it.

Confirming Cooke's expectations, a government report predicted that "in a few years the region would be a place of resort for all classes of people from all portions of the world... . As a place of resort for invalids it will not be excelled by any portion of the world."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, echoing Raymond's concern about Yosemite, the report warned that unless Congress acted immediately, its economic value as a tourist attraction and health resort would be ruined by unrestricted commercial development. "Persons are now waiting for the spring to open to enter in ..., to make merchandise of these beautiful specimens ... as is now done at Niagara Falls."<sup>32</sup>

In March 1872, President Grant signed legislation designating more than two million acres in northwestern Wyoming as Yellowstone National Park, making it the nation's first national park as well as the country's largest acreage of wilderness protection to date. As Sears notes, "while in the long run it would turn out to be an important precedent in the history of conservation, but in 1872 it was a milestone in the history of tourism."<sup>33</sup> The nation's scenic wilderness areas had become an object of national pride, matching the natural

settings and architectural monuments of Europe, with their images featured in numerous and widely copied paintings. The challenge was now to get more tourists to travel west to visit them.

## RAILROADS AND WESTERN TRAVEL

By 1890, thanks in large measure to the backing and political power of major railroads, four major national parks had been created in the western region of the United States. But what worried conservationists was that there was no national political constituency for protecting them. Not only were these parks located far away from the nation's population centers; far too few Americans appeared to be interested in wilderness or scenic protection for its own sake. Clearly, more Americans needed to be encouraged to visit the parks. According to an official of the Appalachian Mountain Club, the nation's oldest conservation organization, only "if the public could be induced to visit these scenic treasure houses, would they come to appreciate their value and stand firmly in their defense."<sup>34</sup>

Equally importantly, the more people who visited the parks, the more the American economy would benefit. One of the most important advocates of scenic protection was the American Civic Association, which had been established in 1904 following the merger of two organizations: the League for Civic Improvement and the Outdoor Society. In 1909 the Association's president warned of the economic costs of not adequately protecting the nation's "God-given resources." He feared that "the generation to come will increasingly spend, in beauty travel to wiser Europe, the millions they have accumulated here, being driven away from what was once a very Eden of loveliness by our careless regard for appearance."<sup>35</sup> Echoing what Greeley had written earlier, Allen Chamberlain, a New England preservationist, stated, "We must consider [the national parks] from the commercial standpoint. Let it not be forgotten that Switzerland regards its scenery as a money-producing asset to the extent of some two hundred million dollars annually."<sup>36</sup> Americans now needed to be persuaded not to "waste money" on traveling to Europe to "see scenery that in no way compares to our own."<sup>37</sup>

Estimates of the amount of money Americans spent on visiting scenery in Europe ranged from 200 to 500 million dollars a year. A congressman from Colorado described the nation's scenery as "one of our most valuable assets," adding that "these great assets should be realized upon the fullest extent." He urged the United States to learn from Switzerland, which had understood that "the public is ready and willing to pay for scenery."<sup>38</sup> But the public could not

“pay” for this scenery unless they had a way of getting there and there were accommodations for them after they arrived. It turned out railroads were in the business of providing both. Accordingly, the western railroads, both by promoting and facilitating travel to the nation’s parks and then by building hotels, became critical political allies of preservationists. As one visitor wrote in *Collier’s Magazine*, “Were it not for the Great Northern Railway, travel through Glacier Park would be practically impossible.”<sup>39</sup>

In the decades following the completion of the nation’s first transcontinental railroad in 1869, the railroads became the primary promoters of travel to the West. In 1885, an agent for the Northern Pacific published a guidebook for travelers to the West that went through several editions. In 1898 the Southern Pacific published the first edition of *Sunset Magazine*, which promoted the natural and historic attractions of the American West. The NP subsequently adopted a mountain goat as its corporate logo in order to promote travel to Glacier National Park, which it had helped create, while the Union Pacific added Zion and Bryce Canyon Parks to its marketing campaigns. In short, “these railroads spared no effort to sell this new post-frontier West to eastern tourists seeking to experience a ... connection with nature.”<sup>40</sup>

At the first government conference on national parks, held in 1911, Interior Secretary Walter Fisher, after noting that the railroads had played the leading role in publicizing the national parks, stated, “We know that this costs them money, and although the inducement is a financial return to the railroads, it is an enlightened selfishness,” adding that without the railroads these parks would be isolated.”<sup>41</sup> The Department of Interior letter that established the core policy principles for the National Park Service, which was established in 1916, likewise emphasized the importance of making the parks as assessable as possible, which of course depended on rail service.

## FOREST PROTECTION IN NEW ENGLAND

In New England, the scenic counterpart to Yosemite and Yellowstone was the White Mountains of New Hampshire. However unlike in the West, where virtually all the wilderness areas originally belonged to the federal government, the New England forests were privately owned. Nor was there was a large, economically and politically dominant business firm that stood to benefit from wilderness protection and to advocate for it. But commercial interests did play an important political role in promoting public policies to protect forests in New England.

During the middle of the nineteenth century, New Hampshire had developed a small-scale sawmill industry that had adapted to the region's mostly second-growth forests. The wood these firms harvested was limited, and much of it was for local use. However around 1880, the state's small business wood cutters became eclipsed by large pulp and paper producers. Unlike earlier logging practices that had been relatively selective in which trees were cut down, thus protecting the appearance and integrity of the state's forests, commercial pulp cutters engaged in wholesale tree removal.

As one journalist wrote, "Until the establishment of the great pulp mills along the waterways ... there was no real alarm concerning the future of the woods... . But when the pulp mill grinders were put on a diet of four-inch stuff, the eyes of the native who thought their forest invincible began to bulge with amazement."<sup>42</sup> The subsequent turn-of-the-century purchase of timber by the Diamond Match Company significantly exacerbated the rate and extent of forest destruction; its volume now exceeded the natural growth of the forests. This in turn threatened the state's long-term economic stability as well as its cultural identity, both of which were closely linked to its forests. The destruction of the region's forests was of especial economic concern to resort owners whose businesses were being threatened by visible scars of forest destruction spreading up the mountain slopes.

They, along with tourists and recreationists from throughout New England, called for regulations to protect the slopes of the White Mountains, which were being stripped of coniferous growth, giving them a "bedraggled appearance."<sup>43</sup> A local newspaper wrote that the region was "in the grip of the lumbermen and land speculators," and a resort owner complained that land speculation threatened to close off access to New Hampshire's beautiful forest scenery, placing "an effective veto ... upon all summer resort extensions."<sup>44</sup>

In February 1901, a group of prominent New Englanders established the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire's Forests (SPNHF). They began to campaign for public forest ownership. The following year a group of conservationists drafted a congressional resolution to create a national park or forest reserve. As logging began to spread to the Presidential Range—the preeminent symbol of New England's wilderness—public support for federal forest management grew. A number of constituencies, including women's clubs, conservation professionals, and farmers, joined the call for forest protection. What drew them together was their resentment over "the control that timber companies held over upstate lands."<sup>45</sup>

They were joined by two important groups of business firms. One was textile owners whose mills were being disadvantaged by the erratic river flows

caused by cutting in the upper watersheds. Subsequently, company officials from throughout the state became strong supporters of federal forest management. The second was hotel owners. Although the forests were privately owned, the resort industry regarded the White Mountains as an important public resource. In fact, tourism had made the White Mountains a regional attraction, prompting considerable support for federal action to protect them by many Boston residents, who valued the mountains for fishing, hunting, and wilderness tourism.

In 1903, the state legislature sent to Congress a joint resolution in favor of a national forest reserve. There was considerable debate in Congress as to whether forest management on private lands was an appropriate role for the federal government. However, in March 1911 Congress enacted the Weeks Act, which authorized federal purchases of forestlands in the east: “The most significant forestry legislation to occur in the region in a century, it accelerated the trends toward public forestry and public ownership already underway in the states.”<sup>46</sup> Seven years later, following successive federal purchases, the White Mountain National Forest was established. By 1938, almost 13 percent of New Hampshire’s land had been purchased by the federal government and incorporated into the White Mountain National Forest.

The tourist industry was a major beneficiary of forest protection in New England. Summer hotel owners, along with land syndicates, competed with one another to promote the benefits of the local scenery in the hope that they would attract rail and steamship companies, which would then raise the value of their properties. During the 1880s, the Maine Central Railroad began to shift its focus from freight to passenger service. It published a monthly magazine extolling the benefits of wilderness recreation and sponsored promotional trips to resorts. Urban merchant associations promoted their towns and cities as a debarkation for the growing number of tourists heading into rural New England. In short, “tourism promoted a new, multiple use for the seemingly exhausted northern New England landscape.”<sup>47</sup> And these tourists—many affluent urban elites—in turn, became influential supporters of forest protection.

## FOREST PROTECTION IN NEW YORK STATE

The Adirondacks comprise a large mostly forested mountain area stretching across six million acres in northern New York State. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the state had made little or no effort to protect the forests in this region, which were all privately owned. Although New York had led the

nation in lumbering in 1850, by 1880 due to overcutting, fire, and neglect, it had declined to fourth place. But the forests now had another use. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, increased public awareness of this mountain region—one of the largest remaining relatively uninhabited wilderness areas on the east coast—drew hundreds of sportsmen attracted by the region's abundant wildlife and fish. They became the first organized constituency in favor of protecting it.

As in New England, those who vacationed in the Adirondacks were an important constituency for forest protection. In 1893, one such visitor to a resort on Lake Placid who had been coming to the Adirondacks for two decades wrote to the *New York Times*, “in climbing ... the slopes ... where there was once a grand and exquisite forest, one passes through blackened ruins and miles of bare and desolate rock ... all made by a certain iron manufacturer ... for a return of 50 cents an acre for charcoal.”<sup>48</sup> However, the popularity of the Adirondacks as a vacation destination in New York was overshadowed both by Niagara Falls—still the nation's most popular tourist attraction—and the Catskill Mountains, which were much closer to New York City. Consequently, the economic benefits of tourism and wilderness recreation did not initially play an important political role in protecting the forests in the Adirondacks.

Rather, urban commercial interests were the most important business constituency for forest protection in New York State. As early as 1864—the year that Yosemite was protected by the federal government—the writer George March had predicted that “the felling of the Adirondack woods would ultimately involve for Northern and Central New York consequences similar to those which have resulted from the laying bare of the southern and western declivities of the French Alps.”<sup>49</sup> Specifically he warned that without adequate forests, erosion would silt the state's major river, the Hudson River, which connected New York City to the interior of the United States.

His concern was echoed in an 1872 report by the state's Park Commission that argued for timber protection on the grounds of “political economy.” It stated, “Without a steady constant supply of water from these streams of the wilderness, our canals would be dry, and a great portion of the grain and other produce from the western part of the State would be unable to find cheap transposition to the markets of the Hudson River Valley.”<sup>50</sup> The state's northern waters were critical to the viability of its canal system, which carried freight relatively inexpensively between Albany and Buffalo. In 1873, a newly established periodical for the state's sportsman recognized that the watershed argument was the key to getting the legislature to back wilderness protection.

It stated that we need “to have them look at the preservation of the Adirondacks as a question of self-interest.”<sup>51</sup>

During the 1880s, declining water levels of both the Hudson River and the Erie Canal made wilderness preservation more politically salient in New York City. An 1883 editorial in the *New York Tribune* stated that the state’s northern woods “contain the fountain heads of the noble streams that conserve our physical and commercial prosperity,” adding that cutting the wild forests in the Adirondacks was equivalent to “tampering with the goose that lays the golden egg.”<sup>52</sup> Not only did forest destruction threaten the viability of the state’s waterways; it could also undermine municipal water suppliers and lead to disastrous flooding.

The New York Chamber of Commerce now mobilized the city’s politically powerful business community in support of wilderness protection, informing the legislature that the destruction of the forests “will seriously injure the internal commerce of the state.”<sup>53</sup> The city’s merchants were particularly concerned that if the state’s internal waterways could no longer be used to ship goods, the railroads would then have a monopoly and be able to raise their shipping costs. As Nash notes, “It did not require a love of wilderness to come to the defense of the Adirondacks on these grounds.”<sup>54</sup>

Originally the Chamber wanted the state to purchase roughly four million acres, exercising its right of eminent domain in order to ensure sufficient supplies of water to the Hudson and Erie Canal. According to an editorial in the *New York Tribune*, “Our lawmakers should be made to understand that the businessmen of the City are in earnest, and that they were not inclined to sit still and see the waterways of our inland commerce destroyed.”<sup>55</sup> But this proposal met with fierce opposition from lumbermen, who did not want their access to these forests to be restricted. They also claimed that they were harvesting the woods responsibly and that existing forest destruction was due to fires set by careless hunters and fishers.

Notwithstanding the support of Theodore Roosevelt, then a young Assemblyman, a Senate Committee decided against buying the land. However, in 1884, the Chamber was now backed by other business associations including the New York Board of Trade and Transportation. For the Board, protecting the state’s watershed was “essential for the commercial, industrial and transportation interests of the commonwealth.”<sup>56</sup> The state legislature was now persuaded to establish a Forestry Commission to investigate conditions in the state’s northern mountains.

The following year the Commission issued a report that recommended the creation of a forest reserve in the Adirondacks. Following extended

negotiations in which experienced lobbyists for the Board of Trade played a critical role, in 1885 New York State established the state's and nation's first forest preserve—acting six years before Congress enacted legislation that permitted the president to set aside such reserves. However, rather than have the state purchase additional land, it instead listed counties in which state already owned forests on land that had been abandoned. It was those forests that would remain in the public domain and therefore be “forever kept as wild forest lands.”<sup>57</sup> At its inception, the preserve included 681,000 acres in the Adirondacks.

Subsequently, downstate residents with recreational interests in the mountains created the Association for the Protection of the Adirondack to preserve the mountain's forests, waters, game, and fish. Their stake in forest protection was backed by local businesses that benefited from the patronage of summer boarders and tourists. As one local property owner explained, “the woods attract them, and so it stands us in hand to do what we can to keep the forests as they are, or better them. In order to do so this timber and stealing and firing must be stopped.”<sup>58</sup> Thanks to the Association's efforts to keep wilderness protection on the public agenda, in 1892 the legislature designated the forest reserve as a state park intended for the public's “rest and recuperation,” suggesting a shift in the focus of forest protection.<sup>59</sup> By 1904 New York State owned 1.4 million acres in the Adirondacks. Many of these forests were located in higher elevations, land that was the least valuable to loggers and most valuable in protecting headwaters but also useful for wilderness recreation. Over time the Adirondacks became more commercially important for recreation than for lumber.

## CONCLUSION

The most influential historical study of business and federal conservation policies is Samuel Hays's *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920*.<sup>60</sup> Due to the beginning date of his study, only a portion of his book overlaps the public policies discussed in this article. However, one of his central insights—namely, that historically natural resources policies were politically dominated by, and in the interests of, business—is also clearly reflected in policy developments earlier in the nineteenth century. But while Hays focuses on the interest of business in using natural resources most efficiently, this article describes another motivation. The creation and then the promotion the nation's national parks, the reclamation of New England's forests, and forest protection in the Adirondack



were not motivated by using the nation's natural resources more efficiently. Rather, important segments of the business community benefiting by protecting and preserving them.

Their policy preferences divided business interests because for each of the protected areas described in this article there were alternative economic uses. The scenic wilderness areas in California, the hot springs in Yellowstone, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and the forests in the Adirondack all could have been economically developed very differently, which in turn would have benefited a different group of businesses. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century more powerful business interests were often able to persuade policy makers that both they and the country would benefit more by protecting these natural resources. Their efforts both reflected and contributed to a broader public understanding of the value of wilderness and forest protection.

The conflict between alternative economic uses of natural resources persists. For example, during the twentieth century the interest of oil companies in drilling off shore has been challenged by commercial interests who wanted to protect the beaches and coasts for recreation.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, California, the state with the largest shoreline used for recreation, was the first state to restrict offshore oil drilling, followed by Florida, with its valuable beach front properties on both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. When the Trump administration announced plans to reopen virtually the entire continental coast to oil drilling in January 2018, its plans met with vigorous opposition from virtually all coastal states because they threatened their (more) economically valuable beachfront tourism industry. The fact that, in 2016, the outdoor recreation industry had revenues of 170 billion dollars suggests that Olmsted's vision of the commercial value of protecting the "outdoors" has proven prophetic.<sup>62</sup>

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## NOTES

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