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Conservation: America’s Environmental Modernism?

A few years ago, there would have been an obvious way to start an article on “environmental modernism”: emphatic declarations that the two words are by no means anathema. In the twenty-first century, one can probably do away with these conventions. With the threat of global warming apparent to anyone willing to see and a U.S. president touting the potential of green technology, it is a given that environmental sustainability is a key goal of any modern society. In fact, it now seems that labeling environmentalists as anti-modernists was first and foremost a ploy to derail inconvenient initiatives. After all, chastising people for standing in the way of progress sounds more high-minded than lamenting about costs and priorities. In any case, there is no longer anything spectacular about “environmental modernization”, and scholarly articles, rather than fighting rearguard actions against those who continue to assert that environmentalists harm business, are well advised to focus on conceptual merits. From a historian’s perspective, the remarkable thing about the concept of environmental modernism is that the rise of American modernism coincided with a growing concern for the environment, and chances are that this chronological overlap was more than an accident of history.

To be sure, the coincidence is not evident on first sight. The environmentalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a fragmented one, and not only because words like “ecology” and “sustainability” had yet to gain their current meaning. The environmental question was unlike the so-called social question in that it started as a diverse set of challenges in different fields: pollution of the air, soil, and water, decimation and extinction of species, concerns for beautiful or otherwise remarkable landscapes, the supply of scarce resources, and so on. With that, environmental modernism comprised hugely different challenges. Some of the problems lay in urban areas, while others concerned rural America or wild, mostly unexplored areas. Furthermore, environmental problems required different types of knowledge and different types of policies on different levels, and that made for a great deal of heterogeneity. In the early 1900s, people thought about environmental issues as mostly isolated challenges. It was a key innovation of environmentalism to develop ideas and concepts that highlighted similarities and linkages between the diverse array of issues.
The diversity of environmental challenges was – and is – evident in all modern societies across the globe, from England, the motherland of industrialism, to present-day China. However, in making sense of this diverse set of themes and issues, environmental historians of the United States are more fortunate than most in that they can identify a concept from the period that built bridges in quite a similar way to today’s environmentalism. In the early 1900s, “conservation” emerged as a buzzword in many different arenas, ultimately becoming part of the enduring legacy of the Progressive Era. Furthermore, conservation embodied a key element of progressive thinking between the 1890s and the First World War, namely its penchant for “efficiency”. In his pioneering monograph on the conservation movement, Samuel Hays spoke of a “gospel of efficiency”, and Daniel Rodgers emphasized “efficiency” as one of the pillars of progressivism, itself a rather heterogeneous cluster of groups and issues1. “Efficiency” and “conservation” were versatile concepts: They had a meaning for many different problems and on different levels, providing a compass for administrative procedures as well as forest or water management issues. In fact, one of the great charms of conservation was that it came along with a powerful historical narrative. It was a classic American theme, the spectacular conversion from a sinful to a benign life. So far, the American people had exploited its abundant resources in a reckless manner – but now, with a new mindset, conservation would inaugurate a new era of thoughtful, efficient resource management.

This essay explores the topic in four stages. The first section describes the sudden appearance of the conservation movement around the turn of the century. The article then takes a closer look at the peculiar interplay between the state and the public sphere that characterized the U.S. approach to environmental issues. Third, the article analyzes how the conservation movement fared when it found itself confronted with environmentalist concerns in the post-World War II era. Finally, it considers to what extent conservation defines a distinct style of environmental management in the modern era. Of course, it goes without saying that these are broad themes, each of which could easily fill a volume of its own. Furthermore, it is a task that defies any attempt at comprehensive annotation, and the minimalist footnotes that follow merely scratch the surface. However, it seems that this is precisely the value that modernization theory retains despite all the criticism it has received: The concept of modernization challenges us to ask broad questions that transcend the conceptual barriers that usually demarcate our fields of investigation. Both “modernism” and “environmentalism” are big terms, and yet they have shown a remarkable resilience. It is easy to highlight the vagueness and ambiguity of “modernization”, but the term has proven impossible to exercise. With that, the first goal of this essay is to raise and draw attention to crucial

questions. Whether it can also achieve a second goal, namely providing satisfying answers, is up to the reader to decide.

A Sudden Debut

Conservation has never been uncontroversial. That makes the conservation movement’s sudden entry unto the political stage around 1900 all the more remarkable. In order to highlight the suddenness of conservation’s debut, it is helpful to compare it with the rise of the current environmental movement in the post-World War II years. All in all, environmentalism emerged gradually after 1945, with singular events that only converged into a broad movement over time. For instance, it is only in retrospect that we can identify Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) as a milestone in the rise of environmentalism. From grassroots beginnings, the movement gathered momentum until it could finally weld a new polity on the federal level. In contrast, the debut of the conservation movement looked more like a daring raid on the existing political system. That is especially true on the federal level: Within a few years, a whole host of new agencies came into being, usually with the brash air of a youngster eager to transform the style of resource management from top to bottom. Even more, conservation made a lasting difference, quite unlike other movements that emerge, flashmob-style, out of nothing. U.S. history knows a number of movements that suddenly grow into giants, only to collapse with similar speed – from the populist revolt to the technocratic movement. In contrast, conservation dominated the stage for decades after its spectacular coming-out.

To be sure, it is possible to detect some traditions in hindsight which provide historical context. For example, the charismatic leadership of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, makes it easy forget that there had previously been a Division of Forestry within the Department of Agriculture. After two unremarkable division heads, Bernhard Fernow became chief in 1886, and the German-trained forester initiated significant reforms in the 1890s, including the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 which proved indispensable for the work of the Forest Service. But even with this prehistory, the rise of sustainability-oriented forestry is impressive: Within a single generation, the United States embraced the European tradition of a professional corps of foresters managing the public domain. With the creation of a nationwide network of field stations and research institutes, Pinchot and his successor Henry Graves created an administrative machine that embraced and embodied the idea of conservation2.

While the preservation of forests was a concern in many parts of the United States, the management of scarce water resources was a classic issue of the American West. Once again, activities of the Progressive Era built upon previous activ-

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ities which, though limited in scope, opened the door for the conservation movement. In 1888, Congress asked the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct hydrographic surveys in order to identify regions suitable for irrigation. The initiative soon stalled, not least because John Wesley Powell, then director of the Geological Survey, conceived the authority much more broadly than intended, resulting in a backlash driven by land speculators. However, when Congress passed the Newlands Reclamation Act in 1902 to boost irrigation, Roosevelt located the new Reclamation Service within the Geological Survey; in 1907, it became a separate agency under the broad roof of the Department of the Interior. In order to improve the management of fossil resources, the federal government set up the Bureau of Mines in 1910. However, the trend was also evident on the local level. As the present author has shown, the Progressive Era led to the development of smoke abatement bureaus on the municipal level. Staffed with trained engineers, these bureaus became a major component of air pollution control in the United States. They defined the approach to urban pollution until far into the post-World War II era.

It is a matter of discussion whether one can include the preservation of wild nature in a list of Progressive Era achievements in conservation. Textbooks tend to stress the tension between preservation and conservation. While the latter sought to manage resources in a more efficient and just manner, the former sought to stop all kinds of human intrusions. The crucial episode illustrating this dichotomy is usually the Hetch Hetchy controversy over the construction of a dam in Yosemite National Park. The battle pitched John Muir, the founding president of the Sierra Club, against urban, water, and electric power interests, generating so much heat and attention that no history of conservation can avoid an extended discussion of the affair. And yet, as a number of scholars argued by the early twenty-first century, the sides shared more than they conceded. After all, the protection of nature is a type of human intervention and use. One could discuss this on a philosophical level: A powerful strand within the debate over wilderness holds that the notion of untamed nature, like every idea of nature, is a human construct that needs to be discussed as such. However, the more down-to-earth historian will probably be more comfortable with the view that the national parks were indeed constructed to a significant extent. Linda Flint McClelland has shown that the experience of pris-

4 A little-known overview on the first fifty years is available at the National Archives of the United States, RG 70 A 1 Entry 10. Running at more than 1,500 pages, it presents a chronological summary of activities.
tine nature resulted from a vast but sensitive building program. Without roads, lodges, and other types of human infrastructure, the experience of the national parks would be vastly different. In the twentieth century, the national parks became a crucial resource for tourism, thus blurring the distinction between conservation and preservation even more. Finally, it is telling that the Progressive Era also led to the formation of a National Park Service in 1916. In short, if we conceive the creation of protected areas as a special type of land use, there is little reason to refrain from including preservation into a broader understanding of the conservation movement.

The spectacular debut of conservation on the national stage was probably more impressive than the actual results. The backlash from vested interests was significant, but the problems went deeper than that. It turned out that efficiency was a rather ambivalent guiding principle, open to numerous interpretations as to instruments and goals. As a result, the concept has drawn just criticism from environmental historians. For instance, Hugh Gorman has argued in his investigation of pollution problems in the American petroleum industry that efficiency, rather than solving the problem, allowed industrialists to sidetrack anti-pollution efforts. In his reading, abatement did not start with vigor until the efficiency-based pollution control ethic was replaced by another. There is no need to stress that discussions of the overall impact of conservation deserve a prominent place in environmental history. However, with a view to American modernism, it seems more worthwhile to look at the general political style and specifically the interplay between state actors and the public. That is what the following section intends to do.

Public Issues

In order to understand the significance of the Progressive Era for the American approach to environmental problems, it is helpful to compare it with the second boom of environmental issues during the New Deal. Of course, it goes without saying that the 1930s saw more than a reinvigoration of previous trends. For instance, the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps had much more resemblance with the Labor Service in Nazi Germany than with anything happening before World War I. And yet it seems that, in the long run, the New Deal was far less influential in the field of environmental policy than it was for, say, the American welfare state. For example, the dams of the Tennessee Valley Authority did not differ all that much from those built by the Bureau of Reclamation and the

Army Corps of Engineers. Reforestation was a key concern of the New Dealers, but ineffectual ideas such as the Great Plains Shelterbelt exerted far less influence over time than Gifford Pinchot’s legacy. Even controversies of the New Deal era provoke a sense of *déjà vu*. Harold Ickes’ plan to transform the Department of the Interior into a Department of Conservation looks much less spectacular when one takes into account that the Department of the Interior had already been a key battlefield for conservationists during the Progressive Era, as the famous clash between Pinchot and Richard Ballinger shows. Only some activities were actually new: In 1933, the Soil Erosion Service joined the ranks of federal conservation agencies. Renamed Soil Conservation Service in 1935, it grew into a huge agency within a matter of years, taking up the fight against soil erosion and depletion that the conservationists of the Progressive Era had somehow forgotten to start.

The New Deal was also similar to the conservation boom of the Progressive Era in that it was followed by a period of lukewarm interest in environmental issues. Just like the early 1900s, the 1930s saw a campaign style of conservation policy, with staunch proclamations of marvelous intentions, quick expansion of bureaucracies, but then a decline of interest and activities after the first feverish years. It is tempting indeed to write the history of conservation with Arthur Schlesinger’s cycles of American history in mind. In such a reading, the start of the Progressive Era gave way to the *laissez-faire* 1920s until the New Deal picked up the torch again, to be followed by lukewarm interest after World War II until environmentalism entered the scene in the 1960s. Since then, the boom-and-bust cycles have only become shorter, as William Ruckelshaus, the first director of the Environmental Protection Agency, noted with his metaphor of a pendulum of environmental policy swinging back and forth. Writing in the mid-1990s, when the fresh Republican majority in Congress set out to dismantle much of the environmental regulation system, he took a long view: “The anti-environmental push of the nineties is prompted by the pro-environmental excess of the late eighties, which was prompted by the anti-environmental excess of the early eighties, which was prompted by the pro-environmental excess of the seventies, which was prompted …” With a view to the staunch anti-environmental stance of the George W. Bush presidency, this narrative seems ever more convincing.

Of course, such a reading would be superficial. Specifically, it would replicate the mistake of progressive history in that it looks at activities without simultaneous attention to interests, let alone to categories like class, race, and gender. It would be rather easy to lay out the elite views behind much of the agenda of conservation, as Samuel Hays attempted to do with urban governance in his classic if

The late emergence of “environmental justice”, a blend of social and environmental concerns, is revealing here, as is the rediscovery of many traditions of environmental activism in ethnic and poor communities, all of which became apparent once historians looked beyond the standard constituencies of conservation. However, it seems more rewarding in the present context to reflect on what this means for the general style of handling environmental problems. Why did America’s environmental modernization rely to such a great extent on campaigns?

It is important to look beyond the standard reference to the extraordinarily weak American state. Many scholars have noted the aversion to a strong federal government throughout the nineteenth century and how that changed to some extent during the Progressive Era. Furthermore, it is difficult to envision an impressive conservation policy as long as governments on all levels were firmly in the grasp of political machines, Tammany-style. And yet it seems that there were also other factors at play. For example, it was no accident that the Progressive Era also coincided with a coming-of-age of American academia. It would be too simple to state that all conservation efforts were driven by a burgeoning profession. For instance, the soil conservation drive in the 1930s essentially preceded the development of a corresponding scientific community, as feverish efforts at training and research during the New Deal demonstrate. And yet it seems that conservation campaigns during and since the Progressive Era drew much of their power and vigor from the fact that they were also about professional recognition and jobs. From its inception, knowledge was a key currency of conservation, and scholars have paid less attention to this connection than it deserves.

It also deserves more recognition that when Americans were inventing their regulatory state around 1900, they were also importing it to some extent. References to Europe, and specifically England and Germany, abound in the conservation literature, although no historian has as yet studied these connections thoroughly. In any case, if we conceive the state as a European invention, as Wolfgang Reinhard has done, it is not difficult to identify a number of American peculiarities. First, in spite of all emphasis on civil service, U.S. officials lacked the degree of independence that members of European bureaucracies so proudly displayed. Second, the idea of entrepreneurial freedom had a special resonance in the United States. Even more, it remained strong even when this notion was more image than reality, as entrepreneurs turned from independent leaders to perennial negotiators.


with all sorts of public and private corporations. Third, corruption plagued U.S. agencies far more than their European counterparts, though quantifying this difference may be difficult. After all, corruption is to a great extent a matter of context; perhaps some European countries were spared the equivalent of a Teapot Dome scandal for lack of oil fields?

In any case, the weakness of the state had much to do with the vigor of America’s civil society, a key theme of transatlantic comparisons since Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. It does not take much searching to find quotations illustrating the passion which accompanied environmental debates in the United States. For example, the Smoke Abatement League in Cincinnati asserted that a notorious producer of dense black smoke in the city “must be looked upon as one who openly defies the law, the rights of the people and the demands of municipal decency and should be treated as an enemy of the public welfare”\(^{18}\). Many activists were indeed speaking of their campaigns as “crusades”, thus evoking a burning fervor unchecked by any kind of administrative routine or penchant for proper procedures. However, passion was not limited to the pro-environmental camp. Statements from the opponents of conservation were no less extreme, especially after environmentalism had come out as a popular force around 1970. James Watt, Ronald Reagan’s first secretary of the interior, provides one of the more drastic examples with his remark: “If the troubles from environmentalists cannot be solved in the jury box or at the ballot box, perhaps the cartridge box should be used.” This is certainly a unique quotation among cabinet-level environmental or natural resource officials in Western democracies\(^{19}\). However, environmentalists crossed the lines of civil, non-violent protest as well, though instruction manuals for “monkeywrenching” made a point of limiting hazards to humans\(^{20}\).

When it comes to environmental issues, one factor seems to boost the degree of civic activism: uncertainty as to what the “interests of nature” really are. Unlike other social issues, environmental problems do not speak for themselves. Endangered species do not file petitions. As a result, defining an environmental problem is more open to divergent interpretations, and it should come as no surprise that there were many conflicts where both sides claimed to pursue an interest in nature. In Hetch Hetchy, the wise use of water resources clashed with the preservation of natural beauty; the same held true for the conflicts over dam projects along the Colorado River in the 1950s and 1960s, which played a crucial role for the rise of U.S. environmentalism. Even in the age of ecology, the definition of the environmental interest remains contested. For instance, the “wise use” movement

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claimed green credentials, as the general idea seemed to loop back to the original ideas of the conservation crusade.

Conservation in the Age of Ecology

When the Reclamation Service became an independent agency in 1907, it was a milestone in the history of conservation. Some eighty years later, Marc Reisner published *Cadillac Desert*, a famous indictment of much of the work of the Reclamation Service as well as the Army Corps of Engineers. Reisner portrayed the Reclamation Service as a reckless agency that had long abandoned its roots in the conservation crusade, instead concentrating on the perpetuation of dam construction for its own sake. To be sure, Reisner was not completely averse to the idea of river development and water management, and yet his book provides a fitting demonstration of the change of mood in late twentieth-century America. At some point in the post-war years, conservation left the stage, or at least faded into the background, to be replaced by a new paradigm that one might call, for lack of a better term, environmentalism.

It is clear that this transition deserves attention in a discussion of conservation as the American path towards modernity. Unfortunately, nearly everything about this transition is disputed; its chronology is open to debate, as are the underlying causes. Did it really mean something that the early environmental movement was also known by the name “new conservation movement”? Was Earth Day 1970, the much-touted event with an estimated 20 million participants, the birth of the movement, or was it merely a milestone in its long-term rise? And what should we make of the link between environmentalism and post-material values that Ronald Inglehart put forward in his famous *The Silent Revolution*? In a book co-written by Christian Welzel, Inglehart recently put forward one of the most stimulating versions of modernization theory – an inspiring and provocative proposal that will be ignored here only because it would entail a detour into an altogether different direction.

However, one thing that can safely be said about conservation and environmentalism is that they could not coexist easily over a long period of time. To be sure, it was impossible to make a clear-cut distinction through much of the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, the Sierra Club was a conservationist organization by tradition but also became a powerful environmental pressure group under David

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Brower’s energetic leadership\textsuperscript{24}. But as soon as environmentalism had become a public force around 1970, the lines were clearly drawn between “old” conservation and “new” environmentalism, a situation which led to an interesting and understudied phenomenon: the deliberate “burning” of conservation traditions. Instead of trying to reform institutions from the conservation tradition, environmentalists demolished them in order to start from scratch. The present author first came across this phenomenon in his study of air pollution control, where the year 1970 marked a general watershed. Since then, institutions from the smoke abatement (i.e., conservation) tradition no longer carried any legitimacy, and environmentalists eagerly set out to write new laws and create new agencies\textsuperscript{25}. The same happened in the field of soil conservation. Environmentalists criticized the U.S. Soil Conservation Service vigorously, pointing for instance at its drainage projects in wetlands. Reisner’s critique of the Reclamation Service provides another case in point.

However, the distinction was clear only from the point of view of the environmentalists. Members of the agencies under fire were less confident about their loyalties, and at times they were aghast. “It was a shock”, Norman A. Berg, who had joined the agency in 1943 and ultimately became chief of the Soil Conservation Service from 1979 to 1982, noted in a retrospective interview\textsuperscript{26}. Another official who had joined the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 voiced a similar sentiment in an interview of 1981: “The word ‘environment’ is a poisonous word with a lot of our people.”\textsuperscript{27} And yet this mattered only to the bureaucratic insider, as conservation traditionalists were fighting an uphill battle in the environmental era. Mel Davis, Berg’s predecessor as chief administrator from 1975 to 1979, reported, “Those environmental groups, and I can take the National Wildlife Federation as a specific example, gave me hell up one side and down the other, yet they never came to my office to sit down and talk to me about these problems. They would leave it up to you to come over there because they thought that they were in the driver’s seat now.”\textsuperscript{28}

It is not easy to make sense of these divergent views. To some extent, the dynamics of knowledge provide an explanation. During the Progressive Era, fostering the knowledge base of the new agencies was an important part of conservation policy. The merits were clear: In order to manage resources properly, conservationists needed professional skills and a wide range of information. But as these agencies became part of the bureaucratic establishment, the situation changed.

\textsuperscript{24} Michael P. Cohen, The History of the Sierra Club 1892–1970 (San Francisco 1988).
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Uekötter, Age.
\textsuperscript{26} Steven E. Phillips, Douglas Helms (eds.), Interviews with Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service: Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg (United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, Economics and Social Sciences Division, NHQ, Historical Notes Number 3, August 1994) 174.
\textsuperscript{27} Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-198 Box 3 Folder 4, Oral History Interview with Gordon K. Zimmerman, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{28} Phillips, Helms, Interviews 99.
Conservation: America’s Environmental Modernism?

With their accumulated wisdom, agencies saw information as one of their key resources and the base of their power, making control of knowledge a key issue. As a result, numerous environmentalists experienced conservation agencies as closed, unaccountable giants. In any case, it seems that the divergence between conservation and environmentalism was more a matter of practical politics and everyday experiences than a matter of principle. After all, the philosophies overlapped on numerous points; both included ethical commitments as well as political agendas; and when it came to concrete measures, the differences was sometimes non-existent and frequently hard to pinpoint. The one key difference lay in their geographic scope: While U.S. environmentalism was part of a general trend in Western societies, conservation was a quintessential American philosophy. And yet it does not seem that this divergent scope mattered much in the beginning of environmentalism. In fact, it seems that the global dimension of environmentalism did not come into view forcefully until after conservation was dead for all practical means and purposes.

In retrospect, the interplay between global and U.S. trends carries an even deeper irony. After all, the end of conservation coincided with the end of what Charles S. Maier has termed the “age of territoriality”. According to Maier, the regulatory powers of nation-states reached a new level in the late nineteenth century, due to a combination of new technological means and political reforms. Since the 1960s, however, these powers were gradually undermined in the wake of globalization. From such a point of view, the willful destruction of the conservation tradition looks even more fateful. After all, this meant that the United States left the age of territoriality without a firmly entrenched tradition of environmental regulation. Building a new tradition proved exceedingly difficult, as the ongoing conflicts over environmental policies attest. When comparing European and American approaches in the early 2000s, one of the striking contrasts is the difference between the stability of European environmental policies and the dramatic fluctuations of agendas and instruments in the United States. It seems that the U.S. system had been thrown off balance in a sensitive moment, making it difficult – if not impossible – to regain a certain degree of stability to the present day.

A Peculiar Modernism?

With that, it might look tempting to rush toward a clear conclusion, namely that conservation was indeed a peculiar style of environmental management that put the United States on a special path to this day. After all, the contrast between European and American environmental policy is familiar to everyone who reads a newspaper nowadays. While Europe has emerged as the global champion of climate policy, the United States displays a far more skeptical posture. However, the
present contrast is probably not a good guide when judging a century-long tradition. After all, there are also similarities; in fact, these similarities are so strong that one might argue that, from a European perspective, conservation looks like the reinvention of the wheel. Weren’t the Americans doing belatedly what European administrations were already doing for decades or even centuries – managing forests, or ore deposits, or city administrations in a way that looks beyond the necessities of the day?

The transatlantic similarities clearly point to the need to reflect on the frame of reference. Modernization theory highlights the similarities between North America and Western Europe, and the merits become clear when one moves beyond the limits of the Western world. To be sure, the colonial world had its own conservation efforts, but they looked notably different from the American model. First, they rarely moved beyond rudimentary efforts until after World War I and often did not become a significant force for the interplay between man and nature until after the intensification of colonial policies after 1945. Exceptional figures like William Willcocks, the builder of the first Aswan dam in 1896–1902, merely confirm the general picture. His hydraulic one-man crusade across the British Empire was without parallel in the Western world, and it is characteristic that Willcocks was much detested, if not feared, among colonial administrators30. Second, colonial conservationists were ultimately part of a system of resource exploitation in the interest of the ruling state, whereas U.S. conservation movement emphasized that it was born out of enlightened self-interest. Third, the knowledge problems of U.S. conservationists paled in comparison with those in the colonial world, where many projects failed or even backfired for lack of information among the authorities. The famous Tanganyikan groundnuts scheme was only one of the more vivid examples.

It is important to see the colonial world not simply as a distant mirror which makes the United States look more attractive and effective in its quest for conservation. When we look at America before the late nineteenth century, it is not difficult to identify certain colonial traits. Specifically, the extraction of resources as if there was no tomorrow was clearly closer to colonial modes than to European practices. The distance between places of resource production and places of resource transformation carries a certain colonial ring as well: William Cronon’s seminal Nature’s Metropolis describes Chicago in a way that is not dissimilar to Liverpool and Manchester in the British Empire31. Against this background, the conservation movement looks like the end of a colonial tradition of resource use and an orientation after European models. Somewhat belatedly, the United States joined the trend of Western states that identified the management of natural resources as a key challenge of modernity, and it attests to the vigor of the conservation movement that the United States advanced from a latecomer to a model in

the twentieth century. Around 1970, U.S. environmental policy became an inspiration in numerous countries, including the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus, from an environmental standpoint, the United States became modern with the emergence of the conservation movement.

In conclusion, it seems that a lot speaks for seeing European and American approaches as essentially one joint endeavor of environmental modernism. Seeing conservation as part of a general tradition of environmental modernism also helps to adjust the focus on European traditions of resource management. While some fields like forestry were many decades ahead from a U.S. standpoint, the distance shrank when it came to urban issues, where the late nineteenth century was a key period of reforms in many European cities as well. Only a few European cities, for example London, had a long tradition of urban resource management when American cities began to confront the problem. However, the greatest similarity between European and American models clearly lies in the limits of what was achieved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For all the respect that we owe to the energetic pioneers of that era, it is clear that they were operating within strict limits. Theirs was a repair job which usually reached the limits of its potential when change became too expensive for vested interests. Changing the path of modernity, as opposed to supporting its course through incremental reform, was out of the question; by and in itself, modernism was presumed to be environmentally sound. In short, what European and American modernism embraced around 1900 was a “get rich quickly, then clean up later” approach. Easy problems were more or less solved, while the more difficult ones were postponed indefinitely. It is this legacy of environmental modernism that we are struggling with today.

Summary

Jede Gesellschaft sieht sich im Zuge industriegesellschaftlicher Modernisierung mit ökologischen Problemen konfrontiert. Der Beitrag diskutiert, inwiefern sich dabei in den Vereinigten Staaten ein spezifischer Stil des Umweltmanagements herausbildete. Im Unterschied zu anderen Ländern gab es in den USA mit dem Begriff „Conservation“ einen zeitgenössischen Terminus, der zahlreiche Dimensionen dessen, was wir heute als ökologische Frage bezeichnen, miteinander verband. „Conservation“ markiert das Ende eines kolonialistischen Stils im Umgang mit Ressourcen und ökologischen Herausforderungen. Seit die „Conservation“-Bewegung um 1900 ziemlich rasch auf allen politischen Ebenen entstand, prägten eine Leitthetorik der Effizienz sowie ein enger Nexus zu Expertengruppen mit spezifischen Wissensangeboten und Professionsinteressen die einschlägigen De-