Alan MacEachern,“The Conservation Movement,” *Canada: Confederation to Present* CD-ROM, Chris Hackett and Bob Hesketh, eds. (Edmonton: Chinook Multimedia, 2003).

Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, Canadians for the first time began to seriously question whether they were doing permanent damage to nature. The buffalo had all but disappeared in the 1870s, and the once-ubiquitous passenger pigeon was well on its way to extinction; the seemingly endless Canadian forests were showing signs of overcutting; and urban areas were polluting the air, land, and water. As a result, some people began working to protect nature from people. This conservation movement peaked early in the 20th century, though strains of conservationism can be seen throughout the 19th century and even in present-day environmentalism.

Conservation -- or "preservation", as it was also known -- may be defined as the planned and efficient use of natural resources, so as to ensure their permanence.[1] By taking no more from nature -- whether it be pine trees, deer, or water -- in a given time period than nature itself would replace in that period, resources could be sustained. Naturalist C. Gordon Hewitt introduced the idea to Canadians in 1911, writing, "conservation means nothing more or less than the protection of Nature, the prevention of destruction without perpetuation...." Prudent use also meant targeting wasteful practices. Hewitt said of conservation, "It means use without waste, or with as little as possible." Economic motivations were coupled with a broader, more social vision: the conservation movement was meant to guarantee the continued prosperity of Canada as a nation. In Hewitt's words, "Conservation is nothing more than a gospel of unselfishness, a lesson on our duty to future generations of Canadians...."[2] That Hewitt needed to define his term in a number of ways hints that conservationism meant a number of things to its promoters.

The birth of the national park system in the same era may be seen as an offshoot of conservationist thinking. The creation of Banff National Park in 1885 and other parks around the turn of the century signalled a wish to protect not just elements of nature but also entire landscapes. In an influential 1969 essay, historian Robert Craig Brown has argued that the national parks were born of the same idea that fostered

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[1] Some historians refer to "preservation" as distinct from "conservation", with preservationists interested in saving parcels of nature intact and free from any extractive use. However, such a differentiation is confusing, for two reasons. For one, it forces historians to speak of conservation and preservation as both streams of a larger movement which has traditionally been called conservation. More importantly, it ignores the fact that people of the time spoke of conservation and preservation interchangeably: the very first paragraph of the Commission of Conservation's Conservation of Life journal uses "preservation" twice as a synonym for "conservation".

[2] C. Gordon Hewitt, "Conservation, or the Protection of Nature," The Ottawa Naturalist, vol. 24 no. 12 (March 1911), pp. 210 and 221.

conservation: a desire for efficient, permanent use of nature. The Canadian government created Banff National Park not because of sentimental or environmental concerns, but simply to make the best economic use of it, since the mountainous terrain of the Rockies was deemed unsuitable for much of anything but tourism. Brown calls this pragmatic economic thinking that led to parks' establishment "the doctrine of usefulness."[3] Through time, historians have taken to using Brown's expression as shorthand for the entire conservation movement.

But conservation should not be given such a one-dimensional meaning, as the inclusion of parks within its domain makes clear. Parks involve a form of resource exploitation that is far different from, and far less physically destructive than, outright extraction. Moreover, those who visit parks are impelled by social, aesthetic, and even spiritual motivations -- just as those who promote wildlife, forest, or watershed protection are. Conservationism is best understood as an ideology inspired by a number of factors, only one of which is economics. Those who supported conservation at the turn of the century did so for such diverse social and intellectual reasons as fear of urban decay and immigration, growing confidence in scientific expertise, distaste for perceived rural backwardness, and a growing appreciation for nature. The conservation movement was ultimately rooted in making Canada not only an economically secure nation -- even a richer one -- but also a better one.

Historiography

There is a simple enough reason why our understanding of conservation has been skewed toward economic motivations. Those conservationists most interested in economics tended to be people with power, the people most likely to have their opinions heard at the time, their ideas put down on paper and preserved in archives, and their histories later told. Most works on the Canadian conservation movement have therefore dealt with elite groups. Janet Foster's Working for Wildlife follows the efforts by federal bureaucrats to save wildlife; R. Peter Gillis and Thomas R. Roach's Lost Initiatives studies the influence of lumber barons and scientific foresters on conservation; W.F. Lothian's A Brief History of Canada's National Parks examines its subject from the point of view of the federal parks agency; and Michel F. Girard's L'écologisme retrouvé traces the history of the government's Commission of Conservation. Such texts are valuable -- indeed, they form the backbone of this synoptic essay. But as a result we have a decidedly "top-down" view of Canadian conservation, and do not know much about how it played itself out on the ground.

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[3] Robert Craig Brown, "The Doctrine of Usefulness: Natural Resource and National Park Policy in Canada, 1887-1914," Canadian Parks in Perspective, eds. J.G. Nelson with the assistance of R.C. Scace (Montreal: Harvest House, 1969), pp. 46-62.

Bill Parenteau's excellent article "Care, Control, and Supervision" shows the direction that research on conservation is starting to take. Parenteau studies the late 19th century Atlantic Canada salmon fishery to see who benefited from conservation initiatives that developed there. He finds that regulations were designed specifically to save fish for well-off urban sportsmen, at the expense of commercial and subsistence rural and Native users.[4] Parenteau's article demonstrates the need to study how conservation affected the lives of ordinary Canadians, and how they reacted to the limitations it imposed on their use of resources.

More research is also needed on the relationship between the conservation movement and the back-to-nature movement of the same era. Those who visited parks, or thought animals should be photographed rather than hunted, or believed in nature's healing qualities, were not nearly as active as more economic-minded conservationists in uniting with others who held similar beliefs. Though their beliefs would be important to the eventual germination of environmentalism, we do not really know in what ways back-to-nature attitudes present in early 20th century Canada actually led to changing actions toward nature.

Early Conservationism

Citing a beginning of conservationism in Canada is impossible. Members of the First Nations and European settlers each possessed spiritual and philosophical beliefs that constrained them from acting improvidently against nature (though some scholars do not consider these beliefs expressly "environmentalist"). Not surprisingly, game laws were the first measures explicitly imposing limits on the exploitation of nature, since wildlife depletion from overhunting threatened both livelihood and survival. For example, Upper Canada declared a closed season on ruffed grouse in 1762. The Hudson's Bay Company, attempting to slow the rapid depletion of fur-bearing game in the James Bay/Churchill River region in the early 1800s, restricted both whites and natives from trapping there. In the 1840s, conservation laws helped to curb the massive slaughter of shorebirds and the theft of their eggs along the St. Lawrence River. By Confederation in 1867, all of the provinces had game legislation of some sort. These laws, however, were only irregularly implemented, and even more irregularly enforced.

Canadians gave little thought to conservation when there was little imminent threat of resource depletion. The prevailing ethic in 19th century North America was the "myth of superabundance": a belief that the continent's natural wealth was so vast as to be inexhaustible. Such a small percentage of land had yet been settled, and settlers had fought such a difficult battle clearing it, that there seemed little danger it would ever be used up. This thinking was probably even more prevalent in Canada than

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[4] See the "Suggested Readings" for complete references to these works.

in the United States. Canada had a smaller population and larger wilderness area than its neighbour to the south, and the government's retention of Crown Lands put a check on land speculation not present in the American system. During the final third of the nineteenth century, Americans began to feel their nation's limits were finally being reached. The U.S. Census of 1891 declared that the frontier was now for all intents used up, leading historian Frederick Jackson Turner to mourn the death of what he called the defining agent of American character. Canadians, seeing on their maps the great open expanse to the north and west, felt no equivalent sense of threat.

Recognition of the limits to American growth nevertheless spurred the first Canadian interest in conservation, in the forest industry. If the U.S. were to run out of its own forests, it might turn to Canada and soon deplete ours. Ottawa lumber baron James Little published pamphlets in the 1870s warning of this threat, and calling for policies that would curb overcutting and control forest fires. Although others in the industry disputed Little's forecasts, they agreed that Canada should work now to avoid the problems Americans were facing. No less an observer than Prime Minister John A. Macdonald noted in Ottawa in 1871 that "The sight of immense masses of timber passing my windows every morning suggests to my mind the absolute necessity for looking into the future of this great trade. We are recklessly destroying the timber of Canada and there is scarcely a possibility of replacing it."[5]

Foresters in this period were involved in professionalizing their enterprise and making it more scientific, both to minimize waste and to regulate price and supply. A few Quebec and Ontario lumbermen sought out the most up-to-date forestry practices from Europe and the United States. They found allies in the Ontario Fruit Growers Association, which was dedicated to improving agriculture through science. The OFGA saw forests as necessary to good farming (since they provided windbreaks and prevented erosion), and even called for reforestation in places where land had been cleared for agriculture but had proven unsuitable. Members of the OFGA and the conservationist foresters -- including James Little and his son William -- attended the first American Forest Congress in Cincinnati in 1882. While there, they convinced the convention to meet again in Montreal, later the same year.

The Montreal Congress was an important moment in Canadian conservation. It brought together Canadians and Americans to discuss the future of forestry, through newspaper accounts it introduced conservation concerns to the public, and from it emerged two clear leaders of the Canadian movement: forester William Little, and longtime Quebec politician and naturalist Henri Joly de Lotbinière. More immediately, it produced recommendations for the protection of Canadian forestry. The delegates

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[5] Macdonald to John Sandfield Macdonald, 23 June 1871. National Archives of Canada [NA], Sir John A. Macdonald papers, MG26A, vol. 518 pt. 4, LB15, p. 963.

proposed that forest reserves be created, brush fires be banned in some seasons, and more money be spent on fire suppression. Such proposals were clearly of greatest benefit to industry, and laid forestry's problems at others' feet. After all, forest reserves were not to be reserves from forestry but for it, keeping marginal land safe from settlement. Similarly, the congress ignored overcutting and argued that the greatest danger to the Canadian forests was fire, believed to be the result of hunters' and settlers' carelessness. Quebec responded to the congress's recommendations by establishing a fire ranger system and the nation's first forest reserve in 1883; Ontario followed with its own rangers, and created Algonquin Park in 1893.

These early measures indicate that conservation was motivated largely by economics: foresters saw fire as the loss of potential profits, and took action. But they also show that there was more to conservation than just economics. Industry leaders, mostly from urban centres, saw themselves as offering safer, more efficient resource management than small rural woodlot owners could provide. They teamed up with university-trained foresters -- members of an increasingly respected scientific elite -- to convince governments to pass appropriate legislation. Much the same pattern emerged in wildlife conservation of the time. An urban upper class promoted hunting as a ritualized sporting activity rather than a rural necessity, and so created hunting seasons and implemented license fees that best suited themselves. Conservation was part of an ideological shift taking place across the Western world that devalued the rural, traditional, premodern way of life in favour of an urban, scientific, modern one. However, the shift was hardly unstoppable or even unidirectional. The Canadian forest industry that had begun to embrace conservation in the early 1880s backed away from it later in the decade, troubled by the more immediate concerns of a nation-wide recession.

National Parks and Conservation

Curiously, during this recession the Canadian national park system was created. This suggests that the parks might have been distinct from broader conservationism, even more removed from direct economic thinking. And yet, the parks were born of the same ideas that propelled conservation: to use nature to full advantage, to ensure its permanence, and, in doing so, to make Canada a stronger nation. To consider the creation of the parks as consistent with conservation in introducing how late nineteenth century Canadians were beginning to think about nature is therefore sensible.

In 1883, Canadian Pacific Railway employees Frank McCabe and William McCardell discovered hot mineral springs at Banff, in the Rocky Mountains. The two envisioned making the springs a tourist resort, like spas popular in Europe and the United States. After squabbling with other speculators, McCabe and McCardell tried to

gain title to their claim from the federal government in 1885. John A. Macdonald's Ministry of the Interior agreed that Banff had great tourist appeal -- and so decided to keep the land for Canada. A 26 sq. km. site was originally to be set aside, but following the Dominion Land Surveyor's enthusiastic report of the surrounding land's beauty, the reserve was greatly expanded to 673 sq. km. In 1887, Rocky Mountains Park -- later renamed Banff -- became Canada's first national park.

Economic motivations propelled the park's establishment. The government imagined travellers, drawn by the spectacular mountain scenery, first as paying passengers on the Canadian Pacific Railway line and then as paying guests in CPR-owned lodgings and restaurants. Secretary of the Interior Department John Hall had drawn inspiration from visiting the privately-owned Arkansas Hot Springs resort in 1886. He felt that putting Banff under government ownership would guarantee it did not fall victim to the sort of overcommercialization present at the Arkansas site. In this way, national park creation signalled the same commitment to resource permanence as did the broader conservationism. The same interest in efficiency was also evident: the government saw the Banff area as best suited for tourism, since its mountains made settlement impracticable. In Parliament, John A. Macdonald stated, "the Government thought it was of great importance that all this section of country should be brought into usefulness."[6]

But the politicians who created Banff clearly believed that it was to be about more than just financial exploitation. The government took its precedent not only from the Arkansas Hot Springs, but also from Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks, created in 1864 and 1872 respectively. Indeed, the wording of the park act -- whereby Banff was to be "hereby reserved and set apart as a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage, and enjoyment of the people"[7] -- mimicked that of the Yellowstone act. The authors of the act understood that making Banff a park limited how it would be used. Macdonald himself argued that the land needed to be preserved so that "as much attention as possible should be paid to the protection of the timber in the general line of the park."[8] This was conservation for aesthetic reasons, to ensure the beauty of the planned resort's surroundings, but conservation nonetheless. Other Parliamentarians spoke even more bluntly, one saying that no timber licenses should ever be allowed, and another saying that "if you intend to keep it as a park, you must

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[6] Canada, House of Commons, Debates, 3 May 1887, p. 233. From this single reference in the 25-page debate, historian Robert Craig Brown coins the "doctrine of usefulness." I discuss Brown's interpretation of Banff's creation in Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970 (Kingston-Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), pp. 15-19.

[7] Canada, Act Respecting Rocky Mountains Park of Canada, 50 ch. 32, 1887.

[8] Canada, House of Commons, Debates, 3 May 1887, p. 233.

shut out trade, traffic, and mining."[9] Even at so early a period, politicians -- and, presumably, Canadians generally -- accepted that a park would and should interfere with otherwise approved financial considerations.

One might still argue that Banff's establishment proves only that the methods of drawing profit from nature were expanding, but that financial motivations remained supreme. (In the same way, Yoho and Glacier National Parks were created in the late 1880s to further increase traffic to the CPR's mountain route, even if their mandates spoke of preserving "the timber and natural beauty of the district."[10]) But this interpretation ignores the fact that the reason parks were thought good investments was that they were expected to be popular, because society was increasingly interested in nature for reasons that cannot be considered economic. Turn of the century Canada was experiencing a back-to-nature movement. Cottaging and canoeing were popular pastimes for well-off Central Canadians; groups like the Canadian Alpine Club and Camp Temagami attracted the adventurous; and readers were hooked on Canada's own world-famous nature writers Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton. In such an atmosphere, parks offered landscapes that enriched one aesthetically, air and exercise that made one healthier, and a sense of wonder that fulfilled one spiritually. Naturalist John Livingston argues in The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation that our interest in nature is never really altruistic, that "wildlife preservation 'for its own sake' is for the sake of the experiencer."[11] But that does not mean that conservation is always motivated by economic reasoning; it can as well be based on other human desires.

Conservation at the Turn of the 20th Century

Conservation took a more prominent place on the North American stage in the last years of the 19th century. A key reason was the realization among groups with concerns for specific resources that their ambitions could be united. This realization was evident in the establishment of Ontario's Algonquin Park in 1893. First, sportsmen groups that had arisen in recent decades argued that market hunters and rural folk were wiping out game species in the area; tougher game laws were needed. In 1892, a Royal Commission on Game and Fish came to the same conclusion and recommended a park be created to restock Ontario's depleted wild. Second, Ontario foresters once more grew interested in conservation. Price instability and questions about the valuable white pine supply led foresters to see the utility of forest reserves; they had already moved to selective cutting by setting minimum diameters for the trees they harvested. Third, watershed conservation was gaining adherents. Provincial forest clerk Robin

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[9] Ibid., 29 May 1887, p. 196.

[10] Cited in Janet Foster, Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 31.

[11] John Livingston, The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981), p. 102.

Phipps lobbied for Algonquin's creation on the basis that this northern region stabilized the river systems of the entire province; clearing forests might dry out all of Ontario. Surprisingly, when the advocates of these disparate conservations came together they took as their model the new national parks in the West, though the basis of their interest was the permanent retention of resource use. Algonquin's establishment act copied the Rocky Mountains Park Act, and the new reserve was even dubbed a "national" park, thanks to its size and purpose rather than its management. But this nod to the value of the national park designation came back to haunt. Though Algonquin was always meant as a reserve for cutting mature pine trees, visitors in the coming years were horrified to find forestry taking place in their national park, and voiced their adamant opposition.

A schism had begun within North American conservationism. The question was no longer just whether nature should be protected, but why and how. To those who had come to conservation from an enjoyment of nature and a belief in its sanctity and right to peaceful existence, parks best represented their goals. To those who had come to it from a concern that resources were being exploited wastefully, and would not always be available for human use, reserves best represented their goals. The latter became more dominant, at least in the short term. The more economically-minded group consisted of progressive businessmen who, with the aid of scientists intent on demonstrating their ability to regulate nature, could convince governments that their vision for resource use was most profitable.

This amalgamation of power may be seen in the creation of the Canadian Forestry Association [CFA] in 1900. Ontario lumbermen were unable to convince their provincial government to enforce rudimentary policies to protect resources, and so turned to the federal government for support. They found allies there. Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier was himself an amateur ornithologist and an advocate of wildlife protection, Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton was a committed conservationist, and the Minister of Inland Revenue was none other than Sir Henri Joly de Lotbinière, who had chaired the Montreal Congress fifteen years earlier. In a rather circular development, the Laurier government nudged industry to create the CFA, whose prime purpose was lobbying the government to promote conservation. But the CFA attracted more than just foresters: its membership soon resembled a who's who of Canadian banking, industrial, and railway sectors. Businessmen were attracted to conservation because they saw its values -- prudence, efficiency, and permanence -- as their own. Implicitly, they were defending large-scale modern management techniques over the decision making of small, independent, traditional resource users. The ascendance of this "authorized" form of conservation gave the cause a much more prominent place on the national stage in the early 20th century.

Economic-minded conservationists identified as their enemies not just the people who used resources inefficiently, but also the people who thought that portions of nature should not be used at all. Bernard Fernow, an American forester who would become the first Dean of Forestry at the University of Toronto, told the 1906 Canadian Forestry Convention that forests were meant to be used. He warned, "Beware of the sentimentalists who would try to make you believe differently."[12] American forester Gifford Pinchot likewise suggested, "forestry with us is a business proposition. We do not love the trees any less because we do not talk about our love for them, but the owners of forest land in the mass will never protect their forests for merely sentimental reasons."[13] Ironically, since Canadian nature-lovers did not tend to organize in this era, these critical sources provide the best existing record that there was a "sentimental" strain of conservation at all.

The Commission of Conservation

As the quotes by Fernow and Pinchot above suggest, the United States' conservation movement influenced Canada's. Of course, it was only natural that the two nations should travel along similar paths: they shared much the same social, intellectual, and environmental conditions that fostered conservation. But without the success of the American movement, conservation in Canada would most likely have been no stronger in the early 1900s than it had been in the late 1800s. American supporters gave the cause a greater sense of urgency, since they believed the resources of their nation were in greater jeopardy. Also, they offered stronger leadership. Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. president from 1901 to 1909, served as a very public model for conservation by dedicating much of his administration to protecting land by creating national forests, national parks, and wildlife refuges. His Chief Forester of the U.S. Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, was himself well-known in the press as a booster for scientific, business-like forestry and had succeeded in giving "conservation" the utilitarian meaning that came to characterize the term.

In 1908, Roosevelt was about to leave office, and wished to ensure that his conservationist measures would have permanency. He held a national conservation conference and followed this up with invitations to Canada, Mexico, and Newfoundland for a North American congress in February 1909, just weeks before he would leave office. Each government accepted. Canadian Prime Minister Laurier sent on his behalf Minister of Agriculture Sydney Fisher, Quebec M.P. Henri Beland, and Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton -- all longtime supporters of conservation. The Washington conference resulted in a number of recommendations, the most notable being that each

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[12] Canada, Report of the Canadian Forestry Convention, Ottawa, January 10-12, 1906, p. 26.
[13] Ibid.

nation form its own conservation commission. Incoming President Taft nixed this plan for the U.S., but in Canada the Laurier administration moved ahead swiftly. In April 1909, an act to create a permanent Commission of Conservation was introduced in Parliament; it was passed with unanimous support from both sides of the House the following month.

The Commission of Conservation stands as the high water mark of the Canadian conservation movement. Its position within government gave conservation a national credibility it had not previously enjoyed, and the Commission was able to accomplish a great deal in matters such as forestry, wildlife protection, public health, and town planning. Moreover, its history serves as a useful microcosm of conservation itself in this period. During the agency's life, it was involved in a variety of programs for a variety of quite disparate reasons. Its ambitions grew steadily broader over time, even as society's commitment to conservation dissipated; the disjunction of these two paths led to the death of the Commission in 1921.

The Commission of Conservation was directed "to take into consideration all questions which may be brought to its notice relating to the conservation and better utilization of the natural resources of Canada, to make such inventories, collect and disseminate such information, conduct such investigations inside and outside of Canada, and frame such recommendations as seem conducive to the accomplishment of that end."[14] It was to be an advisory body rather than a legislative one, because the federal government did not want to interfere in resource matters under provincial jurisdiction. But it was to work among all government departments rather than be responsible to any one. Despite the Commission's speedy birth and the breadth of its mandate, however, the government provided a start-up budget of only $22,000. This small budget raises the possibility that politicians saw conservation as an issue that was easy to endorse and easy to forget about. But the Commission of Conservation's apparent inoffensiveness offered it great political opportunity. Here was to be a non-partisan, publicly-funded, permanent conservation body moving freely through government channels. Clifford Sifton, who had drafted the bill creating the agency, thought enough of its potential to accept its chairmanship and announce that he would forego all other political commitments to give it his full attention. Sifton was a nationally-known and admired politician and businessman, and his participation signalled that the Commission of Conservation would not be a do-nothing body.

The Commission consisted of 32 members: the Canadian Ministers of Agriculture, Interior, and Mines; the nine provincial governments' ministers responsible for natural resources; and 20 people appointed for their professional expertise. Each province with a university was to have at least one professor serve on the commission.

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[14] Canada, Act Establishing the Commission of Conservation, 8-9 Edward VII, ch. 27, 1909.

Sifton hoped that these academics would direct their energies (plus facilities and staff) to Commission work, making it a scholarly, professional conservation research institute. This did not happen. Most professors involved felt their first commitment was to their own institutions, and they acted only as advisors. But again, what might have spelled disaster was turned to advantage. Behind the facade of a political and academic elite, a tiny, committed Ottawa staff actually undertook most of the Commission's work. Day-to-day operations were under the direction of Secretary James White, who had been chief geographer in the Ministry of the Interior. White was an earnest champion of conservation and, during the life of the Commission, Canada's most influential conservationist.

To better tackle its broad interests, the Commission of Conservation divided its work among seven committees: Forests; Waters & Waterpowers; Fisheries, Game & Fur-Bearing Animals; Public Health; Land; Minerals; and Publicity & Co-operative Organizations. Each committee attracted specific members, had its own jurisdictional hurdles to surmount, had individual ambitions, and developed its own strategies for success. Each, then, illustrated a different way in which conservation could be applied to Canadian life.

Thanks to the prominent role of the forestry sector in conservation, as well as the membership of lumbermen and scientific foresters in the Conservation, the Forests committee went to work almost immediately. It successfully lobbied government to make railways legally responsible for fires caused by sparks from coal-burning trains, which were blamed for about one-quarter of all forest fires. It also pressed for better disposal of slash (the debris left from chopping down trees), believed to be another prime cause of fire. Such initiatives perfectly suited the foresters' conception of conservation: trees were to be used efficiently; fire constituted the waste of usable trees; therefore, straightforward measures must be found to eliminate fires. In this respect, the Forests committee -- like forest conservation generally -- best represented the economically-driven side of conservationism.

The Waters & Waterpowers committee became involved in much broader protection of Canadian interests. In 1910, it strongly opposed two proposed American hydroelectric projects, one that would put a dam across the St. Lawrence River at the Long Sault Rapids, and another that would divert the Saskatchewan River watershed. In both cases, the committee argued that Canadians would lose control of their water, and would not receive much benefit in return. The Commission of Conservation also acted as a watchdog against an Illinois utility's illegal diversion of Great Lakes water and a similar plan from Minnesota involving the Lake of the Woods watershed. Such stands were popular with Canadians, of course, and suggest that conservation had a streak of nationalism to it: Canadian nature should only be exploited by Canadians. But the

Commission also rejected almost all Canadian applications for hydro projects because they flooded large areas.

Nor did the Commission see the United States' natural resource interests as necessarily incompatible with Canada's. The Fisheries, Game & Fur-Bearing Animals committee -- more than any other, constrained by provincial jurisdiction -- did much to rationalize fish and game laws between the U.S. and Canada, as well as nationwide. Its greatest success was in the assistance it gave to the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1916 by the two nations. The Treaty ensured that all provinces and states would abide by the same regulations on migratory bird protection. The Fisheries, Game and Fur-Bearing Animals committee in particular attracted members who believed that the protection of nature was an admirable goal in itself, regardless of whether that nature could then be used. This belief reflected wildlife conservation generally: because wildlife were sentient, living creatures, people found moral, non-economic reasons to decry their slaughter.

The committee on Public Health demonstrates by its very existence that conservation was meant to fulfill more than just narrow, economic goals. The argument was that Canadians themselves were Canada's greatest natural resource. That they too be "conserved," that is, protected in the present to ensure their productivity and permanence, was therefore essential. In these days before the existence of a federal department of health, the committee started with a wide scope of concerns which grew even wider through time. The vigilant Dr. Charles Hodgetts, who became the Commission of Conservation's Advisor on Public Health in 1909, espoused the social reform position of the day that good health demanded a good environment. He involved the committee in issues of public housing and water pollution, which in turn led to work on town planning . In 1914, the Commission wooed renowned British planner Thomas Adams to Canada. For the next four years he wrote extensively on Canadian urban issues and oversaw the creation of town plans across the country. One might be tempted to conclude that because the Commission of Conservation's work was moving away from direct economic motivations, it must have been increasingly selfless. Such a conclusion would be mistaken. In the agency's journal Conservation of Life, dedicated wholly to public health and town planning issues, articles such as "The Defective Immigrant" and "Unmarried Motherhood" make it clear that conservationists feared that the urban poor and immigrants posed a threat to the physical and racial health of the nation. Scientific and bureaucratic rationalism was needed to restore order. Of course, in this idea as in so much else, the Commission of Conservation reflected broader concerns within Canadian society.

Despite the differences in interests and tactics, the Commission's committees all spent much of their energy in the compilation and publication of reports on Canadian

natural resources. For example, the Minerals committee gathered national inventories on minerals such as coal, and the committee on Lands (primarily involved in agricultural matters) wrote surveys on Canadian soil fertility and fertilizer use. Such publications are without doubt the institute's greatest legacy. Between 1908 and 1921, the Commission of Conservation published about 200 reports for the layman and the academic, thus greatly expanding knowledge of Canadian nature and contributing to the making of public policy. Moreover, the Publicity & Co-operating Organizations committee spread the gospel of conservation through public meetings, press reports, and a monthly bulletin with a circulation of 12,000.

When established in 1909, the Commission of Conservation seemed blessed in its freedom to work among all departments of government without actually being responsible to any of them. But through time, this freedom made it a target of bureaucratic grumbling. Other ministries felt it was duplicating work, or being funded to do work that should have gone to them. (Actually, the Commission more often undertook innovative programs that other departments then coveted. The Lands committee's demonstration farms, for example, inspired the Department of Agriculture's Experimental Farms program.) Complaints that the Commission was publishing reports written in other departments, occasionally without permission, turned out to be valid. Commission spokesman James White tended to make interdepartmental tensions worse with his confrontational manner. In hopes of solidifying the Commission of Conservation's status and supplying it with the research component its academic members were not contributing, chair Clifford Sifton proposed to Prime Minister Borden (who had defeated Laurier in 1911) that a national institute doing its own scientific and industrial research be founded and put under the Commission's control. The move backfired; Borden instead created an independent National Research Council in 1916, thus further threatening the Commission with redundancy. And because the Commission was not affiliated with any department, it had no one to champion it when under siege.

Rather than drawing on departmental power, the agency relied on Clifford Sifton's personal power and his ability to maintain the support of the prime minister. But in 1918, both of these crumbled, and with them went the Commission's security. The St. Lawrence River dam project was renewed by American investors, and this time approved by the U.S./Canada International Joint Commission [IJC]. The Canadian government believed the IJC held no jurisdiction in the matter, and so ignored its ruling. Unaware of the government's stance, the Commission had prepared a brief on the matter for the IJC, implying it recognized the board's jurisdiction -- and thus undermining the Canadian position. Prime Minister Borden, though a supporter of the Commission, upbraided Sifton, who countered angrily that his institute had practically

written the Canadian position against American power interests in the first place. Sifton resigned as chair three weeks later, apparently feeling that the Commission was not receiving the support it deserved. His replacement, Senator W.C. Edwards, did not possess his authority in government. When Arthur Meighen, a longtime opponent of the Commission of Conservation, became prime minister in 1920, its days were numbered. Calling the agency costly, redundant, and too independent, the Meighen government unceremoniously dissolved it the following year.

The most remarkable thing about the Commission of Conservation's abolition is the lack of opposition to the move. Whereas 12 years earlier it had been created by unanimous approval in Parliament, and during its lifetime it had encountered very little political antagonism there, now only three members of Parliament defended it. This silence, when taken with Sifton's frustration prior to resigning and Meighen's vehement disapproval of the Commission, suggests that conservation itself was not nearly so popular anymore. The agency had been the fortunate product of a continent-wide movement, when conservation seemed a fresh, forward-thinking philosophy. But in the economic boom following the First World War, conservation stood in the way of unlimited natural resource development. Meighen complained in 1921 that "Conservation, as conceived by the Commission at any rate, up until a year or two ago meant the locking up of the resources of the Dominion from proper development and use."[15] Prudence now seemed constrictive. The Commission of Conservation, born when conservation came into fashion, died when it then fell out.

Conclusion

The demise of the Commission of Conservation serves as a tidy bookend to conservation's life as a movement. But just as it is impossible to fix conservation's beginning in Canada, so too is locating its end. Those drawn to it for other than economic reasons were not so swayed by turns in the economy. Jack Miner, who had maintained a bird sanctuary on his farm in Kingsville, Ontario since 1904, found his pioneering work in protecting the Canada goose attracting national enthusiasm only in the late 1910s. Membership in natural history clubs was likewise on the rise, and fish and game magazines devoted more space than ever to wildlife conservation. Game sanctuaries -- places for wildlife to be safe from human interference -- grew popular in the 1910s, demonstrating that conservation's hold on the national imagination was rooted in more than just financial gain. True, some of these refuges were set aside so that sportsmen could ensure a future hunt, but more often they were created out of a sense of responsibility to protect threatened species. Thus sanctuaries were created for

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[15] NAC, Arthur Meighen papers, "Extracts from Report of Sub-Committee of Council on the Commission of Conservation, 1921," p. 010954.

"worthless" wildlife like the pronghorn antelope (at Alberta's Nemiskam National Antelope Park) and birds (on Quebec's Bonaventure Island).

The national park system also thrived during the 1910s and through the 1920s. In 1911, the Dominion Forest Reserves and Park Act greatly reduced the size of Rocky Mountains, Jasper, and Waterton Lakes parks, turning much of their lands into forest reserves, but in return tightening government control of natural resource use within the parks. Society was coming to accept that parks were places where wilderness and wildlife should be maintained in as natural a state as possible. Also in 1911, the parks were placed under the control of a new Dominion Parks Branch, the world's first government body dedicated solely to national parks. James Harkin, a secretary for successive Ministers of the Interior, was appointed the Parks Branch's first commissioner. For the next quarter century he would oversee the development and expansion of the park system. Elk Island, Mount Revelstoke, St. Lawrence Islands, and Point Pelee national parks were all created in the 1910s, as were Kootenay, Wood Buffalo, Prince Albert, Riding Mountain, and Georgian Bay Islands in the 1920s. Perhaps parks flourished even as conservation withered away because they served as something like zoos for conservation. By visiting parks, Canadians could remember why they felt conserving nature to be important, while conveniently forgetting that they had largely chosen not to apply conservation to the larger society.

Though conservationism never truly died out, the Commission of Conservation's decline does signal a general shift in Canadians' thinking. In the 1920s, the nation began a decades-long period of intense resource exploitation free of any discernible public opposition. The philosophy underlying this was not questioned until the 1960s, when concern over everything from nuclear fallout to overcrowding in parks made North Americans wonder once more whether nature could accommodate their culture's unrestrained use of it. But the term "conservation" now seemed far too utilitarian and paternalistic for an idealistic attempt to save nature; the more holistic yet scientific "ecology" was adopted instead. Twenty years later, the now-passé ecology movement was similarly replaced by the more solemn "environmental" movement. The conservation movement is rightly remembered as Canada's first environmental movement, the first time in which concerned Canadians recognized the limits to what nature could tolerate from humans, and took action to protect nature for coming generations.

Suggested Reading:

- George Altmeyer, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," Journal of Canadian Studies, vol. 11 no. 3 (1976), pp. 21-36.
- Robert Craig Brown, "The Doctrine of Usefulness: Natural Resources and National Park Policy in Canada, 1887-1914," Canadian Parks in Perspective, eds. J.G. Nelson with the assistance of R.C. Scace (Montreal: Harvest House, 1969), pp. 46-62.
- Kurkpatrick Dorsey, The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).
- Janet Foster, Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998 [1978]).
- R. Peter Gillis and Thomas R. Roach, Lost Initiatives: Canada's Forest Industries, Forest Policy, and Forest Conservation (New York, NY, and Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986).
- Michel F. Girard, L'écologisme retrouvé: Essor et déclin de la Commission de la conservation du Canada (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1994).
- Gordon C. Hewitt, The Conservation of Wildlife in Canada (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1921).
- Gerald Killan, Protected Places: A History of Ontario's Provincial Park System (Toronto: Dundern Press with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, 1993).
- W.F. Lothian, A Brief History of Canada's National Parks (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1987).
- Bill Parenteau, "'Care, Control and Supervision': Native People in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery, 1867-1900," Canadian Historical Review, vol. 79 no. 1 (March 1998), pp. 1-35.