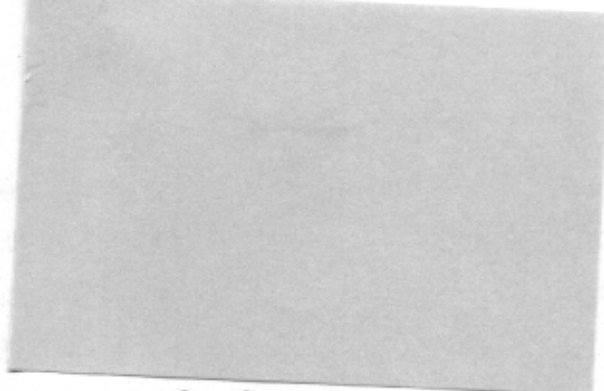


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The Wilderness Society

The following outlines the chain of events that led to the creation of a new non-government organization that was initiated to provide specific services and actions that appeared to some to be lacking in the organizations existing at that time. The time was 1934 and it marked changes in the economy and the beginnings of a zag in the environmental movement that was replacing Republican supporters with Democrats. This time also represented a zag away from utilitarian environmentalism to a preservationist stance.

Background

The beginning of environmental protection in the United States in the late 1800s was championed by individuals like John Muir who was himself an amateur scientist. The philosophy of the time was preservation and was promoted by a few strong willed individuals who were known in the field. Over time, these men realized that their reach and control over governmental policy was limited through individual efforts and collective actions were necessary. Muir said, *"I would gladly do anything in my power to preserve Nature's sayings and doings here or elsewhere but have no genius for managing societies"* (Fox, 1981, page 106). Muir felt that individual effort was his strength, but collective action was the role of others.

Muir was said to speak of intangibles, beauty, quiet, a harmony with nature. Others like Gifford Pinchot spoke in terms of material resources and jobs. By the 1930s the environmental movement was nearing a crossroads. Gifford Pinchot had molded the Forest Service into a utilitarian bastion of support for the lumber companies. The Park Service under the direction of Stephen Mathers was

catering to city folk in a carnival type atmosphere. Stephen Fox described Robert Sterling Yard's description of Yosemite in 1926 "*The results offended Yard's cultured sensibilities. He found crowds, automobiles, and a honky-tonk atmosphere.*" (Fox, 1981, page 204). There was a dichotomy between preservation for nature's sake and conservation for human utilitarian needs.

A Changing Environment for NGOs

As the issues became more complex and covered a broader range of environmental concerns, narrow focused organizations were at a disadvantage to impact the broader scope of American wilderness policy. The Audubon Society was concerned with bird sanctuaries, plumage use, and preservation of eggs. The Sierra Club was focused on the forests. Others were focused on their individual niches. Some environmentalists felt that it was time to create an organization that could focus on a number of issues dealing with forests, habitats, roads, dams and all the problems impacting the wilderness. Robert Sterling Yard who with Stephen Mathers founded the National Parks Association was finding that he could no longer support some of the activities of the Park Service. Later after Yard and Mathers had created the National Parks Association, ^{on} the leadership of the association was taken away and given to a more moderate person, one that would improve membership numbers and the donation pool. Yard lost a major avenue of influence. He needed another outlet.

Robert Marshall, a well-to-do son of a New York attorney, became enamored with the environment from reading books and staying summers in the Adirondacks of upstate New York. He later went on to live in Alaska and wrote several books on his experiences in Alaska and as a forester. Marshall was well connected with individuals in the Forest Service and was successful in influencing Gifford Pinchot, Forest Service Director and got his agreement with the premise of public ownership of forestland. The agreement on public ownership was as close to agreement that the two men (Marshall & Pinchot) would have in regard to policy surrounding forest management. Stephen Fox in his book on the conservation

movement summed up Marshall's beliefs this way, "*The greatest threat to the wilderness according to Marshall was the misapplication of the utilitarian doctrine – so often invoked by Pinchot – or the greatest good for the greatest number. For most people trees implied lumber. For Marshall and his minority they implied higher intangibles: beauty, adventure, and release from the psychological repressions of modern life.*" (Fox 1981, page 208). Marshall and a small group of similar thinking conservationists were becoming dissatisfied with the way public policy was initiated and with the apparent ineffectiveness of the various conservation organizations. It was the trend for organizations once established to garner favor of funding sources by moving group actions to the conservative side. Robert Sterling Yard lost his job as leader of the National Parks Association because he was seen as too far outside of the mainstream environmental movement.

cooptation?

Marshall became increasingly concerned with aspects of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policy. The creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the resulting public works actions that initiated development and road construction in the national forests were major concerns and probably inspired Marshall to more quickly to affiliate with those having beliefs similar to his own. Benton McKaye who worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority, and was the principal supporter for the development of the Appalachian Trail was one of those individuals that Marshall sought out. Another person of similar beliefs was Harold Anderson, developer of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. He was also concerned about the intrusion of the CCC into pristine mountain areas. Fox outlined Anderson's support for a new conservation organization in the following passage, "*In August 1934 Anderson planted the seed for a new organization.*" "*You and Bob Marshall have been preaching that those who love the primitive should get together and give a united expression to their views, that is what I would like to get started.*" (Fox, 1981, page 210).

The Wilderness Society is Born

Others sought out by Marshall and were important to the creation of the new organization included Aldo Leopold and Earnest Oberholtzer, both were high rolling influential conservationists of the era. *"When their car came to a screeching halt somewhere outside of Knoxville (Tennessee), the four passengers were in hot debate over plans for a new conservation group. The men got out of the car and climbed an embankment where they sat and argued over the philosophy and definition of the new organization."* (Wilderness Society Home page). *"With a baptismal donation of a thousand dollars from Marshall, the group was officially launched in January 1935."* (Fox, 1981, page 210).

Subsequent to some initial infighting Yard was appointed as president of the group. Marshall, who was on the board kept tight control of membership during his lifetime in order to prevent any intrusion by outsiders who may have had more conservative beliefs. The new conservation group was dubbed the Wilderness Society.

Triggers

The triggering event that may have facilitated the development of the Wilderness Society was linked to New Deal economics and the impact of the Work Progress Administration's push to employ people. This movement that created the CCC caused the development of roads and parks throughout the national forests. The creation of these new roads and public works projects threatened the Appalachian trail and other pristine areas of the national forests. The promotion of new parks (operated in the Mathers mode as carnivals) would also have been abhorrent to Marshall.

Marshall and Yard felt the impact of being pushed out of the main stream due to their strong beliefs on limiting use of the forests – away from the utilitarian conservationist modality. Most of the major conservation groups were not so

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much activists as educators. Marshall and his elite wanted an organization that was free to act and free to influence policy as they saw fit to support.

What Worked

One process that worked for the Wilderness Society was to support other environmental groups with various issues throughout the country. They found that if they supported these groups, they received support in return. Stephen Fox quoted Howard Zahnister a member of the Society, who handled many of its administrative duties when he said, "*The Society's overt purpose was still to preserve wilderness areas. Yet we find that to accomplish this we need to cooperate in every sound conservation enterprise and to support as actively as we can the whole conservation movement.*" (Fox, 1981 page 271). This effort allowed the Wilderness Society to be involved in a wide range of environmental issues without committing large amounts of staff and money.

Another aspect that worked for the Wilderness Society was to keep membership small and limited to an oligarchy of zealots that shared the same beliefs and were very influential in political matters. The group was able to use "collective individualism" to push issues in Washington. This limitation and the high caliber of its members gave the Society a great amount of credibility, but it also had its limits. A small group of individuals may impact some policy decisions, but at that time had great difficulty impacting public opinion as outlined by Hal Rothman, "*As a forum for discussing ideas, the Wilderness Society gained much early acclaim, but translating those ideas into policy was a more complicated undertaking. Without aspiring to a broad constituency, the society lacked an effective public voice and could attempt to influence policy-makers.*" (Rothman, 1998, page 24).

What Didn't Work

Another approach that didn't work so well for the Wilderness Society was its activist/elitist approach to environmental issues. This approach worked well for impacting environmental issues when the focus was on a federal agency like the

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US Forest Service, but it tended to alienate people and corporations who normally would be expected to contribute funds. Marshall knew when he started the organization that fund raising would be difficult with a small membership and that his approach to environmentalism would have its limits, but he didn't want to risk being pushed out of another organization and felt that his issues were too important to be lost. The oligarchy approach to management of the Society worked as long as dynamic people were in control. With the passing of Marshall, the Society went into a period of stasis that took some time to recover from.

The current day Wilderness Society's mission is to "*Deliver to future generations and unspoiled legacy of wild places, with all the precious values they hold: Biological diversity; clean air and water; towering forests, rushing rivers, and sage-sweet, silent deserts.*" (Wilderness Society Home Page). The Wilderness Society continues to be involved in a multitude of environmental issues and supports and in like manner is supported by other similar minded organizations. The current theme is environmental activism through collective action using a coalition effort (similar to its origins) using expertise and education to create a broad base of support for their efforts. The Society is active in 45 states and is affiliated with the Vermont Wilderness Association.

The Society is operated by a 29 person governing council and a 13 person executive council. Funding is obtained from a number of different sources and appears to be well organized and thought out. People can join for fees ranging from \$15 to \$1,000 – up to 75% of dues are spent on environmental protection. People can also donate, give through estate planning, or buy merchandise. Up to 25% of fees for merchandise is used for conservation efforts. The Society is also supported by corporate foundation grants.

Summary

The decade of the 30s was a turning point for the environment. The Great Depression, the Dust Bowl Era, the resulting New Deal economic actions of the

Roosevelt administration, which created the WPA and the CCC, were a chain of events that saw a changing of the environmental guard from Republican to Democrat. The Republicans who had historically voiced environmental conservation for utilitarian needs of hunting, fishing, logging and for commercial development – now wanted to use these resources to support an economic turnaround – new jobs, roads, railways, parks etc.

The business of America became business. Wilderness was a luxury America could no longer afford. Visionary people like Bob Marshall, Robert Sterling Yard, and Aldo Leopold recognized the need to change the way environmentalists were doing their business in response to changing public opinion and policy. Their approach was ahead of their time and necessitated a new organization of zealots (the Wilderness Society) and was the vanguard. The approach was to move away from collective action of an individual organization to collective action by multiple organizations. In this approach organizations support each other. They avoid competition with each other if possible, but each organization moves forward using its strength, built on the actions of the entire group of organizations.

key observation

This innovative approach is still effective today and almost every major non-profit organization that exists uses it to some degree to support its own environmental issues nationwide or worldwide.