will perennially yield bountiful crops, as the means for their redemption involves their constant fertilization.

To a great extent, the redemption of all these lands will require extensive and comprehensive plans, for the execution of which aggregated capital or co-operative labor will be necessary. Here, individual farmers, being poor men, cannot undertake the task. For its accomplishment a wise prevision, embodied in carefully considered legislation, is necessary.

PART TWO

THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATION CRUSADE, 1901–1910

NOTICE

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Conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time.

—Gifford Pinchot

The first national explosion of concern about conservation—indeed, the coining of the term itself—occurred during the Progressive era in the early-twentieth century. Within the space of a few years conservation acquired the status of a household word. For the first time in American history resource management became a national priority. Forests and wildlife continued to command attention, but water was a new focal point. Progressive conservationists dreamed of controlling rivers with dams and contemplated “reclaiming” land for civilized purposes by draining swamps and irrigating deserts. The Reclamation Act of 1902 created a mechanism for putting the proceeds from the sale of western lands to use in federal irrigation projects. Within five years the Bureau of Reclamation had twenty-five projects underway. They became showcases of the capabilities of government planners and engineers and paved the way for really comprehensive regional planning efforts such as those that would transform the Tennessee, Colorado, and Columbia watersheds in the next generation.

Conservation became entangled in national politics when President William Howard Taft failed to sustain his predecessor’s, Theodore Roosevelt’s, zeal for natural resource protection. Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt’s friend and chief of the U.S. Forest Service,
clashed with Taft’s Secretary of the Interior, Richard A. Ballinger. At issue was the acquisition of valuable public lands by big business. The so-called Ballinger-Pinchot controversy led to Pinchot’s dismissal in 1910 and to a schism in the Republican party. The election of 1912 found Roosevelt and Taft splitting the Republican vote and Woodrow Wilson winning the presidency for the Democrats. World War I temporarily eclipsed conservation, but the Progressives had discovered the political potency of the human nature issue.

One way to understand the sudden emergence of Progressive conservation is in terms of its historical context. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Americans were ready to be concerned about their environment. A national mood or temper existed that had been absent, with a few exceptions, a generation before. Its dominant characteristic was anxiety over change in the American environment. The change involved industrialization, urbanization, and a growing population, but it can be expressed most succinctly as the ending of the frontier. The Census of 1890 simply announced this fact. Three years later Frederick Jackson Turner wrote *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, and a vague uneasiness over the prospect of a frontierless America became widespread. The frontier had been almost synonymous with the abundance, opportunity, and distinctiveness of the New World. For two and a half centuries its presence largely explained America’s remarkable material growth as well as many characteristics of her people. As a consequence, few could regard its passing without regret.

One result was a general tendency to look favorably on conservation. It would extend the remaining abundance, preserve the environmental qualities of the nation’s youth, and assuage anxiety over population growth and industrial expansion. Conservation, to be sure, was not the only beneficiary of American uneasiness. Imperialism and the movement for immigration restriction, for instance, also reflected turn-of-the-century anxieties. But conservation had special appeal because it directly attacked the problem, which was, at root, environmental. Conservation would be, in a sense, the new frontier, keeping the nation young, vigorous, prosperous, democratic, replete with opportunity for the individual, and because of its relation to nature, wholesome and moral. These had once been the frontier’s functions. For a civilization that had begun to notice its first gray hairs,