

FORUM ARTICLE

INTRODUCTION TO GIFFORD PINCHOT'S ARTICLE

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An article by first Chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, entitled, *The Relation of Forests and Forest Fires*, was published in National Geographic in 1899. Pinchot, at the time of article publication, was a forester without a portfolio. He was the Chief of the Bureau of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture, while the forest reserves (later to be renamed national forests) were managed by the Office of Public Lands within the Department of the Interior. In the article, Pinchot shows a remarkable understanding of fire ecology, ranging from the grass stage of the frequently burned longleaf pine, to the even-aged forests of the coastal Pacific Northwest, with their infrequent but stand-replacing fires. In between, he mentions the fire adaptations of western larch, giant sequoia, and pitch pine, and the ability of lodgepole pine to regenerate after stand-replacing fires. Pinchot would seem to have been the perfect leader to emplace an intelligent fire management policy onto the national forests of America. However, in spite of the evidence he provided, he could not bring himself to admit that fire had a beneficial role, and ended his article with, "I hasten to add that these facts do not imply any desirability in the fires which are now devastating the West."

The next year, William McKinley was elected President, and soon his Vice President, Teddy Roosevelt, replaced the assassinated McKinley. Pinchot rode the progressive wave of conservation fostered by Roosevelt, and by 1905, the forest reserves were transferred to Pinchot within the Department of Agriculture. One of Pinchot's first duties was to produce a set of management guidelines for the forest reserves, which became known as the Use Book (Pinchot 1905)¹. His earlier National Geographic article appears to have been forgotten, as a one-size-fits-all, monolithic fire suppression policy replaces the thoughtful approach to fire ecology as a science of place.

Two quotes from the Use Book:

Probably the greatest single benefit derived by the community and the nation from forest reserves is insurance against destruction of property, timber resources, and water supply by fire. (Page 63.)

Officers of the Forest Service, especially forest rangers, have no duty more important than protecting the reserves from forest fires. (Page 65.)

Within another five years, the great fires of 1910 in Idaho and Montana cemented into place the fire exclusion policies of the federal government, which continued unabated for another 50 years, and only recently were replaced with more flexible fire management policies.

¹ Pinchot, G. 1905. The use of the national forest reserves. USDA Forest Service, Washington, D.C., USA.