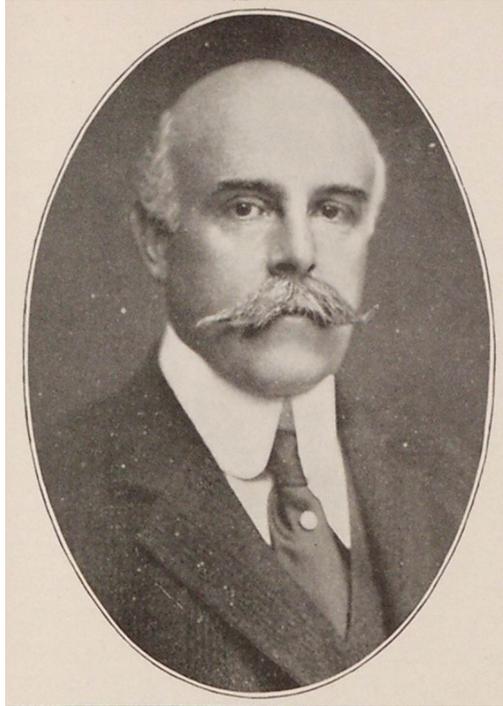


Environmentalism's Racist History

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Madison Grant is known less for his conservationist efforts than for his book "The Passing of the Great Race, or The Racial Basis of European History," a pseudo-scientific work of white supremacy. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY NEW YORK ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Madison Grant (Yale College 1887, Columbia Law School) liked to be photographed with a fedora, or just his dauntingly long head, tilted about thirty degrees to the right. He belonged, like his political ally Teddy Roosevelt, to a Manhattan aristocracy defined by bloodline and money. But Grant, like many young men of his vintage, felt duty-bound to do more than enjoy his privilege. He made himself a credible wildlife zoologist, was instrumental in creating the Bronx Zoo, and founded the first organizations dedicated to preserving American bison and the California redwoods.

Grant spent his career at the center of the same energetic conservationist circle as Roosevelt. This band of reformers did much to create the country's national parks, forests, game refuges, and other public lands—the system of environmental stewardship and public access that has been called “America’s best idea.” They developed the conviction that a country’s treatment of its land and wildlife is a measure of its character. Now that natural selection had given way to humanity’s “complete mastery of the globe,” as Grant wrote in 1909, his generation had “the responsibility of saying what forms of life shall be preserved.”

Grant has been pushed to the margins of environmentalism’s history, however. He is often remembered for another reason: his 1916 book “The Passing of the Great Race, or The Racial Basis of European History,” a pseudo-scientific work of white supremacy that warns of the decline of the “Nordic” peoples. In Grant’s racial theory, Nordics were a natural aristocracy, marked by noble, generous instincts and a gift for political self-governance, who were being overtaken by the “Alpine” and “Mediterranean” populations. His work influenced the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and Africa and banned migrants from the Middle East and Asia. Adolf Hitler wrote Grant an admiring letter, calling the book “my Bible,” which has given it permanent status on the ultra-right. Anders Breivik, the Norwegian extremist who killed sixty-nine young Labour Party members, in 2011, drew on Grant’s racial theory in his own manifesto.

Grant’s fellow conservationists supported his racist activism. Roosevelt wrote Grant a letter praising “The Passing of the Great Race,” which appeared as a blurb on later editions, calling it “a capital book; in purpose, in vision, in grasp of the facts our people most need to realize.” Henry Fairfield Osborn, who headed the New York Zoological Society and the board of trustees of the American Museum of Natural History (and, as a member of the U.S. Geological Survey, named the *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the *Velociraptor*), wrote a foreword to the book. Osborn argued that “conservation of that race which has given us the true spirit of Americanism is not a matter either of racial pride or of racial prejudice; it is a matter of love of country.”

For Grant, Roosevelt, and other architects of the country's parks and game refuges, wild nature was worth saving for its aristocratic qualities; where these were lacking, they were indifferent. Grant, as his *Times* obituary noted, "was uninterested in the smaller forms of animal or bird life." He wrote about the moose, the mountain goat, and the redwood tree, whose nobility and need for protection in a venal world so resembled the plight of Grant's "Nordics" that his biographer, Jonathan Spiro, concludes that he saw them as two faces of a single threatened, declining aristocracy. Similarly, Roosevelt, in his accounts of hunting, could not say enough about the "lordly" and "noble" elk and buffalo that he and Grant helped to preserve, and loved to kill. Their preservation work aimed to keep alive this kind of encounter between would-be aristocratic men and halfway wild nature.

For these conservationists, who prized the expert governance of resources, it was an unsettlingly short step from managing forests to managing the human gene pool. In a 1909 report to Roosevelt's National Conservation Commission, Yale professor Irving Fisher broke off from a discussion of public health to recommend preventing "paupers" and physically unhealthy people from reproducing, and warned against the "race suicide" that would follow if the country did not replenish itself with Northern European stock. Fisher took the term "race suicide" from Roosevelt, who, in a 1905 speech, had pinned it on women who dodged childbearing. Gifford Pinchot, the country's foremost theorizer and popularizer of conservation, was a delegate to the first and second International Eugenics Congress, in 1912 and 1921, and a member of the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society, from 1925 to 1935.

Roosevelt put Pinchot in charge of the National Conservation Commission, and made him head of the new Forest Service, but he also cultivated the Romantic naturalist John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892. In the Sierra Club's early leaders, the environmental movement has some less troubling ancestors. Following Muir, whose bearded face and St. Francis-like persona were as much its icons as Yosemite Valley, the club adopted the gentle literary romanticism of Thoreau, Emerson, and Wordsworth. The point of preserving wild places, for these men—and, unlike in Roosevelt's circles, some women—was to escape the utilitarian grind of lowland life and, as Muir wrote, to see the face of God in the high country.

But Muir, who felt fraternity with four-legged “animal people” and even plants, was at best ambivalent about human brotherhood. Describing a thousand-mile walk from the Upper Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico, he reported the laziness of “Sambos.” Later he lamented the “dirty and irregular life” of Indians in the Merced River valley, near Yosemite. In “Our National Parks,” a 1901 essay collection written to promote parks tourism, he assured readers that, “As to Indians, most of them are dead or civilized into useless innocence.” This might have been incisive irony, but in the same paragraph Muir was more concerned with human perfidy toward bears (“Poor fellows, they have been poisoned, trapped, and shot at until they have lost confidence in brother man”) than with how Native Americans had been killed and driven from their homes.

It is tempting to excuse such views as the “ordinary” or “casual” racism of the time, and it does feel more like a symptom of the dominant culture than Grant’s racism and Pinchot’s eugenics, which touched the nerves of their organizing commitments. But Muir and his followers are remembered because their respect for non-human life and wild places expanded the boundaries of moral concern. What does it mean that they cared more about “animal people” than about some human beings? The time they lived in is part of an explanation, but not an excuse. For each of these environmentalist icons, the meaning of nature and wilderness was constrained, even produced, by an idea of civilization. Muir’s nature was a pristine refuge from the city. Madison Grant’s nature was the last redoubt of nobility in a levelling and hybridizing democracy. They went to the woods to escape aspects of humanity. They created and preserved versions of the wild that promised to exclude the human qualities they despised.

Their literary icon, Thoreau, had said in his 1854 speech “Slavery in Massachusetts” that even his beloved ponds did not give him pleasure when he thought of human injustice: “What signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? . . . The remembrance of my country spoils my walk.” But Thoreau also shared Muir’s problem; in some ways, he created it. When he wrote about American nature, Thoreau was arguing about American culture, which, even for most abolitionists, meant the culture of a white nation. In his essay “Walking,” which gave environmentalists the slogan “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” Thoreau proposed that American greatness arose as “the farmer displaces the Indian even

because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural.” For both Muir and Thoreau, working, consuming, occupying, and admiring American nature was a way for a certain kind of white person to become symbolically native to the continent.

The nineteen-seventies saw a raft of new environmental laws and the growth of the Sierra Club’s membership from tens to hundreds of thousands. But the decades of advocacy behind this wave of environmental concern shared much with the older, exclusionary politics of nature. In 1948, more than a decade before Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” (most of which was first published in this magazine), a pair of best-selling works of popular ecology sounded many of Carson’s themes, from the dangers of pesticides to the need to respect nature’s harmonies. William Vogt’s “Road to Survival” embraced eugenics as a response to overpopulation, urging governments to offer cash to the poor for sterilization, which would have “a favorable selective influence” on the species. In “Our Plundered Planet,” Fairfield Osborn, the son of Madison Grant’s friend and ally Henry Fairfield Osborn, forecast that postwar humanitarianism, which allowed more people to survive into adulthood, would prove incompatible with natural limits. While neither man evinced Madison Grant’s racial obsessions, they shared his eagerness to champion an admirable “nature” against a debased humanity that had flourished beyond its proper limits.

This strain of misanthropy seemed to appear again in biologist Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 runaway best-seller “The Population Bomb.” Ehrlich illustrated overpopulation with a scene of a Delhi slum seen through a taxi window: a “mob” with a “hellish aspect,” full of “people eating, people washing, people sleeping. . . . People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating . . . People, people, people, people.” He confessed to being afraid that he and his wife would never reach their hotel, and reported that on that night he came to understand overpopulation “emotionally.” By the evidence, what he had encountered was poverty. Ehrlich was announcing that his environmentalist imperatives were powered by fear and repugnance at slum dwellers leading their lives in public view. At the very least, he assumed that his readers would find those feelings resonant.

Even as environmentalism took on big new problems in the seventies, it also seemed to promise an escape hatch from continuing crises of inequality, social conflict, and, sometimes, certain kinds of people. *Time* described the environmental crisis as a problem that Americans “might actually solve, unlike the immensely more elusive problems of race prejudice or the war in Vietnam.” In his 1970 State of the Union address, in which he expended less than a hundred words on Vietnam, made no explicit reference to race, and yet launched a new racialized politics with calls for a “war” on crime and attacks on the welfare system, Richard Nixon spent almost a thousand words on the environment, which he called “a cause beyond party and beyond factions.” That meant, of course, that he thought it could be a cause for the white majority.

Environmentalism largely was that. When the Sierra Club polled its members, in 1972, on whether the club should “concern itself with the conservation problems of such special groups as the urban poor and ethnic minorities,” forty per cent of respondents were strongly opposed, and only fifteen per cent were supportive. (The phrasing of the question made the club’s bias clear enough.) Admitting to its race problem took the movement nearly two decades. In 1987, the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice published an influential report that found that hazardous waste facilities were disproportionately located in minority communities, and called this unequal vulnerability “a form of racism.” The environmental movement, the report observed, “has historically been white middle and upper-class.” Three years later, activists sent a letter to the heads of major environmental organizations, claiming that non-whites were less than two per cent of the combined seven hundred and forty-five employees of the Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council (N.R.D.C.), and Friends of the Earth. Fred Krupp, then executive director of the Environmental Defense Fund, replied with a mea culpa: “Environmental groups have done a miserable job of reaching out to minorities.”

Since then, “environmental racism” and “environmental justice” have entered the vocabulary of the movement. There are many environmentalisms now, with their own constituencies and commitments. In the Appalachian coalfields, locals fight the mountaintop-removal strip mining that has shattered peaks and buried more than a thousand miles of headwater streams. Activists from working-class Latino neighborhoods in

Los Angeles have opposed parts of California's landmark climate-change legislation, which the large environmental groups support, arguing that it gives poor communities too little protection from concentrated pollution. Despite some such conflicts, large, well-resourced national groups such as the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council seek out these groups as partners in everything from environmental monitoring to lawsuits. Mitch Bernard, director of litigation at N.R.D.C., says, "It's no longer a national group swooping down on a locale and saying this is what we think you should do. Much more of the impetus for action, and the strategies for action, come from the affected community." (I worked under Bernard at the N.R.D.C., in the summer of 2000.)

Still, the major environmental statutes, such as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, were written with no attention to the unequal vulnerability of poor and minority groups. The priorities of the old environmental movement limit the effective legal strategies for activists today. And activists acknowledge that persistent mistrust goes beyond immediate conflicts, such as the split over California's climate-change law, but can make them more difficult to resolve. Bernard attributes some of the misgivings to environmentalism's history as an élite, white movement. A 2014 study found that whites occupied eighty-nine per cent of leadership positions in environmental organizations.

Some of the awkwardness of environmental politics since the seventies, now even more acute in the age of climate change, is that it lays claim to worldwide problems, but brings to them some of the cultural habits of a much more parochial, and sometimes nastier, movement. Ironically enough, Madison Grant, writing about extinction, was right: the natural world that future generations live in will be the one we create for them. It can only help to acknowledge just how many environmentalist priorities and patterns of thought came from an argument among white people, some of them bigots and racial engineers, about the character and future of a country that they were sure was theirs and expected to keep.