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The Sierra Club: Environmental Activism and US Empire, 1892–1900

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Abstract

Formed in 1892, the Sierra Club (SC) is the oldest US environmental organization concerned with the environment within US borders and beyond. Yet, to date, the Club has not received much attention from historians. Using personal papers of SC members, government documents, and newspaper articles, this paper unpacks the Club's role in important environmental issues, such as the sustainability of natural resources and the creation of national parks and commissions. It assesses the impact of its activism on these key events, on themes such as preservation, conservation, "wilderness" tourism, and the growth of the US empire.

Keywords: Conservation; Empire; Settler-Colonialism; Activism; Sierra Club.

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1 Introduction

This article will show how the Sierra Club's promotion of the "wilderness" concept in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century is an example of settler-colonialism and, subsequently, tied to the promotion of US empire. By advocating for the preservation of natural landscapes as untouched and pristine "wilderness," the Club helped facilitate the growth of US empire, participating in a narrative that often erased or marginalized Indigenous presence and traditional land uses in these areas in the process. This notion of "wilderness," largely a construct of the US conservation movement, played a role in legitimating the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the reconfiguration of land rights by framing lands as empty and in need of "civilizing." This facilitated the expansion of the US empire, extending American cultural and environmental influence globally. Paradoxically, while promoting preservation, it also segregated lands from both development and Indigenous stewardship, illustrating the complex interplay between conservation and empire. While the Club's efforts were centered on conservation within territories already under US control, their actions aligned with broader colonial practices of asserting dominion over land by redefining and controlling its use, often to the detriment of Indigenous communities who had long-standing relationships with these environments. Therefore, this conservation activism meant that the Club was an active agent of US empire during this period.

The Sierra Club was founded on May 28, 1892 by a group of California conservationists led by the Scottish-American naturalist, author, and environmental philosopher, John Muir. Its stated mission was

> To explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast; to publish authentic information concerning them [and] to enlist the support and cooperation of the people and government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada.[1]

The Club was formed against a backdrop of rapid industrialization and expansion in the US. The SC was also formed shortly after the Dawes Act, signed into law by President Grover Cleveland, which was designed to carve up collectively held tribal lands into individual plots, displacing many Indigenous American landowners in the process. It was also during this time that the Census Bureau broadcast the closure of the western frontier. Consequently, many of the country's most iconic natural landscapes were targeted for resource exploitation.

As a result of the significant environmental challenges that arose from these developments, several conservation organizations were formed during the Progressive Era in the US to help combat these issues. Mostly consisting of white, middle-class men, the Sierra Club—and other conservation organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Club and The Audubon Society—viewed themselves as protectors of the country's natural resources.[2] Yet whilst these organizations did not directly contribute to the growth of US empire, their advocacy for both preservation and conservation during this period had a significant impact on the way the US considered its natural resources and understood its government's role in their protection.

This article will analyze the complex and intertwining relationship between conservation and US empire through an examination of the activism of the Sierra Club, which emerged as a key player during this period in helping to preserve and conserve the country's natural resources, integrating conservation into the broader contexts of nation-building and empire. The Club played a key role in the creation of national parks and wilderness areas, such as Yosemite National Park and the Grand Canyon, as well as advocating for the creation of the National Park Service and other federal agencies tasked with managing and protecting public lands. Yet during the first years of its existence, the Club's

1. Sierra Club, "Articles of Incorporation," June 4, 1892, https://www.sierraclub.org/articles-incorporation.

2. Whilst many supported US empire development, there was no unanimity on the subject among conservationists during this period, not just within the SC itself, but also the broader movement. Instead, ideological diversity was prevalent in both, although all were united in their belief in the importance of preserving the environment, despite having different motivations for that view. See: Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Escaping the Dark, Gray City: Fear and Hope in Progressive-Era Conservation* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2017); Robert W. Righter, *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

activism would see it move away from campaigns solely focused on the local–in California—but also engage in activism in the national and international/transnational spheres too. The Club was part of a wider conservation movement that supported anti-immigration and imperialism, included members who were proponents of eugenics theories, as well as espousing views on and the role of natural resources in power projection. A focus on the Club is important as it has been a vital part of US political and social culture since 1892, and continues today to influence the public debates over environmental issues as well as domestic policy and national identity.

This paper will shed light on the Club's role in the growth and development of US empire during the first eight years of its existence. It was at this juncture that the Club took a very different direction to the one intended by its founders, including Muir, highlighting the tensions that existed within the Club between the preservationists—who wanted to preserve the land and its beauty, eliminating human impact—and conservationists, who sought to regulate human use of the land. This article will show that, by promoting the idea that the natural resources in the US were a public trust to be managed and protected both in the present and for the future, and through "wilderness" tourism, the Club helped to shape public opinion and government policy around conservation and environmental protection and, as a result, contributed—often inadvertently—to the growth of US empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period.

There is an existing body of literature that examines conservation and its imperial dimensions. For example, historians of European imperialism have drawn connections between colonial expansion and environmental degradation, and how they led to the development of environmental thinking, linking its origins to the history of colonialism and exploitation of natural resources.[3] For some scholars, the themes of conservation, race, and empire are also inextricably linked in the US context. Using examples ranging from individuals to cities, goods to natural resources and land management, several historians have advanced claims that these factors, both separately and in combination, were key to the growth and expansion of industry and commerce, and, in turn, US empire. For example, William Cronon uses Chicago's growth as a city as a case study to examine how the transformation of the West's landscape and use of its natural resources was central to US expansionism.[4] Others have focused on the role of the individual. Douglas Brinkley and Char Miller use key political figures in Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot–both conservationists–as prisms through which a deeper understanding of the role of conservation and how it intersected with domestic policy goals can be gained, particularly those related to empire, power, and national identity on the world stage.[5]

Other scholars have explored US territorial expansion and critically analyzed its domestic empire. Manu Karuka challenges the conventional notion of the US as having a natural national territory. Instead, Karuka emphasizes that what is often perceived as national territory is, in reality, colonized land. By accepting the myth of a national territory, Karuka argues that we continue to live and think within a context of ongoing colonial occupation. This perspective reframes the historical narrative of the US and underscores the importance of recognizing its imperialist roots.[6] Paul Frymer characterizes the US domestic empire as a project fundamentally intertwined with race and government policy. He emphasizes that racial dynamics, particularly the prioritization of white European interests and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, were central to US expansion. Frymer highlights the role of government in orchestrating westward expansion, which was designed to establish a white settler nation. He observes that the confrontation with existing land inhabitants and the differing re-

3. For more on this, see: Bernhard Gissibl, *The Nature of German Imperialism: Conservation and the Politics of Wildlife in Colonial East Africa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

5. Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Island Press/Shearwater Books: Washington, D.C., 2001).

6. Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

sponses to non-white populations significantly influenced expansion policies; the forced movement of the indigenous population making US expansion most akin to an imperial project.[7] As Benjamin H. Johnson has also stated,

> The validation of untrammeled wilderness that constituted such a powerful cultural legacy of this period made it easy to justify removing Indian peoples from parks and forests, and indeed the Yosemite, Havasupai, Blackfoot, and many others found themselves expelled from their homelands in the name of environmental protection.[8]

That many conservationists held these views on race is not surprising. As David W. Southern notes,

> The typical progressive intellectual thought in terms of racial hierarchy because the young, well-educated, middle-class activist was exposed to a steady diet of racist literature and teaching from birth.[9]

This was a period when debates were emerging on Darwinian evolution and the broader societal tensions between scientific advancements and religious beliefs.[10] Indeed, many prominent conservationists in the US in the second half of the nineteenth century felt that they "owed their racial vigor to the continent's wilderness" and the "emergence of conservation thought owed greatly to this reinterpretation of the sources of environmental strength"—essentially, the efforts of these conservationists "to rescue this environment were inseparable from their desire to preserve distinct but related visions of white America."[11] Many of these individuals were some of the nation's most prominent early conservationists and preservationists despite holding deeply racist views; Madison Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, and Joseph LeConte, for example, were all successful in creating policy that tamed the "wilderness" in this white vision.[12] This article will situate the SC in this narrative, highlighting how its conservation efforts meant it indirectly reflected the imperial practices of the federal government through its assertion of control over land traditionally inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

More recent scholarship examines the conservation movement in the US in terms of its place within a wider, international context. Ian Tyrrell's work in particular explores the broader conservation movement and its relationship to the growth of US imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[13] Tyrrell shows that it was not an inward encounter specifically bound to its national framework, but instead was part of a wider movement that lent on the knowledge and expertise of international networks of geologists, engineers, and foresters to inform domestic conservation efforts to combat a growing anxiety regarding a perceived diminishing of natural resources. Tyrrell argues that US expansionism and imperialism were not solely about territorial conquest but also about

7. Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). On the themes of race, dispossession, and masculinity in the continental empire context, see: Colin Fisher, *Urban Green Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Dorceta Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

8. Benjamin H. Johnson, "American Environmentalism and The Visage of a Second Gilded Age," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 19 (2020): 249.

9. David W. Southern, *The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900-1917* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005), 47.

10. For more on the broader influence of this school of thought on organisations and individual activists, see: Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Scott M. Shubitz, "Liberal Intellectual Culture and Religious Faith: The Liberalism of the New York Liberal Club, 1869-1977," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 16 (2017): 183–205.

11. Miles A. Powell, *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 48–49.

12. For more on the impact of Grant's views on race on later figures associated with the Sierra Club, such as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, see: Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Burlington, VA: University of Vermont Press, 2009).

13. Ian Tyrrell, *Crisis of a Wasteful Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

the control and exploitation of natural resources. The conservation movement, which emerged during this period, was driven by concerns about the overuse and depletion of natural resources, but was also, in Tyrrell's view, closely tied to the imperialist project of managing and controlling those resources in newly-acquired territories. Tyrrell argues that the conservation movement was not only an attempt to protect the environment but also a means of preserving US economic and political power. By promoting conservation and sustainable use of resources, the US hoped to demonstrate its superiority as a civilization and to maintain its dominance in the world, highlighting the complex relationship between conservation and US empire-building during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This article therefore endorses and further supports Tyrrell's critique of the conservation movement, one that highlights the interconnected relationships spanning the US territorial expansion within North America and its establishment of overseas territories. This includes parallels and intersections between domestic nation-building efforts and the broader US colonial efforts alongside its role as a settler empire and its participation in the global narrative of settler colonialism, often viewed as part of a "civilizing mission." It adds to the burgeoning scholarship on the conservation movement and its links to US empire building by departing from Tyrrell's transnational focus and instead examines the role of the Sierra Club—the "Green Giant" of conservation movements in the US—in its national context and impact on empire development to show how conservation clubs like the SC, despite their perceived noble aims and ideals, played a significant role in the growth of US empire during the Progressive Era.[14] Tyrell's argument that conservation was fundamental to the settler vision that "involved the idea of white intruders justifying their demographic takeover and their rule over indigenous peoples by putting down a deeper stake in the land than pioneers had accomplished" provides the framework for this article, which argues the SC was central to this implementation of a moral and material hegemony in the US continental empire.[15]

It will also add to the historiography of the SC more specifically, to develop a greater understanding of the potency of its activism on the formulation of US government domestic policy thinking and formulation during this period.[16] To do so, this article will focus on two key events in the SC's history between 1892 and 1900 - its advocation for the creation of Mount Rainier National Park and National Forest Commission - to highlight its role in the development of US empire at the turn of the twentieth century through its promotion of the "wilderness" as a concept. For example, the land administered as Mount Rainier National Park was the ancestral homeland of the Cowlitz, Muckleshoot, Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin Island, Yakama, and Coast Salish people. By creating a national park, indigenous groups were excluded from their own lands, losing their right to roam, and were casualties of the growth of US empire and the continuation—and solidification— of "manifest destiny." Indigenous peoples were victims of the attempt to bridge the continental empire with the inland island empire during this period. The racism, self-interest, and professions of benevolence that justified this expansion was driven by the conservation movement, and, in particular, the Sierra Club.

14. Rex Burress, "The Coming of Conservation," *Sierra Club*, May 10, 2019. Available online: https://www.sierraclub.org/mother-lode/yahi/may10-2019 (accessed 1 December 2022). Burress references a *Wall Street Journal* article written by Jim Sterba entitled "The Green Giant." However, there is no evidence that an article with that title exists. Either the title of the article has changed or Burress incorrectly recalls Sterba's article entitled "The Man Who Saved the Grand Canyon" which discusses the SC and its history. See: Jim Sterba, "The Man Who Saved the Grand Canyon," *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2016. Available online: https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-man-who-saved-the-grand-canyon-1473453148.

15. Tyrrell, *Crisis*, 16.

16. To date, given its size and importance, the SC has largely been neglected in terms of focus on the Club itself. Instead, it often appears alongside other subjects, such as work on its founders and the broader environmental movement. Surprisingly, only two works have been produced to date that attempt to resemble an institutional history. Michael P. Cohen's work was the first to attempt such a study. However, it offers what the author terms an 'inside narrative', one that espouses the views of insiders of the Sierra Club, with the glaring omission of an outsider's perspective. Tom Turner's 1991 book is insightful but is a clear—yet effective–piece of propaganda for the Sierra Club. See: Michael P. Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club 1892-1970* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988); Tom Turner, *Sierra Club: 100 Years of Protecting Nature* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991).

2 Mount Rainier National Park

The SC played a significant role in the creation of Mount Rainier National Park, a volcano located in the Cascade Range in Washington State and one of the first national parks in the US. This campaign, part of a broader movement to preserve natural landscapes, often overlooked the rights and traditions of these communities, leading to their displacement and the restriction of their traditional land use practices. The Club's advocacy for the park's establishment, focused on protecting the environment from industrial exploitation, inadvertently supported these practices by prioritizing a White vision of untouched "wilderness," thereby impacting the existing human-environment relationships of Indigenous populations. In this context, the actions of the Club can be considered to be part of the broader project of US empire-building, which was not only about expanding territorial control and influence but also about imposing a specific set of cultural values and norms, including particular understandings of nature and land use.

The establishment of the park was part of a broader effort to protect natural landscapes and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest, an area undergoing rapid economic and social change. This was during a time when the US was experiencing significant expansion and consolidating its influence as an emerging global power. The promotion of "wilderness" areas, emphasizing their natural beauty, resources, and recreational opportunities helped to facilitate these changes within US borders. Thousands of settlers arrived annually, contributing to a population boom that led to a rapid expansion of logging, mining, and agricultural industries in the area, fueling economic expansion. The pace of this change meant that the landscape was significantly transformed, threatening the region's natural resources. Consequently, preservation efforts began to protect national landscapes that were tied into a growing conservation movement. This movement aimed to establish national parks throughout the country to protect these resources. The SC was a key player in this movement. The newly-formed SC turned its efforts to the Pacific Northwest, where it saw an urgent need to protect the region's forests, rivers, and mountains, with Mount Rainier identified as urgently in need of protection from development and exploitation.

The Mount Rainier campaign emerged at a time following the creation of four national parks in the US—Yellowstone (1872), General Grant (now part of the smaller western section of Kings Canyon National Park), Sequoia, and Yosemite (all in 1890)—alongside 40 million acres of national forests, all set aside by presidential proclamation through the Forest Reserve Act of 1891.[17] This campaign also coincided with a period in which the US became increasingly concerned about the availability, sustainability, and potential usage of national forestry resources. This was not solely a national anxiety, despite, as Tyrrell observes, how the "survival of forests came to be seen as essential to republican civilization's health," but, rather, one that was emerging across the empires of the world, as colonial competitors began to take control of key resources abroad.[18] Despite this perceived emerging global crisis, in the US context, there was also a focus on "the need for Americans to catch up with European forestry."[19] The SC indirectly facilitated US empire during this period by promoting the idea of "wilderness" as a symbol of national identity and by advocating for the preservation of natural landscapes as a way of asserting US control over territory. This idea of "wilderness" as a symbol of US identity helped to reinforce the myth of American exceptionalism and the idea that the US had a special role to play in preserving and protecting the natural world. This "scenic nationalism," as Alfred Runte describes it, led conservationists like the SC to campaign for showcasing the natural wonders of the US in newly-created national parks.[20]

The campaign for Rainier began in 1893 when Bailey Willis, a geologist and mining engineer, approached the Geological Society of America to begin efforts to preserve the area in a national park. The Sierra Club—among other organizations—soon followed suit. A committee was appointed by

17. Theodore Catton, "The Campaign to Establish Mount Rainier National Park, 1893-1899," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 88 (1997): 70.

18. Tyrrell, *Crisis*, 9.

19. Tyrrell, *Crisis*, 266.

20. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2022), 14.

the Board of Directors of the Club after meeting in San Francisco over the winter of 1893-94 which included Muir, Robert Underwood Johnson, Honorary Member of the SC and editor of *Century Magazine*, and Regular Member and Muir's guide on Rainier, Philemon Beecher (P.B.) Van Trump.[21] The SC did not lead the Mount Rainier campaign. Instead, the Club joined forces with the Geological Society of America, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Appalachian Mountain Club to form a joint effort in lobbying for the park's creation.[22] Yet the SC's support and involvement was important as it gave the campaign more credibility, especially through the involvement of its leader, Muir, who was a respected voice on conservation issues, and because the Club also counted prominent scientists, such as Joseph LeConte—a geologist—amongst its board of directors.

SC members went to work to promote Mount Rainier and highlight its importance as an expression of cultural richness and inspiration to tourists who visited the region—all "wilderness" promotion. In an article in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Van Trump told its readers that Rainier was "beyond question the grandest of all peaks of the great Cascade Range" and was "without a rival in North America in ruggedness, grandeur, beauty of outline, and in the number and magnificence of its glaciers." In an effort to situate Rainier at least on par with—if not better than—the world's other scenic wonders, Van Trump then compared Rainier to the beauty spots of European "rivals," stating that "it is questionable whether there is in all Europe a single mountain which has a glacial system on so grand a scale."[23] Muir had long been an admirer of Rainier, once declaring it to be "the most majestic solitary mountain I have ever yet beheld."[24] He later stated that "the Mount Rainier Forest Reserve should be made a national park and guarded while yet its bloom is on; for if in the making of the West Nature had what we call parks in mind—places for rest, inspiration and prayers—this Rainier region must surely be one of them."[25]

Through the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, as well as articles in newspapers and lobbying political figures, prominent SC members published many accounts of explorations, travelogues, and personal narratives, that celebrated the beauty and uniqueness of America's wilderness areas. It was through this that the SC helped the public to develop a sense of connection and pride in the nation's natural heritage, which, in turn, contributed to the growth of US empire by promoting a unifying national identity. One important factor in this was the trips that the Club organized. From 1893 onwards, the SC began organizing nature trips for its members which would often be written up and published afterwards in the *Bulletin*. For some scholars, the purpose of these trips was to "establish commonalities between members, fortify member engagement and interest for the mountains and wilderness, and ultimately train conservation activists," as well as helping "establish a new avenue for member recruitment."[26] Whilst this is no doubt true, and all of these things did occur, one largely overlooked consequence of these trips was their role in encouraging Americans to engage with their country's natural beauty, which, in turn, promoted the concept of "wilderness" tourism and helped to contribute to the nation's economic development as well as the image of US power and prosperity through showcasing the country's landscapes and natural wonders.

The tourism argument reached the corridors of power, when Senator Watson C. Squire of Washington presented a Memorial in Congress on behalf of the SC and the other organizations involved in the Mount Rainier National Park campaign. Again drawing international comparisons, Squire stated that the memorial was presented

21. *Memorial from the Geological Society of America Favoring the Establishment of a National Park in the State of Washington*, 53rd Congress, 2nd Session, Misc. Doc. No. 247, 1894.

22. "Sierra Club to Elliot McAllister," December 21, 1893, John Muir Papers, Series 1, Box 5, Reel 7.

23. P. B. Van Trump, "Mount Tahoma," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 1 (1894): 111.

24. John Muir, "Notes of a Naturalist," *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, 29 August 1879; John Clayton, *Natural Rivals* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019), 47.

25. John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Sheffield: Vertebrate Publishing, 2018), 24.

26. Jonathan S. Coley and Jessica Schachle, "Growing the Green Giant: Ecological Threats, Political Threats, and U.S. Membership in Sierra Club, 1892-Present," *Social Sciences*, 10 (2021): 189; Ronald W. Perry, Charles E. Cleveland, David F. Gillespie, and Roy E. Lotz, "The Organizational Consequences of Competing Ideologies: Conservationists and Weekenders in the Sierra Club," *The Annals of Regional Science*, 9 (1975): 14–25; Turner, *100 Years*.

> In favor of the establishment of a carefully defined national park in the State of Washington, which [...] shall include the most wonderful scenery to be found on this continent...it especially includes the celebrated Mount Rainier [...] which is one of the grandest mountains on the face of the globe, to be named in admiration with such great mountains as Mount St. Elias, Mount Ararat, Mount Fusiyama [sic.] and the most superb summits of the Alps."

Squire also stated the economic and cultural benefits of tourism, explaining that

> The establishment of the proposed park would confer a great boon upon the people of the United States. Its educational advantages would be of unspeakable value; and as a resort for seekers of health and pleasure it would be unsurpassed.[27]

Highlighting the importance of its geographical location, Squire declared that

> The State of Washington, although a recent addition to our galaxy of American commonwealths, is destined to become within a few years one of the greatest [...] it will be the home of millions of prosperous and worthy citizens."

In an attempt to allay any financial concerns that may arise concerning the maintenance of the park, Squire assured his fellow Senators that the park would essentially pay for itself, stating that

> Now, when we can easily provide, not only for ourselves but for future generations, such a magnificent pleasure ground, sanatorium, and educational object-lesson, shall we let the opportunity pass, particularly when all this can be secured with comparatively little expense? The outlay of money required for the establishment of the park is very small. Concessions can be leased for hotels, stage routes and stopping places; the proceeds of which will provide for maintenance of the park.[28]

Yet within Squire's speech was the counter-economic argument that, because the land was also worthless to other interests, it should be used for recreation and tourism purposes instead. Squire stated that

> The boundaries of the proposed national park have been so drawn as to exclude from its area all lands upon which coal, gold, or other valuable minerals are supposed to occur, and they conform to the purpose that the park shall include all features of peculiar scenic beauty without encroaching on the interests of miners of settlers.[29]

Some scholars have viewed this line of argument as a negative strategy, stating that conservation activists drew attention to the supposed worthlessness—in the context of agriculture, mining, and farming—of the land as a way of controlling the size of the designated national parks.[30] However, though this may be true, the same conservationists, whilst arguing that the land was worthless monetarily, were also inadvertently making the counter argument for national prestige on the international stage. The creation of national parks on supposed "worthless" land contributed to the "wilderness" tourism that provided a boost to US standing in the world.

After several years of campaigning, the Mount Rainier National Park Act passed both houses and signed by President McKinley on March 2, 1899. It was a symbolic development in the US government's approach to development of a national system to manage national parks and one that meant the US now entered the world stage as a serious figure in conservation. By designating protected areas, the US projected itself as a responsible steward of the country's natural wealth. The US now

27. *Memorial from the Geological Society*.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Runte, *National Parks*, 43–56; Catton, "The Campaign," 76.

aimed to protect vital resources that ensured the long-term availability of these resources for economic development. It also helped to showcase the natural beauty of the US, creating tourism that not only stimulated the economy but also its cultural influence, contributing to the image of the US as a country—and empire—of natural splendor through the creation of these popular attractions.

3 National Forest Commission

The Sierra Club's support for the establishment of the National Forest Commission in the US reflected aspects of imperial practices, notably in how it aligned with federal control over vast natural areas, often disregarding the rights of Indigenous peoples. While the Club's aim was to protect forests and wildlife, this advocacy inadvertently supported policies that marginalized Indigenous land-use practices and communities, aligning with a broader imperialistic trend of land management. In exerting pressure on the federal government, the Club's efforts, though environmentally motivated, contributed to a pattern of federal expansion and control over natural resources, illustrating the complexities of conservation initiatives within the context of settler colonialism and imperial governance.

The SC's "wilderness" promotion also links to the growth of empire as it coincided with the emergence of the US as a world power. This "wilderness" promotion was central to—and intertwined with—notions of "civilization." For example, Muir described what he saw as neglect of US forests and drew attention to their importance, highlighting international comparisons and making connections to the preservation of forests as a facet of "civilization." Muir wrote that

> Every other civilized nation in the world has been compelled to care for its forests, and so must we if waste and destruction are not to go on to the bitter end, leaving America as barren as Palestine or Spain.[31]

Drawing links to colonial power and "civilization," Muir stated that

> It seems […] that almost every civilized nation can give us a lesson on the management and care of forests. So far our government has done nothing effective with its forests, though the best in the world, but is like a rich and foolish spendthrift who has inherited a magnificent estate in perfect order, and then has left his rich fields and meadows, forests and parks, to be sold and plundered and wasted at will, depending on their inexhaustible abundance. Now it is plain that the forests are not inexhaustible, and that quick measures must be taken if ruin is to be avoided.[32]

Johnson agreed, declaring that "the subject of forest reservation has long ago passed the sentimental stage. The National Government is waking up to its importance' which he hoped meant that the US would 'enter upon a civilized forest policy."[33]

In a letter published in *Century Magazine*, B.E. Fernow, an Honorary Member of the SC, stated that, in his view, there was a need for a "common-sense treatment and more careful exploitation of our natural forests." This was before any "thorough, permanent, and scientific systems of management" should be implemented when demand for timber increases.[34] Muir agreed that the forests needed to not only be preserved but also utilized in the present and maintained for future generations, stating that

> It is impossible […] to stop at preservation […] the forests must be, and will be, not only preserved, but used; and the experience of all civilized countries that have faced and solved the question shows that […] the forests […] may be made to yield a sure harvest of timber,

31. John Muir, "The American Forests," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1, 1897.

32. Ibid.

33. Robert Underwood Johnson, "The State Forest Preserve: Widespread Opposition to the Proposed Constitutional Amendment," *New York Times*, October 31, 1896, 4.

34. B. E. Fernow, "A Plan to Save the Forests: Forest Preservation by Military Control," *Century Magazine*, 49 (1894-1895): 627.

> while at the same time all their far-reaching beneficent uses may be maintained unimpaired.[35]

This belief in the inextricable relationship between conservation and "civilization," and the wider connections this fostered between both and empire building, led the SC to engage in a broader campaign to protect US forests. An increasing awareness in the mid-eighteenth century of the importance of sustaining forests in the US led to the creation of the National Forest Commission. Pressure on the government to act to protect the country's woodlands had been building for decades. The result of this pressure was the creation of an albeit small federal bureau of forestry in the mid-1870s. However, it was largely impotent as the bureau was a victim of US government bureaucracy, in that it was not actually responsible for any forests; this responsibility lay with the General Land Office in the Department of the Interior, whilst the bureau was located in the Department of Agriculture. This chasm united conservationists in lobbying Congress to establish a commission to advise the President on forest management.[36]

The discussion of the forest situation and calls to create a National Forest Commission was described by one *Century Magazine* reader as "heeding and echoing a cry of the broadest patriotism; indeed, more-of civilization."[37] At the Club's annual meeting in 1895, Muir stated that "forest management must be put on a rational, permanent, scientific basis, as in every other civilized country."[38] In an editorial, Johnson declared the need for a fact-finding mission to be conducted to furnish the US government with information needed to inform policy on the creation of a National Forest Commission. He urged the

> appointment of a commission composed of men of sufficient reputation to make their recommendations heeded, whose business it shall be to study the whole question of forest preservation, and to report full upon it to Congress. Until such a report has been prepared all forest lands on the public domain should be withdrawn from sale.[39]

To prepare for this campaign, conservationists—including the SC–collaborated to coordinate efforts in pressuring the US government to create a scientific expedition to assess the forests. The campaign was primarily led by scientific and environmental organizations until they were joined by business interests too, when both the New York Chamber of Commerce and New York Board of Trade and Transportation both passed resolutions urging Congress to pass a bill authorizing the president to appoint a commission of experts to conduct a study of public timber lands throughout the US.[40] To do this, they approached US Secretary of the Interior Hoke Smith with plans to undertake an investigation to provide evidence for their memorial to Congress petitioning for the creation of a National Forestry Commission. In Smith, the conservationists found a sympathetic ear, with Johnson informing Muir that they would

> have a national forestry commission by shortcut […] it will not be necessary to have a bill, but Secretary Hoke Smith will ask the National Academy of Science to undertake the investigation, and it becomes its duty to do so in accordance with its constitution, and all congress will have to do will be to foot the bill by appropriation.[41]

35. John Muir, "A Plan to Save the Forests: Forest Preservation by Military Control," *Century Magazine*, 49 (1894-1895): 631.

36. Gerald W. Williams and Char Miller, "At the Creation: The National Forest Commission of 1896-1897," *Forest History Today*, 1 (2005): 32.

37. William J. Palmer, "A Plan to Save the Forests: Forest Preservation by Military Control," *Century Magazine*, 49 (1894-1895): 633. Palmer was the founder of Colorado Springs, Colorado, and, at the time of his statement being published, president of the Rio Grande Western Railway.

38. "Proceedings of the Sierra Club," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 1 (1896): 284; Cohen, *History*, 15.

39. Johnson, "The Need for a National Forest Commission," *Century Magazine*, 49 (1894-1895): 635.

40. "Hope for the Forests," *Century Magazine*, 50 (1895): 796.

41. Johnson to Muir, January 9, 1896, John Muir Papers, Series 1, Box 7, Reel 9.

Johnson later informed Muir of his efforts in lobbying in Washington to pressure Congress "to get an appropriation of $25,000 passed for the expenses of the Commission."[42]

On hearing the news that the Commission had been formed, Muir expressed his delight to Johnson, stating that "the glorious news of the National Academy of Sciences Commission has kept me happy ever since I heard of it. This sure enough is a move direct towards permanent forest management and cannot fail. I have just written to Senator Perkins to do his best for the $25,000 carefully explaining the high character and importance of the Commission etc. and will get a resolution from the Sierra Club as soon as possible."[43] Muir ensured that the SC would throw its full weight behind the cause. This was tied in to his—and others—belief that increasing tourism was both positive for US national identity but also brought with it destruction of the natural beauty of the land, and, as such, it needed to be policed by the government to ensure its longevity as a tourism hotspot, as well as the sustainability of the timber resources of the country and the need to conserve them for future generations.

By mid-1896, the funding was secured. Once the investigation was launched, no members of the SC were officially part of the fact-finding team. However, the Club's members still promoted the work of the investigation through articles, speeches, and lectures, and Muir himself joined the expedition for a period. When describing his trip to a reporter for the *Morning Oregonian*, Muir declared that "the forest must be able to yield a perennial supply of timber [...] thus securing all the benefits of a forest, and at the same time a good supply of timber," predicting that "the establishment of national parks and [forest] reserves is only the beginning of the work necessary to secure these lands." Muir highlighted the significance of the fact-finding mission, stating that

> I consider the appointment of this commission and its setting out to look personally into the condition of all forests left to the government as really the first step that has been taken toward placing the forestry question on a permanent working basis.[44]

These quotes highlight the central aim of the National Forestry Commission. It was not to be created to prevent the public from accessing—and using, for leisure—US forests. Instead, the argument to create the reserves was driven by a belief in preserving the remaining natural resources for future use.

Despite facing opposition from timber, mining, and railroad interests, the investigation's preliminary report was submitted in 1897. However, the report achieved its aims. Prior to leaving office, President Cleveland created thirteen new forest reserves totaling 21,279,840 acres, adding to the previous 13 million acres created by President Benjamin Harrison following the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 which gave presidential power to establish forest reserves from the public domain.[45] Yet the aforementioned interests were determined to derail Cleveland's legislation. In the face of mounting criticism from these interests, the SC sprang into action to defend the creation of the National Forest Commission and the thirteen new reserves, passing two resolutions in the wake of President Cleveland's proclamation. The first fully endorsed the action of the Senators and Representatives of California in Congress in their support of forest reservations. The second called on the US government to put these forest reservations "under the care of the War Department" to ensure they were sufficiently policed to maintain them.[46] Muir also made a significant contribution by authoring three articles in defense of the reserves. This was the result of a direct appeal for help from Arnold Hague, a geologist with the US Geological Survey and one of the Commission's most prominent members. Hague wrote to Muir to plead for his support, stating that

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Williams and Miller, "At the Creation," 37.

45. Ibid.

46. "Circular No.14," *Sierra Club*, March 27, 1897, Online Archives of California, Item 48, BANC FILM 2945, Sierra Club Board of Directors meeting minutes 1892-1907.

> The editor of *Harper's Weekly* told me he would write and ask you to prepare an article for the Weekly on the forest reservations […] It is very necessary that the people be educated in this matter as to the importance of forest reservations."[47]

Muir responded. In his first article, Muir re-emphasized the importance of the forest reservation, highlighting not only their immediate importance, but their role—and the importance of the "wilderness" more generally—in essentially helping to maintain and sustain US prestige, declaring that "not only should all the reserves established be maintained, but that every remaining acre of unentered forest-bearing land in all the country, not more valuable for agriculture than for tree-growing, should be reserved, protected, and administered by the Federal government for the public good forever."[48] His following two articles in the *Atlantic* reinforced this message, along with continuing to draw attention to the role of these reserves in promoting tourism, stating that "these grand reservations should draw thousands of admiring visitors."[49] Hague's request for support was a shrewd one as Muir's articles were all well-received, with one author later observing that they "bore so much influence on public opinion that Congress would reject moves to abolish Cleveland's eleven remaining reserves outright."[50] Soon after, the Forest Service Organic Administration Act of 1897—more commonly known as the Organic Act—was passed. This Act provided the main statutory basis for the management of forest reserves in the US, and, as Gerald W. Williams and Char Miller have observed, "used language that, for the first time, stipulated that management of these and other natural resources were essential elements of the forest reserve system" meaning that the "National Forest Commission's work was brought to completion."[51] The Sierra Club had played its part in this success.

4 Conclusion

As this article has shown, the Sierra Club's conservation activism between 1892 and 1900 and its inadvertent role in the growth of US empire suggests that activist organizations can have significant influence in shaping and influencing US government domestic policy, even if it is not their primary objective. Their campaigning helped to demonstrate that the US could be a leader in the conservation of natural resources. Through the designation—and management—of national parks and forests, the Club helped the US showcase its commitment to sustainable land practices and the protection of "wilderness" areas. The SC understood that US prosperity and imperial power increasingly depended on prudent use of natural resources. Furthermore, they helped to ensure the long-term availability of the natural resources, which was crucial in supporting economic development and promoting the standing of the US as a responsible steward of its natural wealth. Additionally, through the Rainier and Commission campaigns, the Club helped encourage domestic tourism, which, in turn, also boosted the economy and enhanced the reputation of the US as a desirable destination to experience the "wilderness." By emphasizing the value of this "wilderness" and the importance of conservation, the Club played an integral role in helping to foster an environmental awareness and appreciation among the general public.

The Club's role as an influential lobby group significantly bolstered US imperial structures through its advocacy for federal control of land, exemplified by these successful campaigns. This advocacy not only expanded governmental authority over natural areas but also reinforced internal colonization practices, often sidelining Indigenous land rights. The Club's shaping of national and international environmental policies, aligned with US conservation ideals, also extended the nation's influence globally, embedding American exceptionalism in environmental stewardship. Additionally, by influencing public opinion and policy, the Club played a crucial role in directing national priorities and re-

47. Arnold Hague to Muir, March 9, 1897, John Muir Papers, Series 1, Box 7, Reel 9.

48. John Muir, "The National Parks and Forest Reservations," *Harper's Weekly*, 41 (1897): 567.

49. The quote appears in: John Muir, "The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1, 1898. Muir's second *Atlantic* article was entitled: Muir, "The American Forests."

50. Thurman Wilkins, *John Muir: Apostle of Nature* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 166.

51. Williams and Miller, "At the Creation," 39.

sources, strengthening the federal government's role in managing and exploiting natural resources. This advocacy, while rooted in conservation, had broader implications for reinforcing US imperial power through enhanced federal control, national identity formation, and economic exploitation of "wilderness" areas for tourism and development.

By promoting the preservation of natural resources and the establishment of national parks, the Sierra Club—alongside other conservation organizations—helped to shape US attitudes toward the environment and resource management. These attitudes later influenced government policy in newly acquired territories, where the government sought to manage and control resources in ways that aligned with conservationist values. Overall, the Sierra Club's conservation activism between 1892 and 1900 highlights the important role that activist organizations played in shaping US domestic conservationist policy, and, in turn, contributed to the growth of US empire during this period.