While a student at Yale in the 1880s, Gifford Pinchot decided that he would pursue a career as a professional forester. Because no such programs were offered by any American universities at the time, he attended the French National School of Forestry. Following his return to the United States in 1890, he took a position with the recently formed United States Bureau of Forestry. He soon left government service to open his own consulting firm, where he developed a reputation as one of the country’s leading foresters and conservationists. In 1896 Pinchot served on a forestry commission appointed by Congress to study ways to implement the Forest Reserve. Pinchot was a proponent of resource management or “wise use,” and while serving on the commission had a falling out with fellow commission member John Muir over the issue of opening the newly created forest preserves for mining and grazing. Over the next twenty years, this conflict between wilderness preservation and resource utilization would have significant repercussions for the conservation movement, which split into two antagonistic factions over this issue. After Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1901, Roosevelt appointed Pinchot as his chief forester, a position he held until he was dismissed by President William Taft in 1910. Pinchot later served two terms (1923–1926 and 1931–1934) as governor of Pennsylvania.

The Fight for Conservation (1910) reflects both Pinchot’s firmly held belief in the Progressive political agenda and his core principles regarding conservation. Unlike Muir and his allies in the wilderness preservation movement, Pinchot believed that natural resources should be used as part of a well-planned program of economic development. Such a program should eliminate unnecessary waste of such resources and ensure that the benefits of their development should be fairly distributed rather than used for the economic benefit of only a few. As Pinchot wrote in the following essay, “Conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time. One of its great contributions is just this, that it has added to the worn and well-known phrase, ‘the greatest good to the greatest number,’ the additional words ‘for the longest time,’ thus recognizing that this nation of ours must be made to endure as the best possible home for all its people.”
"Principles of Conservation"
from *The Fight for Conservation*  
(1910)

The principles which the word Conservation has come to embody are not many, and they are exceedingly simple. I have had occasion to say a good many times that no other great movement has ever achieved such progress in so short a time, or made itself felt in so many directions with such vigor and effectiveness, as the movement for the conservation of natural resources.

Forestry made good its position in the United States before the conservation movement was born. As a forester I am glad to believe that conservation began with forestry, and that the principles which govern the Forest Service in particular and forestry in general are also the ideas that control conservation.

The first idea of real foresight in connection with natural resources arose in connection with the forest. From it sprang the movement which gathered impetus until it culminated in the great Convention of Governors at Washington in May, 1908. Then came the second official meeting of the National Conservation movement, December, 1908, in Washington. Afterward came the various gatherings of citizens in convention, come together to express their judgment on what ought to be done, and to contribute, as only such meetings can, to the formation of effective public opinion.

The movement so begun and so prosecuted has gathered immense swing and impetus. In 1907 few knew what Conservation meant. Now it has become a household word. While at first Conservation was supposed to apply only to forests, we see now that its sweep extends even beyond the natural resources.

The principles which govern the conservation movement, like all great and effective things, are simple and easily understood. Yet it is often hard to make the simple, easy, and direct facts about a movement of this kind known to the people generally.

The first great fact about conservation is that it stands for development. There has been a fundamental misconception that conservation means nothing but the husbanding of resources for future generations. There could be no more serious mistake. Conservation does mean provision for the future, but it means also and first of all the recognition of the right of the present generation to the fullest necessary use of all the resources with which this country is so abundantly blessed. Conservation demands the welfare of this generation first, and afterward the welfare of the generations to follow.

The first principle of conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now. There may be just as much waste in neglecting the development and use of certain natural resources as there is in their destruction. We have a limited supply of coal, and only a limited supply. Whether it is to last for a hundred or a hundred and fifty or a thousand years, the coal is limited in amount, unless through geological changes which we shall not live to see,