Throughout the following short essay, I have compiled the basic history of the development of the American environmental movement. While environmental movements are not unique to the United States, the development of environmental thought in America has deeply influenced and governed its development in other countries. Americans, whether for good or for ill, are uniquely tied to the land, and this relationship has shaped how we view the environment today.

This essay will follow three major themes: (1) land use in America, (2) the changing concept of “wilderness,” and (3) what it means to be America. All of these topics we will address in class, but the details are such that they are better presented in a written format. You will be tested on the themes from this essay just as you will be from class and book concepts. While I am not critical on specific names and dates, themes at the level of centuries and key individuals should be remembered and understood.

**Early America**

Settlers in the 17th century encountered an America of verdant greenery: trees reaching nearly to the coasts from the Massachusetts Bay Colonies to the lands beyond Roanoke. Demarcating the old life and the new, these trees stood as a line of both hope and apprehension. For many, this was a land of opportunity, a way to escape tired Europe, the bondage, religious persecution, and failed economic policies that prevented the lower classes from advancement. One historian remarked that America was seen by many as a way to start “a new life in a fresh green landscape... With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed [to the European mind] that mankind might actually realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy.” However, for many, this land also was of source of immense danger. Imagine: a new land with vast, unmapped regions, it was plausible to be filled with savages and ferocious beasts. In fact, one colonist, looking off the deck of the *Mayflower* remarked that the land was probably “a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wilde beasts and wild men.” As a result of these views – and from the equally important need of establishing a sustaining culture on the continent – the first and foremost requirement was to conquer the forests.

Land needed to be cleared for homes and farms – the practices long-established in Europe – and removal of the forests also acted to drive back the dangers and provide blankets of safety. A forest at distance from your homestead insured that no savage could shoot arrows from the darkness on the unsuspecting. This destruction also helped to remove competition in grazing from introduced cattle and the forest-dwelling creatures such as deer, and reduced predation on livestock and children from bears, wolves, panthers, and any other creature the colonists feared.

Along with these fears, many settlers also brought with them religious views that saw America as a continent upon which to build the holy land as God had intended.
True, it may be filled with uncivilized, savage peoples, but it hadn’t been corrupted with institutions like Europe’s established church and those of the other “false religions.” The Puritans saw America as an unspoiled site upon which to found the new city of God. It was, in the view of Reverend Samuel Danforth, speaking in the mid-1600s, humanity’s “errand in the wilderness.” Subdual of nature was therefore necessary to achieve this result.

Sadly, it wasn’t long until, for some, the destruction of nature and “civilization of the wilderness” was seen as the errand itself. In 1653, Edward Johnson, a colonial historian, regarded the subdual of nature as “God’s providence that ‘a rocky, barren bushy, wild-woody wilderness’ was transformed in a generation into a ‘second England for fertileness.’” Note the difference. In the beginning, the view was to establish the “new city of God.” Under this new view, some claimed that God wanted us to subdue and civilize all nature, to convert it from its savage state “into a land that could enjoy the blessings of the Christian civilization.” This would have a lasting impact on American thought. Consider: even until the closing of the frontier, some in America still held this view. As Congressman Francis Baylies wrote in 1823, dismissing opposition to the oppression of Indians:

The swelling tide of our population must and will roll on until that mighty ocean interposes its waters, and limits our territorial empire. . . . Our national boundary is the Pacific Ocean... To diffuse the arts of life, the light of science, and the blessings of the Gospel over a wilderness, is no violation of the laws of God; it is no invasion of the rights of man to occupy a territory over which the savage roams, but which he never cultivates. . . The stream of bounty which perpetually flows from the throne of the Almighty ought not to be.

President James Monroe even said in 1817, “The hunter of the savage state requires a greater extent of territory to sustain it than is compatible with the progress and just claims of civilized life... and must yield to it.” By 1845, journalist John O’Sullivan captured this view when he wrote the following:

“...that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”

It was the duty of America to spread its ideas, policies and beliefs across the continent. There was, for some, no apparent middle ground between nature and man. Nature must be subdued.

In order to understand the progression of this American thought, energy, and development, it is necessary to have a good foundation on the differences between the native peoples and the European settlers. First and foremost, the existence of the native peoples was generally mobile. True, the mound-builders and cave-dwelling peoples had established cities, but many were nomadic. As a hunter-gatherer
society, they moved with the herds. If game became scarce, they moved onward. Agriculture among these peoples existed, but, like Ron Popeil, they had a “set it and forget it” mentality. They would plant corn, squash, beans, and pumpkins, leave it through the growing season while they went off to hunt, and return to harvest crops in the fall. This nomadic lifestyle led to relatively low populations within, arguably, the land’s ability to support it. They generally felt that the land could not be owned by the individual and as such, they were part of nature, not separate from it.

In contrast, the colonists came from European with an agrarian lifestyle mindset. It generally followed the logic of “I settle, I stay.” They believed in private land ownership, and as such, fenced off their fields. This followed from the belief that nature existed to serve man. They had been given a Biblical mandate to “fill the Earth and subdue it.” Permanent ownership meant the same bit of land would be farmed repeatedly, reducing the nutrient content of the soil and thus requiring either the acquisition of more land, or the use of chemical enhancements (as agricultural science advanced). Materials needed by the farmers included trees (which had been removed for the farm itself) and wild animals to supplement their food stocks. These materials were treated as “commons,” meaning that each person could harvest what he wanted as they were owned by no one. However, with permanent habitations, this meant that each stand of forest would be consistently harvested, reducing its size. Wood eventually needed to be hauled in from a distance. Also, with consistent use of “common” animals, meat became scare, requiring it too to be hunted and brought in for supplies.

As a result of the European mindset to personal ownership and because vast land existed in America, millions came; consider the population growth chart on the next page. Large urban populations developed primarily as a consequence of this sedentary worldview: I build a farm here, you build one next to me, and so on, until the entire region is just one connected patchwork. As everyone used the commons, this system is in particular not self-sustaining, generating imbalance related to sustainability.

**Rise of the Market Economy**

With the steady disappearance of the commons, individuals in America could now make a living supplying the needs of the farmers. Hunters could bring in game and loggers could bring in wood. Excess food produced via agriculture could now be taken to market and sold to these people, which established a market economy based on farming. Such ability to produce surplus agriculture was aided by increases in technology, such as the use of draft horses or steel-tipped plows. Also, as land in eastern America became scarce, land itself could be used as a commodity for any new settlements. As the farmed land...
decreased in soil fertility due to monocultures (i.e., growing the same crop on the same land removing a certain set of nutrients, as with, for example tobacco), this further accelerated land sales to maintain a standard of living based of farming. America consumed land and commons at an ever increasing rate. In fact, by the mid-18th century, Peter Kalm, a Swedish naturalist who was touring America remarked:

“In a word, the grain fields, the meadows, the forests, the cattle, etc. are treated with equal carelessness... We can hardly be more hostile towards are woods in Sweden...than they are here: their eyes are fixed upon the greatest gain and they are blind to the future.”

John Gast, in *American Progress* in 1872, wrote:

“In Europe, people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to... the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet.”

Americans were nevertheless connected to the land. It supplied space and food for life and money for the pocket. However, the market economy threatened to change the shape of the “American ideal.” Now, rather than only individual private ownership on your own land, you had the ability to make
money by selling your goods at a distance. This required good roads, canals along rivers and waterways, shipyards for overseas trade, and a consistent currency for exchange. Thus, the rapid rise of the market economy in America initiated what would become a national debate. Thomas Jefferson argued in 1785 that “those who labor on the Earth are the chosen people of God.” He believed that a middle ground between “Indians” and Industrials (as the market economists/capitalists were referred to) could be struck. Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury, advocated for a strong federal government with emphasis on capitalism and industry. He yearned for America to have more influence in world politics. In the end, Hamilton’s views prevailed, and the nation shifted away from agriculture as its sole enterprise to a vast market system.

**American Abundance**

With this new and burgeoning market economy, with the views that America had vast opportunities for personal ownership, and with the millions that were drawn in by these “promises,” it could be easy to claim that many would have seen the so-called “writing on the wall” about the limits of the land to support life. This however, was not the case. From the beginning, Christopher Columbus claimed that, “These lands are very fertile... they have beans and kidney beans very different from ours, and much cotton... and a thousand other kinds of fruit that I can’t describe; and all should be very profitable.” A contemporary, one Arthur Barlowe after a reconnaissance trip to Roanoke, North Carolina in 1584, agreed that “this island had many goodly woodes and full of deere... even in the middest of summer, in incredible aboundance.” This feeling didn’t change much in over two-hundred years. Alexander Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury from 1801 to 1814, commented that “the happiness of my country arises from the great plent...” Many Americans felt natural resources were virtually unlimited and that there would always be more land to the west. The federal government seconded this by giving land to railroad, timber, and mining companies, schools, and war veterans, with little to no oversight or regulation. They were free to do with the land as they pleased so long as it was used. This, in the government’s view, spurred development - if companies were making money, they were providing jobs, which spurred on the market economy, which spurred development, increased tax revenue, and as a direct result, aided in the pacification of the Indians and the conquering of America. They even allowed mining companies to use public land without taxation. In 1863, in part as way to relieve crowding in the east – though principally as a way to give land to individuals and not have them bought up by slave owners – the government instituted the Homestead Act, whereby any many was allotted 160 acres of land in the mid-West for free if they could “claim and improve it” with a house and productive farm within five years.
With so much agriculture and the prospect of limitless land, the United States was viewed by many as the “Garden of the World.” Timber became the largest U.S. industry, in part because the dominant source of energy for heating and blacksmithing was wood, and because the population had increased from six to forty-six million from 1803-1876! If one had to clear land for farming, it only made sense to use up or sell off the excess timber. Forest decline was not seen as “deforestation,” however, but as the “progress of cultivation.” With each year, new technologies emerged and the process became easier. By 1876, America had access to the steam engine, a transcontinental railroad, Morse’s telegraph, Bell’s telephone, repeating rifles, and many more. The Pacific could be reached and goods transported with ease! The prospect that America could supply the world with food and fuel became more believable.

Unfortunately, by this time, large-scale evidences of the dangers of unrestricted growth and environmental usage were also evident. International trade brought weed pests and led to the proliferation of insects. Overgrazing of cattle caused the loss of soil cover which allowed the soil to become drier as a whole and wash away or be blown into rivers and lakes, killing fish. Overuse of soil too, saw widespread nutrient loss and reduction in productivity. Woodland game decreased in large numbers. This was not however, the first evidences of environmental damage, nor was it the first realization of the importance of nature.

Wilderness as Way to Meet God

Alongside the growth of the American economy came a transformation of American thought and awareness. Even as the woods and wild animals were disappearing, Americans now had opportunities previously beyond them to explore the vastness of America and the wildernesses that remained. With bastions of security no longer relegated to the coasts, surrounded by dark and foreboding woods, it became possible to explore the dark, spooky places at leisure. This ability amounted to a dichotomy in American behavior: the land needed cultivation and civilization, but the wilds were special places. Consider Daniel Boone, famed explorer of America. In one breath he declared himself “an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness,” and yet, in another he claimed that, while journeying through the wilds of Kentucky, “no populous city, with all the varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here.” Wild nature could be seen as a thing of true beauty and not something "evil." In fact, wild nature came to be seen as an otherworldly place in which it was possible to glimpse the divine. In 1846, after taking a memorable trip into the mountains, Thoreau recounted how the land itself had humbled him, giving him a perspective of man’s place in nature:

“[Nature] does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys?

Nature had been personified and, one may argue, deified. In fact, this new view of nature became so widespread that Europeans often assumed as a matter of course that since the United States was “in perpetual touch with nature,” unlike artificial, ancient, weary Europe, that veneration of nature was part of the American ideal. James Fenimore Cooper, author of Last of the Mohicans and the Leatherstocking
tales, took this idea of veneration further by asserting that men are freer, happier, and more honest the closer they are to nature. He believed that deforestation as progress created fields which man “had to water by the sweat of their brow... it was iron and corn which first civilized man and ruined humanity.”

This did not mean, however, that technology was viewed as inherently evil. Trascendentalism, developed in the 1830s as a religious movement that stressed the inherent goodness of man and nature, argued that we can become close to nature (and thus, deity) if we rid ourselves of the artifices of civilization. However, they also believed man can blend existence with technology provided we can limit and control it. Consider noted transcendentalist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“England is a garden. Under an ash-colored sky, the fields have been combed and rolled till they appear to have been finished with a pencil instead of a plough. The solidity of the structures that compose the towns speaks the industry of ages. Nothing is left as it was made. Rivers, hills, valleys, the sea itself feel the hand of a master. The long habitation of a powerful and ingenious race has turned every rood of land to its best use, has found all the capabilities, the arable soil, the quarriable rock, the highways, the byways, the fords, the navigable waters... If there be one test of national genius universally accepted, it is success; and if there be one successful country in the universe for the last millennium, that country is England...The only drawback on this industrial conveniency is the darkness of the sky. The night and day are too nearly of a color. In the manufacturing towns, the fine soot... darken the sky... discolor the human saliva, contaminate the air, poison many plants, and corrode the monuments and buildings.”

That sentence would be comical if not taken in the context. Consider the duality! In the mind of the transcendentalist, and more in the mind of the general American of the time, it was possible to both consider nature to be truly awesome and worthy of study, art, contemplation, and divine revelation, and to view it a source of economic benefit and integral to the economy.

The Rudiments of Conservation

Though environmental science may have only been recently organized into a coherent, respected discipline, the concept that man can negatively affect the environment is not a 20th century idea. As shown with Emerson in the last section, the world had started to realize that the market economy and industrial innovation weren’t always only beneficial. In fact, by 1793, Reverend Nicholas Collins advocated protecting birds from extinction until such time as it was possible to learn their role in the “economy of nature.” Consider: man now believed it possible to forcibly cause an entire species to be eliminated from the face of the planet, something previously viewed as only the province of God.

Around this same time, local regulations on timber harvesting had been put in place in parts of New England as residents identified overuse, and Thomas Jefferson and others had started experimenting with agriculture to prevent soil erosion. By the 1830s, American author and painter George Catlin, argued that “many are the rudenesses and wilds in Nature’s work which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man.” He advocated for the creation of “a nation’s park, containing man and beast, in all wild and freshness of their nature’s beauty.” He believed
that we were losing so much of the natural beauty of America that we actively needed to preserve it for the future. So too did the famed George Perkins Marsh.

U.S. Ambassador to Italy from 1861-1882, genius, versed in over twenty languages, G. P. Marsh, argued that humans were harming themselves ignorantly by destroying the natural balance that made life possible. He said:

“There are parts of Asia Minor... and even of Alpine Europe where the operation of causes set in action by man has brought the face of the earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon; and...within that brief space of time we call the historical period, they are known to have been covered by luxuriant woods...they are now too far deteriorated to be reclaimable by man.”

By the late 1870s, Marsh's fears were realized in America: the vast timber resources of America were in jeopardy. Public lands were being illegally harvested - granted, this was largely due to unenforced legislation - and erosion of soil across America due to lack of root support led to floods as waterways became choked. The problems were large-scale, affecting transportation along the Mississippi and other major rivers, and threatening the stability of American agriculture. In fact, the problems were deemed sufficiently egregious as to warrant the U.S. government, in 1876, to name a Special Agent tasked with assessing the quality and condition of the forests of America. The findings of this Agent were grim; by 1891, Congress enacted The Forest Reserve Act, placing lands previously held by the public under the management of the Department of the Interior as "national forests." By 1905, enough land had been set aside under this Act that a separate agency, the United States Forest Service, was created specifically to manage them. Forests so set aside were delineated with the express purpose of being "forest reserves." This did not mean they were destined to remain untouched, but that harvesting and use would be carefully monitored.

In 1905, the first Chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, took this idea of use with restraint and made it a model of management that is still in use today. Nicknamed the "father of conservation," Pinchot believed forests needed to be under government control to stop wanton deforestation by profiteers. He believed management of the forests were only possible if “responsible use” was allowed and sustainable. To cut the forests off from public use, in his estimation would only encourage lawbreaking; if trees were cut intelligently, the forests would continually produce for future generations (and thus, lead to a stable economy). His mantra, which he applied to all resources, was that “conservation is the application of common-sense to the common problems for the common good...”

To accomplish this vision of sustainable use, it was fortunate that he was in office under President Theodore Roosevelt, nicknamed the "Conservation President." Roosevelt similarly believed that America’s resources needed to be protected and the two got along swimmingly for most of their careers. Throughout his presidency, Roosevelt fought to redress imbalances caused by unrestrained corporations, expanded the national park system, appointed a commission to recommend measures to
protect and improve nation’s waterways (of which Pinchot was chief), emphasized that conservation was a democratic issue, and established the protection of human health as a legitimate goal of conservation. He used his powers to set aside so much land as national forests (bringing the total to 160 million acres) that Congress actually voted to remove this power from the Office of the President. President Roosevelt was not, however, a protectionist president. He believed that nature existed to serve man, but that it was the duty of man to steward it properly. Critics have argued his views were self-serving, encouraging land and the animals therein contained from completely free access and usage so that "there would always be more to shoot."

The Need for a Symbol

In America, this awareness that man not only was affecting nature but could conserve nature, at least to some limited degree, developed alongside a burgeoning of nationalistic pride and American exceptionalism. Following the revolution, the new America began to yearn for icons of its power like the statues, cathedrals, and relics stretching back to Ancient Rome that Europe boasted. Since none of these existed in America, the country turned to the beauty of its landscapes and natural wonders, broadcasting their benefits and awesomeness to the rest of the world.

In 1850, Frederick Law Olmsted convinced a host of civic and industrial leaders in Manhattan to set aside 770 acres of green amid the urban sprawl. Imagine: so concerned were some at the potential loss of American heritage that they were willing to leave sections of New York City undeveloped. And this at a time when the city boasted a population of over 500,000! Olmsted further assisted in the legal protection and preservation of Niagara Falls, its beauty threatened by private interests and industrialists, fought successfully in 1864 to get Yosemite Valley christened as the first state park - it would later become a national park - and in 1870 to have Yellowstone christened as the first national park. Yellowstone was specifically set aside to, in his words, be "a pleasuring ground for the people."

Protectionism and Preservationism

Conservationists argue that nature exists to serve man but it is man's responsibility to manage nature responsibly. Preservationists, or protectionists as they are often called, on the other hand believe that nature and wilderness should be protected from all men. They believe that all life has an equal right to exist - arguably a romantic or transcendental view of nature - and it is our duty to live in harmony with this life and to set aside certain areas in which nature can exist alone for its own sake. Preservationists often are disparaged as "wilderness cults" or "radicals" as some have gone to great
lengths to ensure man leaves nature alone. For example, the famed John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, staunch advocate for national parks, was once quoted as saying:

"I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of the races should occur between the wild beasts and the Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears."

Upon hearing that Congress had given the State of California permission to dam the Hetch Hetchy valley, twin to the famed Yosemite Valley, Muir further stated: “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”

**Wilderness as “Other Place”**

*We will discuss this in class.*