

Appalachia

Volume 62
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2011: Up from
Devastation*

Article 4

2011

Public Land Conservation in the East: The Weeks Act Story

Tom Wagner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wagner, Tom (2011) "Public Land Conservation in the East: The Weeks Act Story," *Appalachia*: Vol. 62: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol62/iss1/4>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Public Land Conservation in the East

The Weeks Act story

Tom Wagner



LONG AGO AND NOT FAR AWAY, MEN AND WOMEN FROM ALL WALKS of life, trying to solve a problem in the forests, came up with an idea. They couldn't have known in the late 1800s that this idea would become a key part of the conservation legacy of the United States. If they were with us now, they would be extremely proud of the results of their work.

The rapidly growing United States was using its natural resources to meet its needs. Much of the eastern half of the country had been converted from forest to farms and grazing lands. As the timber supply in the east dwindled, the relatively new railroad provided access to the last tracts of standing timber, such as the spruce-fir forests of the White Mountain region. The rapid clearing of this mountainous landscape and the subsequent fires that were kindled in the remaining logging slash disrupted ecosystems, causing significant erosion and downstream flooding. Although forests had been cleared in many other places in the east and the south, here in New England the nexus of many concerns resulted in a call for action. This place, the White Mountains, was valued for its scenic beauty, recreational amenities, clean air and water, and long-term wood supply.

People in the White Mountains believed it was special. An interesting coalition of people and values joined to develop a new approach to conservation, one that eventually spread west to the Mississippi River and south to the Gulf of Mexico. Those who worked on the Weeks Act came from young conservation organizations such as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and the Appalachian Mountain Club, civic organizations including garden and women's clubs, hotels and tourism industries, business interests such as the textile mills that relied on reliable and clean water flows, and timber mills and private landowners who were represented by the newly organized New Hampshire Timberland Owner Association. Philip Ayres from the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and others worked to spread a public message that captured the attention of many New England residents and people throughout the country.

This loosely organized collection of interests and values worked with state and federal legislators, including Joseph Walker and John Weeks, during a progressive era in our young democracy to fashion a legislative solution. The Weeks Act allowed for the first time the purchase of lands by the federal

U.S. Rep. John Wingate Weeks (D-Mass.), as he looked around the time his bill passed, creating the nation's national forests. Although Weeks later became secretary of defense, his effort for the nation's forests remains his enduring legacy. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/

HARRIS & EWING COLLECTION

government. It created the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire and Maine and Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. These two were followed by many other eastern forests that now amount to more than 22 million acres of public land.

Much has changed during the last 100 years but the Weeks Act story still resonates for me as I interact daily with people worried about the forests' future. I believe the forest conservation story is still about the many special places and the people who depend on these forests for a vast array of goods, services, experiences, and values that come from the land.

The ecosystems of the White Mountain region have proven to be resilient. They recovered from unsustainable logging and clearing practices of the beginning of the twentieth century. Land managers have improved our understanding of sustainable land use. Our scientific understanding has improved significantly during the last 100 years through the research efforts of universities, state and federal agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Conservation legislation at the local, state, and federal levels has helped protect soil, water, and air.

We have made much progress in this region, and we know we have more work to do, but we also know that the ways all countries use resources affects this land, just as what happens here affects the rest of the world. The first 50 years after the Weeks Act, the U.S. Forest Service focused on bringing back spent land. By 1961, Richard McArdle, then the U.S. Forest Service chief, predicted the problems we now understand when forests are developed for other uses. Only in the last 25 years or so have we started a national discourse on global climate change, energy sources, acid rain, wildlife problems such as the white nose bat syndrome, and other ecosystem disruptions.

In a speech 25 years ago marking the Weeks Act's 75th anniversary, then New Hampshire Governor Sherman Adams hoped that this year, 2011, we would see harmony around the concept of forests that could serve many purposes with the public's support. The current public discourse challenges our ability to work together on conservation matters. My 30 years managing the people's forests have taught me that when people strive for understanding, tolerate values different from theirs, and compromise, we can progress toward sustainable forests that serve many interests.

TOM WAGNER is the forest supervisor of the White Mountain National Forest.