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The American Conservation Movement Turns 200 Today

Ever wonder where the idea “to conserve” began in America? What was that moment in time, that event that sparked a movement?

Many believe the first pangs of the conservation movement were in the 1850s with George P. Marsh’s book *Man and Nature* or Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. The reality is the conservation movement began much earlier. It is intertwined with the very fabric of our founding.

It began in Virginia on May 12, 1818, when one of America’s finest delivered a speech to the [Agricultural Society of Albemarle](#). This speech was printed in all major newspapers, pamphlets and other agricultural societies around the world. “The faculty of cultivating the earth, and of rearing animals, by which food is increased beyond the spontaneous supplies of nature, belongs to man alone...Civilization is never seen without agriculture: nor has agriculture ever prevailed, where the civilized arts did not make their appearance. But, closely as agriculture and civilization are allied, they do not keep pace with each other.”

In 1818, the balance of civilization began to outstrip the balance of agriculture. “Agriculture once effectually commenced, may proceed, of itself, under impulses of its own creation. The mouths fed by it increasing, and the supplies of nature decreasing, necessity becomes a spur to industry; which finds another spur, in the advantages incident to the acquisition of property in the civilized state. And thus a progressive agriculture, and a progressive population ensue.”

The distinguished gentleman goes on to say, “although no determinate limit presents itself to the increase of food, and to a population commensurate with it, other than the limited productiveness of the earth itself, we can scarcely be warranted in supposing that all the productive powers of its surface can be made subservient to the use of man.” Hence the idea of “balance of nature” was born. This was important because “agriculture is the basis of population and prosperity” but reform was needed.

The speech, then, proceeds to address the need for a “symmetry of nature.” It delved into large issues of the day --- ranging from the cultivation of land to “the evils of pressing too hard on the land,” to the “neglect of manures,” to the rehabilitation of soils, to the productivity of soil through irrigation, to deforestation.

The man who delivered this clarion call was none other than our founding father, James Madison, the father of our Constitution, fourth President of the United States and our nation’s first forester. And many could say he is the father of the American Conservation movement.

In the words of Madison, “Of all the errors in our rural economy, none is perhaps, so much to be regretted, because none so difficult to be repaired, as the injudicious and excessive destruction of timber and fire wood. It seems never to have occurred that the fund was not inexhaustible, and that a crop of trees could not be raised as quickly as one of wheat or corn.” He concluded saying, “It is high time for many farmers, even in this quarter, and still more so in the country below us, to take this subject into serious consideration. Prudence will no longer delay to economize what remains of wood land; to foster the second growths where taking place in convenient spots; and to commence, when necessary, plantations of the trees recommended by their utility and quickness of growth.”

Two Hundred years later, Madison's words seem more prescient than ever. The scientists today are telling us that the world has 60-100 harvest cycles left before the world has fully depleted the critical topsoil that feeds us all. And it is not just soil but also climate. The Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change states that since 1750, around the time James Madison was born, one-third (1/3) of all the emissions ever put up in the atmosphere has come from land-use change, predominately deforestation.

Most people associate climate change with smokestacks and tailpipes and forget the role of nature. Two years ago, the National Academy of Science published a two-volume report on the technologies to solve and address climate change. They looked at every technology whether it was in a laboratory or commercial development. What they determined was the most scalable, deployable and low-cost technology to address climate change was forestry.

Trees are nature's technology. Trees are scalable, deployable and can be planted anywhere in the world. What we must heed are the words of Madison and protect "the balance of nature" and more fully understand the interdependence between man and nature.

Our company, ACRE Investment Management, recently celebrated its 15th anniversary. Since our founding, the company's mission is to put a price and value on our natural capital and enlarge the spirit of capitalism, creating Conservation Capitalism --- where Conservation has a purpose and Capitalism a heart. In partnership with landowners over 120,000 acres have been reforested and a portfolio of assets ranging from nutrients to carbon to wetlands to stream to water storage credits to land preservation credits has been layered into the economics of the future to widen the sphere of the "economy of nature."

Today, the company is working with the leadership in Virginia and the mid-Atlantic to address forest retention and agricultural impacts on the Chesapeake Bay. While Virginia continues to lead the nation in developing nutrient markets and creating permanent land conservation, we must go beyond protecting. We must restore the earth.

We stand at a unique moment in time where leadership, vision, and the experience coupled with the readiness of private landowners are aligning powerfully. So today, on

May 12, 2018, two hundred years later, may the words of Madison once again reverberate around the world.

Chandler Van Voorhis is the co-founder and managing partner of ACRE Investment Management and a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. For more info visit us at www.acre-investment.com or [download our brochure](#).

See a new report co-sponsored by ACRE Investment Management and Terra Alpha Investments entitled [Eroding Value: Why Dirt Matters For Business Leaders and Investors](#)

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