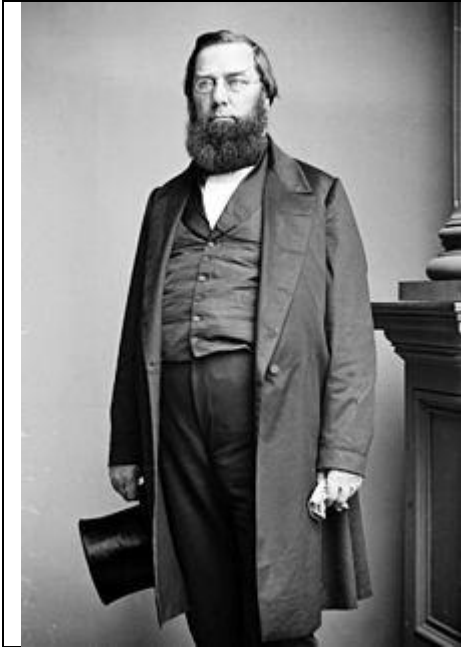


## George Perkins Marsh



Born  
March 15, 1801  
Woodstock, Vermont, U.S.

Died  
July 23, 1882 (aged 81)  
Vallombrosa, Italy

George Perkins Marsh (March 15, 1801 – July 23, 1882), an American diplomat and philologist, is considered by some to be America's first environmentalist[1], although "conservationist" would be more accurate. The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont takes its name, in part, from Marsh.

### Biography

George Perkins Marsh was born in Woodstock, Vermont, to a prominent family. His father, Charles Marsh, had been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. George Marsh graduated from Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, in 1816 and from Dartmouth College with highest honors in 1820, was admitted to the bar in 1825, and practiced law in Burlington, Vermont; he also devoted himself to philological studies. In 1835 he was appointed to the Executive Council of Vermont, and from 1843 to 1849 was a Whig representative in Congress. In 1849 President Zachary Taylor appointed Marsh United States minister resident in the Ottoman Empire. In 1852–1853, he discharged a mission to Greece in connection with the imprisonment of an American missionary, Dr. Jonas King (1792–1869). He returned to Vermont in 1854, and in 1857 was a member of the state railway commission. In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln appointed Marsh the first United States minister to the Kingdom of Italy. Marsh would go on to be the longest-serving chief of mission in U.S. history, serving as envoy for twenty-one years until his death at Vallombrosa in 1882.[2] He is buried at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

Marsh was an able linguist, able to both speak and write fluently in Scandinavian and half a dozen other European languages. He was a remarkable philologist for his day, and a scholar of great breadth, knowing much of military science, engraving and physics, as well as Icelandic, which was his specialty. He wrote many articles for Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia, and contributed many reviews and letters to the Nation. His chief published works are:

A Compendious Grammar of the Old Northern or Icelandic Language (1838), compiled and translated from the grammars of Rask The Camel, his Organization, Habits, and Uses, with Reference to his Introduction into the United States (1856)

Lectures on the English Language (1860)

The Origin and History of the English Language (1862; revised ed., 1885)

Man and Nature (1864)

The last-named work was translated into Italian in 1872, and, largely rewritten, was issued in 1874 under the title *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*; a revised edition was published in 1885. He also published a work on *Mediaeval and Modern Saints and Miracles* (1876).

*Man and Nature* constituted an early work of ecology, and played a role in the creation of the Adirondack Park. Marsh argued that deforestation could lead to desertification. Referring to the clearing of once-lush lands surrounding the Mediterranean, he asserted "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."

His second wife, Caroline (Crane) Marsh (1816–1901), whom he married in 1839, published *Wolfe of the Knoll and other Poems* (1860), and the *Life and Letters of George Perkins Marsh* (New York, 1888). This last work was left incomplete, the second volume never having been published. She also translated from the German of Johann C. Biernatzki (1795–1840), *The Hallig; or the Sheepfold in the Waters* (1856). (See "Hallig").

Guest commentary

## Preservation issues out West have deep roots in history

By June Sochen  
Naples

1872 and 2011.

What do these two years have in common? I'm sure many history buffs can come up with creative answers to this question.

My answer has to do with two pieces of legislation Congress passed in 1872 that still have importance and application in 2011.

Yellowstone National Park, the first congressionally declared publicly protected park, became a place where all "... mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park ..." would be preserved "in their natural condition."

The General Mining Act of 1872 was passed as well to protect miners' rights to explore on public lands. The U.S. government was, and is, landlord to many millions of acres on this continent, particularly in the West.

The only prohibition to mining was on national park lands, national forests, wilderness and monument areas. With the gold and silver rushes living memories, miners rushed to Western public lands

looking for treasure.

Fast-forwarding to today, we see these two laws, both still in existence, clashing. Oil and gas companies are eager to explore with the pressing argument today that dependency on foreign oil supplies leaves us vulnerable and weak in critical areas. Further, geologists claim that there are many oil and natural gas deposits in Alaska as well as the lower 48. Offshore drilling is also an activity that advocates want to increase.

It may interest you to know that the U.S. government still charges between \$2.50 and \$5 an acre to explore on public lands — the same fees imposed in 1872. The various efforts in recent years to increase the fees (with Democrats in Congress supporting a royalty system) have all failed. The oil companies, their lobbyists and friendly legislators argue that this would be a new tax. There has not been a full public debate on this critical subject in recent memory. Who owns public lands and resources — the people or private interests?

The Grand Canyon, or the area immediately around it, is the latest target of the mining companies. They argue forcefully that their drilling will not harm the ecosystem or the wildlife of the canyon. Opponents, led by conservationists, disagree

loudly with that claim.

So two laws passed almost 140 years ago still concern Americans and America's environment. Both mineral exploration companies and nonprofit conservation organizations have been successful in making their respective cases to the public. We have many millions of protected acres and many millions of public lands used by private enterprises for private profit.

It is perhaps unknown to most citizens that, besides mining companies, ranchers graze their cattle on public lands and timber companies cut trees in forests on public lands. This has been going on continuously since the late 19th century. Generally the fees have remained ridiculously low so they have not been a revenue source for the government and the vested interests have effective lobbyists to keep the status quo.

An early ecologist, George Perkins Marsh, wrote a book called "Man and Nature" (1864). In it he wrote: "Man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords." Now while environmentalists applaud this sentiment, private enterprisers shake their heads in disbelief. The battle between the private developers and the preservationists — a

more radical group than the conservationists — has been going on for the same 140 years. (Preservationists don't want any roads in national parks or forests, let alone snowmobiles or lodges).

Members of the environmental community in general have been successful in raising American consciousness about the need for clean air and water and for the protection of public lands. They have increased awareness about the dangers of pollution and rampant development. But the other side has been effective as well in making their case for economic expansion, for growth and, particularly in the present climate, for jobs.

The two 1872 bills unknowingly led to contradictory paths; they have also revealed two conflicting myths about America: the wide-open spaces unspoiled by human action and the machines, the mines and the smokestacks that symbolize industrial might. American citizens seemingly want both. Can we embrace both visions simultaneously? Is it possible to mine and to protect our pristine natural landscape? Is it possible to respect endangered species laws while drilling for oil? Who will decide?

Sochen is professor emerita at Northeastern Illinois University and spends the winters in Naples.



June Sochen