History is the language we employ to describe our relationship to the past. It is how we speak to ourselves about previous generations, their lives, perspectives, achievements, failures; but it is also a form of communication the present uses to talk to itself about itself. History, in that sense, allows us to assess our heritage and inheritance.1

This reciprocal dialog is as evident in studies of individual lives (biography) and assessments of family constellations (psychology) as it is in analyses of social organizations (sociology), and, in truth, because individuals emerging out of familial environments make up the social organisms in which humans live, learn, work, and play, this kind of evaluative discourse cannot help but be multilayered.

And very complicated. Take, for instance, the USDA Forest Service, which in 2005 is celebrating its centennial. How do you track its history? Which language or set of terms best captures its evolution over time? What determines that which it has bequeathed to its employees and the broader public it has served for so long in different eras? (Not to mention its effect on the land under its care.) To address some of these questions, I want to reframe them through a discussion of 4 key challenges that Forest Service leadership has had to confront over the past 100 years.

How Do You Create an Agency?
That query defined everything that Gifford Pinchot and the first leadership team pursued. In 1898, Pinchot became the 4th head of the division of forestry in the Department of Agriculture and immediately began to plan for the creation of what would become the Forest Service. The first task was to build public support for what was in fact a radical idea—creating a land management agency that would regulate the public domain. Hitherto, the public lands west of the Mississippi had been given away, sold cheaply, or lost because of fraud; this privatization was politically acceptable because the stated ambition was that these lands would build frontier communities. But the environmental costs of these land transfers—totaling 1 billion acres—particularly those involving timber and livestock production, mounted across the late 19th century. Fears of a timber famine and dust bowl rangeland conditions, along with a growing conviction that federal intervention through conservation management might rehabilitate battered landscapes, generated pressure on Congress to act. In 1876, it created the small division that Pinchot would inherit 20 years later; in 1891, it established the first forest reserves, and between then and 1897, Presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland added nearly 40 million acres to the reserves; in 1897, a rider attached to an appropriations bill, now called the Organic Act, defined how those new reserves were to be managed.

To capitalize on these initiatives, Pinchot and his staff moved in two directions simultaneously: Without forests to work on—the reserves were located in the Interior Department, and the nation’s foresters were in Agriculture—the agency issued Circular 21, offering their professional services to landowners large and small. This would give its agents an opportunity to field test their ideas and secure favorable publicity. They also launched a quiet campaign to transfer the national forests to their care, which received a huge boost in 1901 when Theodore Roosevelt succeeded the assassinated President McKinley. Four years later, the transfer was complete, and the Forest Service was born.

Crisis Management: Challenge and Controversy in Forest Service History
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