

CHARLES SCHMIDT

Mendocino Blowhole at Low Tide, 2013
Oil on Canvas, 30 x 44 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JERRY LAWRENCE

The Irony Of Hetch Hetchy

Origins of the National
Debate on Preservation
vs. Conservation

For preservationists the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park is a wound that has never healed. Ironically, however, the controversy surrounding this loss of a large part of a national park led directly to the founding of the National Park Service. Forty-four years after the establishment of Yellowstone, a separate agency was created that was devoted entirely to the protection, purpose, and appropriate administration of national parks.

The hundredth anniversary of the National Park Service occurs on August 25, 2016.

How this agency originated and the opposing roles John Muir and Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot played in its creation and the making of the Hetch Hetchy Dam are the topics of this article.

Background—Conservation and Forestry

The conservation movement in the United States developed out of the growing awareness that our forests were being depleted and that unless something was done, lumber and watershed would soon be in short supply. On the other hand, the heart of the preservation movement was the concern for wilderness—wilderness for its own sake and for its scenic, spiritual, and recreational values.

The practice of forestry, which is the management of forests to ensure a continuing supply of wood and other natural resources, was brought to the United States from Europe in the late 1800s. By that time, European forests had already been reduced to only remnants of what had once existed and American forests were headed the same way. In 1875, the U.S. Commissioner of Agriculture said in his report “Because of the rapid deforestation of large areas, forestry has excited much attention in the United States,” and that he “feared a timber famine, unless appropriate actions are taken.”

A report done by Commissioner Franklin Hough for Congress in 1876, titled *Report on Forestry*, described a prevalent “pioneer mentality” which was resulting in a shocking waste of forest resources.

Despite these warnings, it was not until the 1890s that effective federal measures to protect American forests were established. In 1891, Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act, which gave the president authorization to