

Carl Schenck: What Is His Forest Management Legacy Today?

by Douglas MacCleery



Actor Kevin Ude as Carl Schenck in *America's First Forest: Carl Schenck and the Asheville Experiment*, a new film from the Forest History Society.

The new documentary film, *America's First Forest: Carl Schenck and the Asheville Experiment*, produced by the Forest History Society, explores the often overlooked role of the German forester, Carl Schenck, in the early conservation history of America. It also describes the relationship of Schenck to the much better known forest conservation leader, Gifford Pinchot. (See "SAF Grant Boosts Schenck Film," February. For more information about the film and a listing of television stations, visit: www.americasfirstforest.org.)

At the turn of the 20th century, forests were being lost to agriculture at a high rate; wildfire was essentially uncontrolled; the nation's rate of timber harvest greatly exceeded forest growth, raising the specter of a "timber famine"; and many wildlife species, once common, were severely depleted or on the brink of extinction. These conditions led to a national conservation movement.

Pinchot, Schenck, and others stepped in, seeking to address the loss and depletion of forests. The two men demonstrated many similarities, but in their policy strategies for addressing the forest crisis, their approaches were markedly different. Schenck advocated education and close working relationships with forest landowners, timber companies, farmers, and forest users to achieve conservation goals. In contrast, while Pinchot supported working with local forest users, his key policy approach was to support a substantial increase in federal ownership and management of, and control over, forests.

It is interesting and informative to assess the similarities and differences between Schenck and Pinchot and see how history might view the results of their contrasting approaches to forest conservation.

Both Schenck and Pinchot:

- Had strong egos and a conviction that their approach was correct.
- Were professional foresters trained in Europe who were convinced that American forest and economic conditions were vastly different from Europe's and dictated uniquely American conservation and management approaches.
- Agreed that the way to protect forests and encourage their permanence in the landscape was through active management that included judicious timber harvesting (effective management through responsible control of the axe).
- Were convinced that sustainable forest management, whether of public or private forests, would be difficult or impossible unless it could be made to pay.
- Felt that key strategies for forest conservation included: 1) education of the public on its benefits; 2) a strong scientific foundation for management; and 3) establishment of technical and professional schools to train a cadre of young people to spread the word and demonstrate the practical value of forest management.
- Were fired by their bosses (landowner George Vanderbilt and President Taft, respectively) due to headstrong approaches that were viewed as insubordination.
- Had very loyal and committed followings of disciples, or "boys"—students, in Schenck's case, and

Forest Service employees, in Pinchot's—who carried on their work and became conservation leaders in their own right.

Differences between the Two Men

Schenck's approach was to develop the scientific basis for forest management and work with forest landowners, farmers, and users to encourage its effective implementation. This was similar to what was beginning to be put into place in agriculture—state and federal extension and outreach to farmers based on personal interaction and founded on publicly financed research (see the Smith-Lever Act of 1914).

In his role heading up the Bureau of Forestry in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) before 1905, Pinchot actively worked with private timber companies to develop forest-management plans for their forests. Later, Pinchot evolved to have little faith that the private sector would have the interest or economic incentives to manage forests over the long term, once the standing mature and old-growth timber had been removed. There was widespread liquidation of forests by timber companies and then their abandonment, sometimes followed by massive wildfires. Low timber prices discouraged investment, and existing county and state ad valorem taxes on standing timber encouraged these practices.

Pinchot felt that the only effective long-term solution was public ownership and management of forests for timber and other uses and values. He also advocated direct federal regulation of private forests. Under President Theodore Roosevelt, the US Forest Service was established, and Pinchot became its first chief. Pinchot oversaw a vast increase in the area of national forest lands—from 75 million acres in 1905 to

168 million acres when he was fired by Taft in 1910.

The differences between Pinchot and Schenck led to a major rift between the two men, especially after Pinchot wrote Vanderbilt in 1903 urging him to close down the Biltmore School.

The Rear-View Mirror

How has history treated the approaches advocated by Schenck and Pinchot in terms of their effectiveness in promoting forest conservation? Has history vindicated either Schenck or Pinchot? Has the decentralized approach advocated by Schenck won out over the centralized approach of Pinchot? Well, the reality is somewhat murky, as is often the case—but also enlightening and valuable in the lessons it teaches.

Both Schenck and Pinchot were ahead of their time. Both knew that a key to eliminating "cut and run" timber harvest was to make forest management pay economically. That was extremely difficult at the time, due to the huge volume of mature and old-growth timber that existed as "nature's gift," a gift which had not required any investment to produce. Lumber prices were too low to make forest management pay and would remain so until after World War II, when much of the primary forest in the East had been harvested and the market began to boom as demands for housing skyrocketed.

The real prices of lumber (adjusted for inflation) doubled between 1935 and the early 1950s. This created powerful economic incentives for forest landowners to make investments in improved forest management.

Initially, Pinchot's approach was more successful than Schenck's. The area of national forests increased substantially, but never to the degree that

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was advocated by the Forest Service in the 1920s and 1930s. After Pinchot left the Forest Service, he remained a strong advocate for federal ownership of forests, as well as a strong advocate for a federal forest-practices law governing private-forest management. The Forest Service actively supported the idea for decades, until the Eisenhower administration, when the demonstration of improved forest management of private forests finally killed it.

However, even as the area of national forests increased, they did not become a nationally important source of wood products until after World War II, when National Forest System (NFS) timber harvests rose from about 3 billion board feet in the late 1940s to 9 to 12 billion from the late 1950s until 1990, when they were supplying 20 to 25 percent of the nation's softwood sawtimber harvest.

The importance of NFS timber harvests, however, was relatively short-lived, as they have declined by more than 80 percent since 1990 in response to public pressures and federal environmental laws. Somewhat ironically, the prosperity that fueled the nation's increased timber demands also increased public demand for recreation activities associated with the vastly increased NFS road system that had been created to provide access for logging and forest

management. The passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 set up a direct conflict between the use of the NFS for timber harvest and preserving it in its natural state.

But the Forest Service was not a monolith, adamantly opposed to the decentralized approach advocated by Schenck. Forest Service research expanded greatly in the early 20th century. The State and Private Forestry division was established in 1908 and was quite effective in advocating for improved state forestry organizations and cooperative relationships with private landowners, which grew dramatically during the years of the Great Depression. These efforts were successful in advocating for changes in state and county property tax laws that were contributing to poor private-forest management. Some of "Pinchot's boys" were, as Forest Service leaders, strong advocates for a decentralized cooperative approach with private forest landowners. One of the most outspoken of these was the third Forest Service chief, William Greeley (1920–28).

Today, about 90 percent of the US timber harvest comes from private lands. Timber growth on these lands exceeds removals, and most of them are being managed in an environmentally responsible manner. This is a clear vindication for Carl Schenck's vision of decentralized, cooperative management.

However, the success of private forestry in the United States did rely on

important federal and state government roles, especially in forest protection and in research and development (R&D). Protection of forests from wildfire, insects, and disease, led by the federal government and the states, had a major positive effect on investment in private forest management. In addition, federal and state R&D, including silviculture and forest inventory, provided the information and technical foundation for those investment decisions. Many of the technical innovations in improving the utilization of wood products, such as preservative treatments, southern pine plywood, oriented strand board, and engineered wood products, were initially developed at the Forest Service's Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, and in wood technology labs at state land-grant universities.

In addition, some elements of Pinchot's vision of more centralized federal control of private forestlands have also come to pass, not as increased federal ownership or a federal forest-practices act, but in the form of the 1970s-era federal environmental laws. The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), federal pesticides laws, and other federal environmental laws not only were factors in fundamentally changing the national-forest timber program, but also set standards and requirements for use and management of private lands. As an ex-

ample, the "best management practices" (BMPs) designed to reduce sedimentation and protect water quality on private forest-lands, while administered by the states, are based on federal standards issued by the Environmental Protection Agency under the Clean Water Act. It is well recognized that BMPs, when properly applied, can substantially reduce the impact of logging on water quality. More than a hundred years before the creation of BMPs, Schenck used forestry practices, including reforestation, on Vanderbilt's land to limit soil erosion, efforts that inspired the Weeks Act of 1911, a federal law that Pinchot supported.

Thus, today it can be said that the US forest conservation policy framework has borrowed from elements of both Schenck's and Pinchot's legacy. It would be nice to see more discussion and recognition of Carl Schenck's contribution to this legacy. Maybe this film can help do this. **FS**

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