

Introduction

On a warm Friday morning in late June 2012, a party of volunteers—mostly board members of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and staffers from Grey Towers National Historic Site—put blade to ground on the Jorritsma family’s century-old dairy farm in Sussex County, New Jersey. Within minutes, they had dug a series of deep, round holes along the western bank of the Paulins Kill. As they planted willows and silky dogwood in the floodplain, still spongy underfoot from a recent storm, they could begin to see what the program’s advocates had in mind years earlier when they conceived the Paulins Kill restoration project—a well-wooded terrain through which a sparkling river meanders on its way to the Delaware River and the ocean beyond.

Building the collaborative energy to launch this project proved less fluid. In 1994 the Sussex County Municipal Utilities Authority had taken the lead in developing a countywide plan in concert with local stakeholders to restore, maintain, and enhance local waterways, a process that received state funding six years later. Out of this initial activity emerged the Wallkill River Watershed Management Group, which was charged with coordinating and facilitating the restoration activities within the Upper Paulins Kill watershed. In 2008 the group’s planners, ecologists, and landscape specialists met with the Jorritsma family, third-generation farmers whose herd of two thousand purebred Guernsey cattle had heavily grazed along nearly a mile-long stretch of the Paulins Kill. Yet neither the Jorritsmas nor the

Sussex County Municipal Utilities Authority had the requisite funding to regenerate the forest buffer and stabilize the river's badly eroded banks.

That is when they turned to the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, which coordinates the Common Waters Partnership and Common Waters Fund, a nongovernmental initiative devoted to the restoration of the Upper Delaware River watershed. Maintaining this river's water quality is critical to the water supplies of New York City and Philadelphia, which is why Edgar Brannon, the former director of Grey Towers and one of the founders of Common Waters, has argued that the river "may be the most important freshwater resource east of the Mississippi." As represented in its tag line—"Clean Water, Healthy Forests, and Sustainable Communities"—Common Waters is a combination of ecological and human concerns, a forest-to-faucet approach to landscape restoration. Regenerating the Jorritsmas' riparian-buffer forest is one small step toward ensuring the high quality of water consumed by thirsty New Yorkers and Philadelphians.¹

To underwrite this and similar projects, Common Waters and the Pinchot Institute have developed a network of private and corporate philanthropies, local, county, and state agencies, with support from the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. To promote restoration initiatives, these watershed projects have also received technical assistance and scientific data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Nature Conservancy. Building such a complex array of partnerships is not easy, observed Nathaniel Sajdak, the director of the Wallkill River Watershed Management Group, but it is "one of the most important keys to successfully planning and implementing watershed restoration and protection strategies, initiatives, and projects."²

This story of collective action on behalf of people and the environments they inhabit is emblematic of the work that the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and its home base, Grey Towers National Historic Site, have been pursuing since their joint founding in 1963. These two institutions, and their twinned history of environmental engagement, are the central subject of *Seeking the Greatest Good*. Its first six chapters are framed around their collective creation, which was set in motion when Gifford Bryce Pinchot (1915–1989) donated his family's estate to the federal government, a gift that gained the blessing of the White House on September 24, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy came to Grey Towers to deliver the keynote address at the dedication of what was then called the Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies at Grey Towers.

Yet neither this celebration nor the transfer of ownership would have occurred had not Grey Towers been the landscape most closely associated with the Forest Service's founding chief, Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946). Although the legendary forester and conservationist did not grow up at Grey Towers, his adult life revolved around the Norman chateau-like mansion that his parents, James and Mary Eno Pinchot, constructed in 1886. Indeed, the building was formally opened, and deliberately so, on the young man's twenty-first birthday. His family marked the august occasion by presenting Gifford with a gilt-edged copy of the bible of the fledgling conservation movement, George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature: Earth as Modified by Human Action*. Marsh argued that careful stewardship of natural resources was essential to the survival of modern industrial civilization, an argument that Pinchot hoped to exemplify through his chosen profession, forestry. He fulfilled that pledge as the first American-born scientifically trained forester in the United States, becoming the driving engine behind forestry's development as an academic discipline and professional practice. His work was particularly focused on the expansion and management of the national forest system, which now encompasses 193 million acres from coast to coast. When Pinchot was forced out of the Forest Service in 1910—President William Howard Taft fired him for insubordination—his career in public service did not end. From Grey Towers, Pinchot launched one political campaign after another, culminating in his two nonconsecutive terms as Pennsylvania's governor in the mid-1920s and early 1930s; during the latter term, he was credited with helping stabilize the state, then wracked by the Great Depression.³

Whether battling on the national or state level, Pinchot found in Grey Towers' sprawling grounds the perfect respite from the hurly-burly of daily life. A serious angler, he was never happier than when hip-deep in the Sawkill Creek that runs through the property, casting into its deep, dark pools. In important ways, his life was defined by his migrations between his professional occupations and political offices and his rural retreat in Milford.

With Pinchot's death in 1946 and, twelve years later, that of his wife, the human rights activist Cornelia Bryce Pinchot (1881–1960), the question of Grey Towers' future became a matter of pressing concern for the couple's only child, Gifford Bryce Pinchot. His decision to donate the house and surrounding grounds to the Forest Service set in motion the next stage of Grey Towers' evolution, from the Pinchot family's summer residence to a

national landmark overseen by a federal agency. The final six chapters of *Seeking the Greatest Good* tracks this transformation over the succeeding half century through the intertwined histories of the mansion, the Pinchot Institute that was housed within it, the Forest Service charged with managing the historic structure, and three generations of the Pinchot family itself, who have remained deeply involved with the site.

This weave of institutional, administrative, and family history is also set within the context of U.S. environmental policy making since the mid-1960s. In his remarks at Grey Towers, President Kennedy described some of the immediate environmental challenges then facing the country: “The fact of the matter is that [the institute] is needed . . . more today than ever before, because we are reaching the limits of our fundamental need of water to drink, of fresh air to breathe, of open space to enjoy, of abundant sources of energy to make life easier.” The president’s insights helped define the Pinchot Institute’s focus that ever since has been framed around such issues as clean air and clean water, endangered and threatened species, public lands management, habitat restoration, and environmental justice.

Born of an innovative partnership between the Forest Service and the Conservation Foundation (which later merged with the World Wildlife Fund), the Pinchot Institute has been also drawn to cooperative engagement as a form of organizational action. Yet the nature of its work has evolved, as have the goals, objectives, and strategies it has pursued. Dedicated one year after Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* rocked the nation, the institute’s initial aspiration was to use Grey Towers as a neutral site to encourage high-level conversations between leading scientists, educators, government officials, and activists over how to more ethically and efficiently manage America’s natural resources. These linked purposes were essential, President Kennedy affirmed in his keynote address: “Today’s conservation movement . . . must embrace disciplines scarcely known to its prophets of the past,” and although government “must provide a national policy framework for this new conservation emphasis,” to do so it requires “sound information, objective research and study. It is this function which the Pinchot Institute can serve most effectively.”⁴

Yet the public-private partnership that launched the institute was not long sustained. By 1967 the Conservation Foundation had moved its headquarters from New York to Washington, D.C., and its priorities changed along with its address, leading to the collapse of its collaboration project with the Forest Service. In the aftermath the federal agency struggled to

reconceive the institute, finally settling on a different form of alliance, this time with universities in the northeastern United States. In 1971, with Congress and the executive branch worried about the pressures confronting the dense urban corridor from Washington, D.C., to Boston, the Forest Service and its partners created the Pinchot Consortium to address some of these potentially explosive issues. Through this entity, an interdisciplinary cohort of researchers received small federal grants to analyze metropolitan air and water quality, conduct some of the first studies of acid rain fallout, and assess the ameliorative power of open space and vegetated landscapes on urbanites' health and happiness.

Despite the consortium's success, it fell victim to forces beyond its control. Beginning in the mid-1970s, presidents Carter and Reagan began to slash the federal budget—the latter indeed zeroed out funding for Grey Towers and the institute—and in 1984 the Forest Service took the hint, halting this productive cooperative arrangement. It would take nearly a decade for the Pinchot Institute to regain its footing. One major step in that process came when its leadership acknowledged the inherent vulnerability of a one-source funding model; no longer could the institute rely solely on the Forest Service's largesse. This realization led the institute's board of directors, which then included the chief of the Forest Service, to reorganize the institute as an independent nonprofit organization with the ability to seek additional financial support from charitable foundations and other private and public sources. The decision meant that the institute now had to demonstrate to funders and policy makers that its research and on-the-ground conservation projects are directly relevant to the information and action these entities have required. To reach this wider audience, the institute also decided it needed to establish a visible presence in the nation's capital in addition to its offices at Grey Towers.

While the history of Grey Towers and the Pinchot Institute reflect some of the formative issues driving the postwar environmental movement, Grey Towers as a physical setting illustrates another aspect of contemporary environmentalism. Beginning in the 1950s, as urban renewal projects bulldozed historic neighborhoods and suburbanization ran over rural communities, preservationists fought to protect and restore critical elements of the nation's built landscape. To secure sanction for their cause, they lobbied Congress for legislative means to defend imperiled structures and places. With the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, activists gained an important tool with which to preserve properties deemed

valuable examples of the national past, with the goal of fostering “conditions under which our modern society and our prehistoric and historic resources can exist in productive harmony.” Sites of particular significance were designated National Historical Landmarks, and Grey Towers received that status in 1966 (it is now a National Historical Site). This newfound status did not guarantee Grey Towers a careful restoration. The Forest Service’s initial rehabilitation projects tended to degrade the site’s historic integrity, and it was not until 2001, when a nearly \$20 million restoration project was completed, that the house and grounds recaptured some of their original grandeur.

The Pinchot Institute was at the same time undergoing a process of reinvention. Even as it continued its original mission to help the Forest Service make sense of emerging issues in natural resource management, it also responded to contemporary environmental debates that led it to craft policy responses to such contentious issues as wilderness protection, habitat regeneration, and the development of sustainable wood bioenergy. These efforts also have enmeshed the institute in the broader struggle to define the role of government in addressing environmental problems. One of them, the emergence of community forestry initiatives across the country and abroad, has led it to engage in the wider national and international dialogue about the need for inclusive, community-defined land stewardship practices. This contemporary activism has found historic legitimacy in its namesake’s dictum: Management of the national forests, Gifford Pinchot asserted in 1901, “is primarily a local issue and should always be dealt with on local grounds. Local rules must be framed to meet local conditions, and they must be modified from time to time as local needs may require.”⁵

Yet maintaining such a bottom-up perspective can be difficult for policy shops and think tanks headquartered in Washington, D.C. These independent research organizations got their start in the Progressive Era (and in 1909 Gifford Pinchot founded one of the first of them, the National Conservation Association), but they morphed in number and significance in the decades following the Second World War. The government’s need “to marshal sophisticated technical expertise for both the Cold War national security enterprise and the short-lived war against poverty” led it to contract with an array of institutes, such as the Brookings Institution and RAND Corporation, for the requisite knowledge and professional guidance. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new breed of public interest groups emerged that were explicitly allied with conservative or lib-

eral causes and the two major political parties and focused on providing analytical justification for specific policy agendas. As these entities raised money, lobbied Congress, and worked through the media to extend their influence, they helped build a so-called New Washington. In fact, they began to supplant political parties as a key ingredient in defining the capital's political life; their central function—the generation of a steady stream of independent, expert, and often partisan opinions—came at the same time that newspapers opened up their editorial pages for outside commentaries and network and cable television coverage expanded.

The Pinchot Institute has chosen to operate beneath the din. Its approach is a reflection of its historic commitment to nonpartisan analysis, a choice that is also a result of its founding mission, institutional history, and the professional aspirations of a staff attracted to its pragmatic approach to environmental policy making and practice. Consider the problem-solving strategy of one of its progenitors, the Conservation Foundation (1948). Through research and education, the foundation was committed to identifying how the nation could conserve resources and live more sustainably. However short-lived the relationship between it and the fledgling Pinchot Institute, the Conservation Foundation's articulation of its public role, and the social space it occupied—expertise offered to governments and citizens—has had an enduring influence on the institute's self-perception and self-representation.

Indeed, some of the Pinchot Institute's formative leadership came from the ranks of the Conservation Foundation. Its original governing board included the Conservation Foundation's founder Fairfield Osborn and its president Samuel H. Ordway Jr. Paul Brandwein, the foundation's education director, was also tapped to serve as one of two founding codirectors of the institute. This close relationship continued well after its partnership with the Forest Service collapsed in the late 1960s. The Conservation Foundation policy analyst William E. Shands joined the Pinchot Institute's staff in 1990, and five years later V. Alaric Sample, one of Shands's younger colleagues and a senior fellow at the foundation, became the institute's president.

Like Osborne, Ordway, and Shands, Sample routinely has framed the organization's nonpartisan stance against an otherwise caterwauling capital. In 2011, amid the then-bruising battles over the federal debt ceiling, he reflected that “no single political philosophy has a monopoly on wisdom or truth, and no one interest in society is infallible. It is essential in our

democracy that there be a healthy competition of ideas through processes that even the Founding Fathers themselves knew would be messy, sometimes agonizingly slow and, when necessary, self-correcting.”⁶ He was convinced that because these principles guided the Pinchot Institute, it had been able to avoid the ideological pitfalls that trapped other policy entities.

The Pinchot family has kept the institute grounded in another sense, and *Seeking the Greatest Good* recounts its three-generations-long connection to Grey Towers and the institute. Gifford Bryce Pinchot’s service began with his conception of the Pinchot Institute at Grey Towers as dedicated to advancing conservation in the postwar years, a proposition that the Forest Service accepted and worked with the Conservation Foundation to achieve. As a member of the institute’s inaugural board of directors, and until his death in 1989, Pinchot was also the institute’s voice of conscience. He nudged and cajoled the Forest Service to remain true to its commitment to the institute, and when it did not he was quick to challenge its actions. Pinchot’s sons, Gifford III and Peter, and their families, have extended this connection to the Forest Service, Grey Towers, and the institute as consultants, critics, and collaborators.

As indicated in this book’s title, the pursuit of the greatest good is as hopeful as it is unending. Each generation has (and must) act on terms of its own devising to determine how to live within natural systems without destroying them, a challenge that is accelerating with the warming of the planet. This underlying theme of the need for mutability, which is acutely felt in an era of climate disruption, is not new. In his dedicatory speech at Grey Towers, President Kennedy made the same claim when he asserted that Gifford Pinchot’s contribution “will be lost if we only honor him in memory. It is far more fitting and proper that we dedicate this Institute as a living memorial,” an approach ensuring the institute would evolve as it looked “to the future instead of the past.”⁷

The most recent expression of this living legacy was on display on that warm summer day as Grey Towers’ staff and the directors of the Pinchot Institute planted willows and dogwoods in the Paulins Kill floodplain—an act of remembrance and optimism.