

## Wisconsin's Environmental Legacy

In the Twentieth Century, Wisconsin became one of the strongest environmental states in the country. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and its predecessors developed a rich tradition, great technical depth, and a history of leadership, including on PCB problems. In fact, Wisconsin was known since its founding as a forward-thinking state in the sciences, education, government, and environmental protection. Many luminaries contributed to this reputation.

For instance, Increase A. Lapham moved to the suburbs of Milwaukee in 1836 and published one of the earliest scientific papers west of the Great Lakes. In 1848, he founded the predecessor to the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. He published works about Wisconsin's geography, geology, archeology, history, flora, and fauna, and he was widely considered to be Wisconsin's first great scientist. Furthermore, he was a prophetic conservationist, writing in 1855, "Though we have at present in almost every part of Wisconsin an abundant supply of wood for all our present purposes, the time is not far distant when, owing to the increase of population, and the increased demands from the neighboring states...a scarcity will begin to be felt."

Another example: John Muir moved from Scotland to a farm near Portage, Wisconsin in 1849, at the age of 11. There, he acquired a love of nature and a desire to protect it. His early experiences with the Wisconsin wilds led to a philosophy that would eventually resonate with millions: "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Eleven years later, he started studying geology and botany at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, but he left without a degree two years later. He went on to travel North America before helping to establish Yosemite National Park, helping to found the Sierra Club, and writing hundreds of articles and 12 books.

The state was also the birthplace of the "Wisconsin Idea," which held that public universities contribute to government by providing advice, technical skill, and research to solve problems for the state and to benefit as many people as possible. During the Progressive Era of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, much social activism and political reform was based on the Wisconsin Idea and aimed at eliminating problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, and corruption in government. Wisconsin's Republican governor and senator, Robert M. La Follette, Sr., eventually ran for President of the U.S. as the candidate for the Progressive Party. Already in 1897, he recognized the dangers of unfettered corporate power: "The individual is fast disappearing as a business factor and in his stead is this new device, the modern corporation." The La Follette Family went on to found the Wisconsin Progressive Party, which won majorities in the Wisconsin Senate and State Assembly in 1936, as well as winning several seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Wisconsin Idea remained an important tenet for the U. of Wisconsin and Wisconsin state government into the Twenty-first Century, despite efforts by Gov. Scott Walker to eliminate its mention in the 2015-17 state budget.

Aldo Leopold, yet another prominent Wisconsin figure, was the father of the scientific field of wildlife management. He published *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949, which promoted the "Land Ethic" and which continues to inform wilderness conservation, wildlife preservation, and environmental ethics to the present day. In the foreword he wrote, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." His work helped launch the modern environmental movement. As a child, he vacationed in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and as an adult he worked for the U.S. Forest Service before becoming a professor at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison in 1933. He bought 80 acres in the sand country of central Wisconsin and died of a heart attack in 1948 while helping a neighbor with a wildfire.

More recently, Gaylord Nelson, who was born in Clear Lake, Wisconsin in 1916 and received his law degree from the U. of Wisconsin at Madison in 1942, served in the Wisconsin State Senate, became governor in 1958, and a U.S. Senator in 1962. In the 1960s, he helped persuade President John F. Kennedy to speak widely about conservation issues, and he founded Earth Day on April 22, 1970. Later, he became counselor for The Wilderness Society and won the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his environmental work. He wrote, "The ultimate test of man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard."

On the other hand, Wisconsin is also home to powerful conservative organizations and political movements that are often skeptical about governmental efforts to regulate industry for environmental and conservationist purposes. The Bradley Foundation was founded in 1942 and is headquartered in Milwaukee. It supports conservative ideals, including limited government, and has columnist George Will on its board. It has assets of hundreds of millions of dollars, which support Wisconsin Republicans like former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and former Governor Scott Walker. The John Birch Society is a conservative advocacy group founded in 1958, which has had its headquarters in Appleton, Wisconsin since 1989. The group describes itself as favoring limited government and opposing communism. However, famed conservative William F. Buckley, Jr. helped to label the group as a far-right, fringe group in the 1960s, and it was often characterized as ultra-conservative and extremist.

When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began its Green Bay damage assessment, Tommy Thompson had already been governor for five years, and he remained in office until the end of the damage assessment in 2001. Thompson, a plain-spoken leader with enormous political talent, once quipped, "Very simply, I was the original conservative." He served in the state legislature before becoming Governor, and he served in George W. Bush's administration afterwards. He was the longest-serving governor in Wisconsin's history. He was born in Elroy, Wisconsin and received his law degree in 1966 from the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was chairman of the Young Republicans. He joined the state legislature immediately after law school, where he became known as "Dr. No" after becoming a minority leader with particular success in blocking the Democratic Party's agenda. In 1994, just as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began to gain traction on the federal damage assessment on the Fox River and Green Bay, Thompson won every county but one for his third term as governor — carrying 67% of the vote.

During the 1990s, Wisconsin was roughly evenly split between the Republican and Democratic Parties. For statewide elections, Republican governor Tommy Thompson was dominant at the same time that Democratic U.S. senators Feingold and Kohl and Democratic state attorney-general Jim Doyle were in office. Democratic strongholds were in Madison and Milwaukee, and Republican strongholds were in the Fox River Valley and suburban Milwaukee. Also during the 1990s, the Republican Party and the Thompson Administration were opposed to many environmental laws and programs, including Superfund, while the Democratic Party and the Clinton Administration favored most environmental laws and programs, including Superfund.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service realized that Wisconsin's strength would be needed to confront the paper companies effectively about PCB cleanup and restoration. However, it was immediately obvious that the paper companies enjoyed greater influence with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources than did either the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the entire federal government. Over the decade of the assessment, it was easier for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complete an entire damage assessment, including building the foundations for a liability case and cleanup, than to convince the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to embrace U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service efforts.