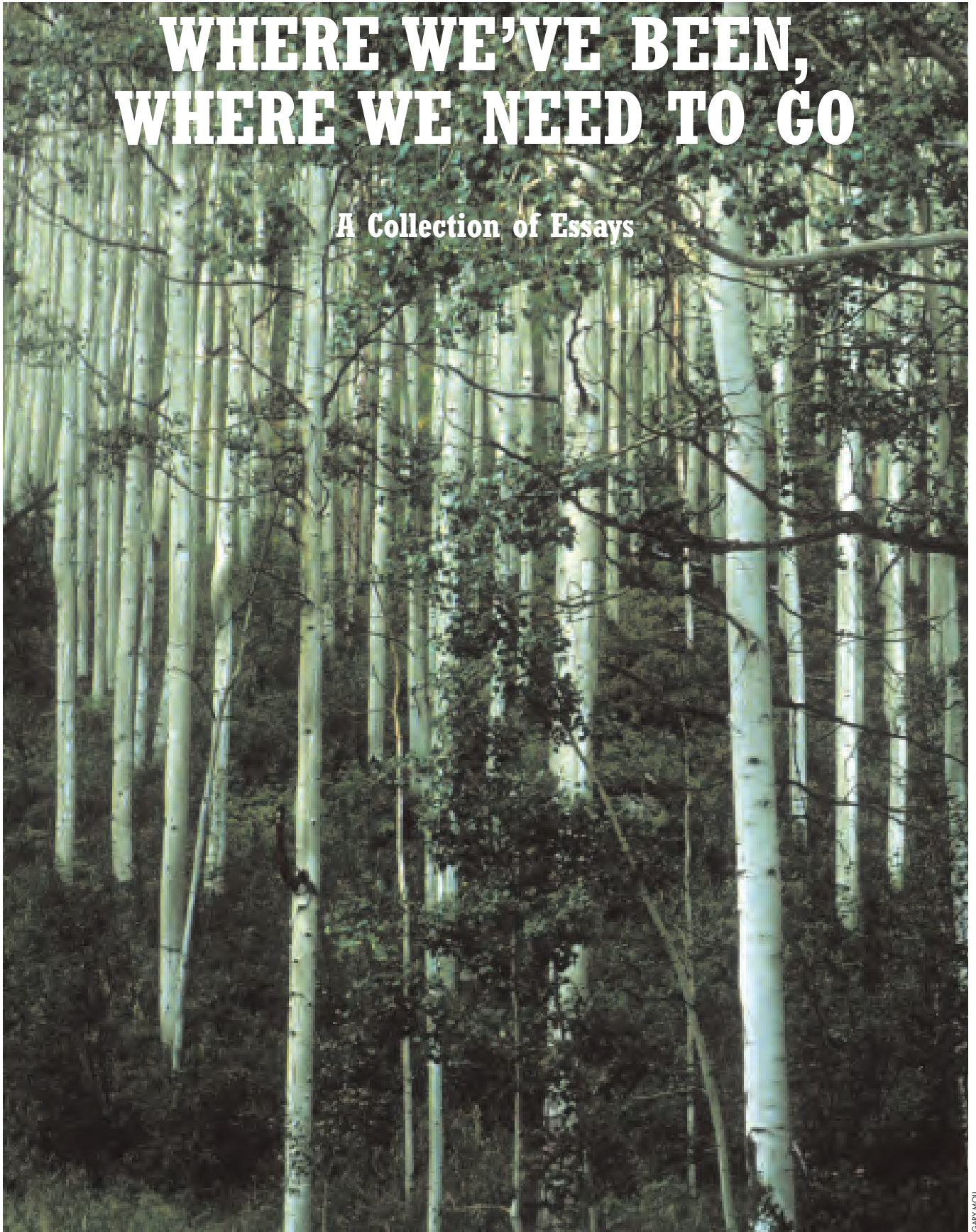


**PEOPLE AND NATURE:**

# **WHERE WE'VE BEEN, WHERE WE NEED TO GO**

*A Collection of Essays*



GARY MCEL

## AMERICAN FORESTS' HISTORY HAS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

*"We need to find a new framework for working with other groups—businesspeople, labor unions, politicians. We need to learn new tactics and build strategic partnerships. It worked a century ago. It can work today."*

—By Gary Moll

**I**n 1875, about a thousand concerned citizens gathered at the Grand Pacific Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. There they formed the American Forestry Association (AFA), now known as AMERICAN FORESTS.

Today, when there are literally hundreds of green organizations, it's difficult to appreciate what a departure this was at the time. But the foundation of this organization was, quite literally, revolutionary.

Keep in mind the context of 1875. It was the Gilded Age, a time of great conflict between people and nature—an age of robber barons making fortunes from steel, railroads, lumber mills, mines.

**Being flexible helped us bring the National Forests into being; we need to be equally innovative today.**

The government promoted westward expansion, Manifest Destiny. The industrial revolution filled the landscape with machines that extracted natural resources from the land. In the decade before the American Forestry Association came to be, the mileage of the railroads doubled. The ability to transport timber by rail from forest to mill to market resulted in a devastating increase in the speed of logging and the resulting deforestation. Government officials and wealthy industrial leaders forged strong ties. The relevant federal agencies of the time—the General Land Office and the Department of the Interior—focused on turning land and

resources into capital.

It was a difficult era for giving birth to what would be called the conservation movement. Most people felt that the forests were endless. Nowhere in the mission statement of any government department was the conservation of natural resources identified as a goal. Not one American school offered a degree in forestry. No one formally studied natural resource management. In their search for solutions, America's conservationists had to look to forest management practices that had been developed in 16th century Germany.

When the founders of this revolutionary organization called for changes in abusive timber practices, their calls initially fell on deaf ears. To gain traction for these ideas, the AFA reached out to industry, and government to try to form partnerships and find common ground. In an effort to bring these diverse groups together, the AFA formed the American Forest Congress (AFC). The AFC operated more like a conference of interested parties than a formal organization.

By the turn of the century, several AFA officers also held prominent government positions: The AFA's president, James Wilson, headed the Department of Agriculture. Gifford Pinchot, chairman

of the AFA executive committee, led the Division of Forestry within the Department of Agriculture.

Spurred on by these political advisors and a growing coalition of citizen groups, President Theodore Roosevelt agreed to address a 1905 joint meeting of AFA and AFC. In his address, Roosevelt said he supported transferring authority for managing the nation's forests away from the General Land Office and the Department of the Interior, which did not employ professional foresters. Roosevelt suggested shifting that authority to the Department of Agriculture's new Division of Forestry, which did have professional foresters. A month later, Congress approved the transfer of authority for 85 million acres of federally owned Forest Preserves.

Thus began the United States Forest Service. The Roosevelt Administration continued its conservation campaign, and today more than 146 million acres have been set aside as National Forests.

Why did it take 30 years for the AFA to help bring the National Forests into being? Politics. In the late 19th century *laissez-faire* government policies put business in a dominant political position. And the activists were divided. Those who wanted to protect natural areas argued endlessly about "preservation"—keeping land pristine—versus "conservation"—managing land responsibly. This disagreement dampened the voice of organizations such as ours.

Gaining political support for the National Forest system meant that AFA had to be willing to negotiate, to consider other points of view. We believed then, and still believe, that managing forests for long-term health is the only logical approach to policy for the nation's forest resources. But we had to recognize that the money generated from selling lumber was a powerful political force. Accordingly, the board of AMERICAN FORESTS decided it needed to support some logging in National Forests. Had it not, there might never have been any federal forest conservation at all.

Such accommodations are often roundly criticized in environmental circles. But consider this: Eventually, the creation of National Forests gave momentum to the idea of setting aside and preserving the special places that now form the National Park System. Both John Muir—who pushed for preserving land—and Gifford Pinchot—who believed in using forest resources, but managing them carefully—were happy with that outcome.

The situation in 2006 has much in common with the early years of AFA. Now, as then, internal divisions and a failure to develop new strategies have hampered advocates for the environment. We in the conservation community need to expand our focus. We need to find a new framework for working with other groups—businesspeople, labor unions, politicians. We need to learn new tactics and build strategic partnerships. It worked a century ago. It can work today. **AF**

---

*Gary Moll is a senior vice president of AMERICAN FORESTS and director of the Urban Ecosystems Center.*