



Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America

By Ian Tyrrell

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Long before people were “going green” and toting reusable bags, the Progressive generation of the early 1900s was calling for the conservation of resources, sustainable foresting practices, and restrictions on hunting. Industrial commodities such as wood, water, soil, coal, and oil, as well as improvements in human health and the protection of “nature” in an aesthetic sense, were collectively seen for the first time as central to the country’s economic well-being, moral integrity, and international power. One of the key drivers in the rise of the conservation movement was Theodore Roosevelt, who, even as he slaughtered animals as a hunter, fought to protect the country’s natural resources.

In *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation*, Ian Tyrrell gives us a cohesive picture of Roosevelt’s engagement with the natural world along with a compelling portrait of how Americans used, wasted, and worried about natural resources in a time of burgeoning empire. Countering traditional narratives that cast conservation as a purely domestic issue, Tyrrell shows that the movement had global significance, playing a key role in domestic security and in defining American interests around the world. Tyrrell goes beyond Roosevelt to encompass other conservation advocates and policy makers, particularly those engaged with shaping the nation’s economic and social policies—policies built on an understanding of the importance of crucial natural resources. *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation* is a sweeping transnational work that blends environmental, economic, and imperial history into a cohesive tale of America’s fraught relationships with raw materials, other countries, and the animal kingdom.

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Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America By Ian Tyrrell Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

“[A] trenchant, transnational chronicle. . .”
(*Nature*)

“Tyrrell presents both sides of the conservation discussion at the time when the practice involved not just trees, soils, and animals but also people as America’s resources. . . . An academic analysis for conservationists or environmentalists who seek to understand the beginning of the conservation movement.”
(*Library Journal*)

“Tyrrell’s *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation* offers a masterful solution to an important historical puzzle: How did US imperial expansion and growing American engagement with international reform currents shape the scope, program, and limitations of the Progressive conservation movement? As Tyrrell demonstrates, no figure better exemplifies the strong, sometimes surprising, and mostly unexamined connections between empire and conservation than Theodore Roosevelt. This is transnational environmental history of the very best sort.”
(Thomas Andrews, University of Colorado-Boulder)

“No scholar has done more than Tyrrell to dispel the enduring myth of American exceptionalism. Here he takes on seemingly the most American of movements, the Progressive conservation movement, placing it into its transnational context and tying it to America’s expanding global ambitions. Finally we have a history that connects early environmental conservation with the nation’s settler colonial past and its imperial future. With his characteristic intelligence, Tyrrell has completely rewritten a major chapter in American history.”
(Linda Nash, University of Washington)

“*Crisis of the Wasteful Nation* is a masterful study of the ways in which progressive conservation, so often mischaracterized as a distinctly American crusade, was part of a world movement that had the dynamics of empire at its core. Once again, Tyrrell shows us the revisionist power of writing American history as if the rest of the world matters.”
(Paul S. Sutter, University of Colorado, Boulder)

“Tyrrell is the most insightful and significant scholar of transnational US history. In *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation* he shows again that the enduring theme of American exceptionalism is best examined and revised through global comparative and transnational contexts. This is an important, new, and nuanced framing of the interrelated realms of natural resource use, physical health, and national strength.”
(David Wrobel *University of Oklahoma*)

“It has long seemed odd that Theodore Roosevelt was as much at ease camping with John Muir as he was hobnobbing with emperors and their finely dressed diplomats. In this fascinating and original book, Tyrrell demonstrates that the two strains of conservationism and great power diplomacy were actually linked in important ways. Anyone interested in Roosevelt, the Progressive Era, conservationism, or diplomacy should read *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation*.”
(Kurk Dorsey, University of New Hampshire)

“Tyrrell has conducted much research on America’s connections to the rest of the world. His latest book finds connections between two ostensibly separate developments around 1900: conservation and the growth of American imperialism. President Theodore Roosevelt was famously active in both movements, which Tyrrell shows were not separate after all. . . . Highly recommended.”
(*Choice*)

“Whether concerned with forests, fuel, water, or soil resources, a chain of powerful anxieties configured Progressive imaginations, he argues. Tyrrell uncovers a Progressive Era America driven less by optimistic reformist politics and more by fears of resource exhaustion and civilizational collapse. . . . Tyrrell’s study offers a powerful reminder that the blinkers of American exceptionalism, particularly regarding our understanding of a supposedly homegrown conservation movement, should not block our view of its international roots.”
(*Journal of American History*)

About the Author

Ian Tyrrell was the Scientia Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, Sydney until his retirement in 2012. He is the author of nine books, including *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860–1930* and *Historians in Public*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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