

Copyright on First Scholarly Study of Man's Impact on Nature Donated, Reclaimed

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George Perkins Marsh, now considered one of the first modern environmentalists, is another prominent and remarkable person who gave away his copyright. His book, *Man and Nature* (1864), focused on forest preservation and soil and water conservation. It was the first scholarly study of mankind's impact on the natural environment.

As a child, Marsh learned about watersheds from his father. As an adult, he closely observed nature, studying alpine glaciers and Italian farmlands, concluding that “the harmonies of nature are turned to discord” by the impact of human activities. In some places, “man has brought the face of the earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon.” He was the first to recognize and publicize this fact.

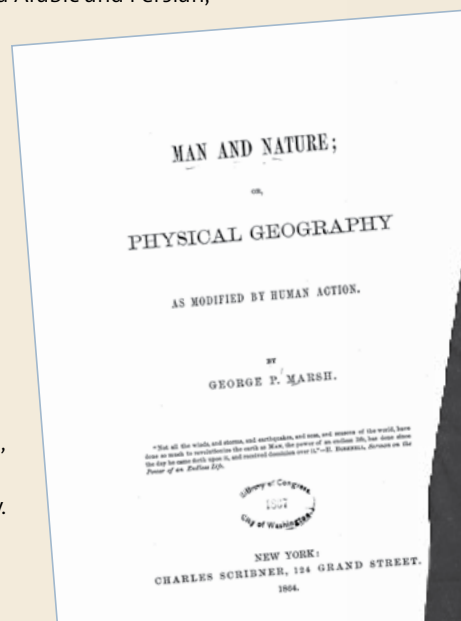
Marsh, a son of New England, was a polymath of extraordinary range. Born in 1801, he was compulsively reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica* by age seven. He studied ancient and modern languages at Dartmouth College, graduating with high honors in 1820 at the age of 19. After a stint as a teacher at a Vermont military academy, he studied law with his father and was admitted to the bar in 1825. Over the next 18 years, he was a farmer, lawyer, member of the Vermont legislature, and author of a grammar of the Icelandic language.

In 1843, Marsh was elected to Congress, where he served seven years, becoming friends with Spencer Baird, an ornithologist and future Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and he helped design the Washington Monument.

Marsh was appointed minister to Turkey in 1849, impressing the diplomatic corps in Constantinople with his ability to converse in multiple languages. While in Turkey, he learned Turkish, studied Arabic and Persian, and journeyed up the Nile.

With a change of administrations in Washington, D.C., Marsh was recalled in 1853. He served as railroad commissioner in Vermont until 1861, when Abraham Lincoln appointed him the first minister to the newly formed Kingdom of Italy, a position he held until his death in Vallombrosa, Italy, in 1882. As a diplomat fluent in 20 languages, his focus, said Secretary of State William Seward, was to prevent foreign powers from recognizing the Confederacy.

His monumental work did not at first appeal to Civil War-weary American audiences. Despairing of the book's commercial success, Marsh donated his copyright to the United States Sanitary Commission, of which he was a member. The commission was a relief agency to support soldiers injured by the war. Marsh's nephew and brother, however, were more hopeful. They bought the copyright back for \$500 and returned it to the author. Before long, the book sold out and the publisher, Charles Scribner, had to reprint it. The volume is still in print today. ©



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George Perkins March