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The Need of Forest Reservations
in
Pennsylvania.

Henry W Mulholland

That the State of Pennsylvania is now highly prosperous is a fact that cannot be denied. Her products, seen in every part of the globe, her facilities for communication, her schools, her numberless factories, are sufficient answer to any contrary argument. Nevertheless she is on the very brink of losing a large part of this prosperity. She has fallen into a great peril, which brings not only present trouble but threatens future destruction. The evil has crept on us so quietly that nine men out of ten would laugh at a hint of its existence. Yet we do not see how they could explain the following circumstances.

Up to within the past few years a des tructive was almost unknown on many of

our streams. Now there is hardly a year passes in which the residents of our valleys are not threatened by heavy loss of property and even of life. Each hard rain or deep snow brings terror to thousands of our citizens till it has passed away. The valleys of our State were always supplied with an abundance of pure water. Now there is hardly a summer passes in which we do not hear of bad drouths. Wells and springs dry up which were never known to fail. Each year the number of towns that have to be put on short water allowance becomes greater; and worse, the low water mark in our rivers becomes lower and lower, till many of them are unable to carry

off the impurities which flow into them. Streams
once clear, are now dark colored, evil smelling
breeders of typhoid and kindred malignant
diseases, a deadly menace to those who live
upon their banks. Streams which a few years
ago had sufficient force to run a mill a large
part of the year, now dry up completely at
certain seasons. And the climate is changing.
Where certain fruits were once an almost sure
crop, it is very seldom now that they are not
killed by frost. Moreover windstorms are
becoming more frequent and violent each year
causing greater damage to crops and property.

For these sudden changes there must be
some cause, and it is not hard to find. We
need not theorize, for history shows us both

causes and results. Once Palestine was most fertile, a land flowing with milk and honey. The same was true of Spain. They supported large populations and their valleys were green with vineyards and groves. To-day they are desolate. Their once fertile fields are wastes of drifting sand and ragged rock, open to the fierce winds; the scorching sun and all the fury of the elements. The streams then so beautiful, have become rocky channels, dry half the year; after a storm a raging torrent; a blot on the face of the land. In both cases we find that they were once well wooded, but the forests have been destroyed so often that Nature cannot

replenish the loss and trees die even under the most careful cultivation. On the other hand take England and Germany. For hundreds of years they have supported a dense population, and their fields are green and even more fertile. Why the difference. It will be found that Germany still has her great Black Forest and England her thousands of parks. Both countries are well wooded.

With this in mind let us consider our own State. We shall find that the past hundred years has been sufficient to almost completely destroy the continuous forest that covered the State. Clear the land at all cost, seems to have been

the watchword. There was hardly a man in Central Pennsylvania who could not swing an axe, from the Governor to the humblest laborer.

For weeks after weeks the sky was red with the light of burning trees. Great piles of huge white pine logs were burned to the ground. The rivers were bank full of floating timber. The cutting was so careless that more was destroyed than used, and the clearings were handed over to the flames. Often they overleapt the mark, and destroyed mile after mile of virgin timber; leaving behind them a blackened waste, in which the soft soil was often burned a foot or more

deep. Thus the almost priceless gift of Nature was thrown away. But she was kind and a new growth at once sprang up. Hardly however had it well started when it was once more cut down to furnish props for the mines and pulp for the paper mills. And once again the flames raged over the land, leaving it more desolate than before.

To day the lumber industry which used to bring millions of dollars annually is almost completely destroyed. Thousands of square miles of timber land, which could be covered with timber, are now desolate, and unproductive, not worth a year's taxes. They could hold back the

rains and snows of winter, preventing floods, and give us plenty of water in the summer. They would soften the climate and check the fierce winds which are becoming so common. They would grow of themselves if only given the chance. The only care that need be given is protection from fire, but this protection must be given soon. This spring in six counties the loss due to forest fires was over eight hundred thousand dollars. A few years more of this and we will not have a wooded area in the State. Private interests cannot cope with the evil. It requires a wider

power and influence than they can control. The present laws are insufficient. They make it the duty of commissioners to fight these fires. Such men are fitted neither by education or inclination to do such work. They have no organization. Often one man devolves the duty of guarding miles of the most important territory. He has not the means nor the power to fulfill his duty. As a result fire fighting is largely confined to the fitful enterprise of private interests.

The first duty of the State is to secure these lands. Our forestry commission has bought in over one hundred square miles of such land, but the tracts are small

and isolated. We need a broader and more progressive policy, which will give immediate possession of several huge tracts on the head waters of our rivers

In the second place there should be an organized department to care for these preserves. If we have not the men here to put at the head of it, we can secure them in Europe, where forestry has been recognized as a profession for hundreds of years.

The penalties for setting fire to timber land should be increased, so that a man will think twice before he destroys miles of young trees to

secure grazing for a few cattle, or a harvest of wild berries.

Funds must be appropriated to carry out the plans, enough to largely increase the guards in the dry seasons of the year. There must be enough wardens even if we have to call out the entire State Guard. The greatest danger will be for the first few years, until the trees get a fair start; afterward they will take care of themselves.

The cost will be less than our annual loss from fires. Besides in a few years we can begin judicious cutting, and thereafter we shall be assured of a steady income.

It is not however as an income maker that we should consider it, but as a

necessity. If we do not take some steps soon the lands will become hopelessly barren. Agriculture will be almost a lost art and a large part of the State will be uninhabitable.

Commencement Oration of Henry W. Mulhollan, Class of 1900

Transcribed by Meg MacAvoy, September 2008

Edited by Krista Gray, September 2008

The Need for Forest Reservations in Pennsylvania

That the State of Pennsylvania is now highly prosperous is a fact that cannot be denied. Her products, seen in every part of the globe, her facilities for communication, her schools, her numberless factories, are sufficient answer to any contrary argument. Nevertheless she is on the very brink of losing a large part of this prosperity. She has fallen into a great peril, which brings not only present trouble but threatens future destruction. The evil has crept on us so quietly that nine men out of ten would laugh at a hint of its existence. Yet we do not see how they could explain the following circumstances.

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