



Conservation Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

—celebrating the 100th anniversary
of the Conservation Department

By Karin Verschoor, Eileen Stegemann and Dave Nelson
Photos courtesy of New York State Archives

Listen carefully; you might be able to hear it in your mind. The year was 1911; the city, Albany. In the Senate Chamber, perhaps a bespectacled man with a three-piece pinstriped suit and a pocket watch cleared his throat before speaking. Taking out a kerchief, he wiped his tiny glasses and placed them once again atop the bridge of his nose before returning his gaze to the sheaf of papers he clutched in his hands.

“The Senate shall come to order.” Shuffling and background noise diminished as members took their seats.

A brief silence, and then, “The clerk shall read.”

“The People of the State of New York now consider an act, relating to conservation of land, forest, waters, parks, hydraulic power, fish and game.”

Article 2 of that bill, which was signed into law by Governor Dix on July 12, 1911, created the New York

State Conservation Department. Predecessor to today’s Department of Environmental Conservation, this new agency brought all of the existing natural resource programs under one department, reflecting the growing awareness at the time of the interconnectedness of forests, wildlife habitat and water resources.

The new Department consolidated the Forest, Fish and Game Commission, the Forest Purchasing Board and the Water Supply Commission into a single administrative unit. Three divisions were created: the Division of Lands and Forests, the Division of Fish and Game, and the Division of Inland Waters.

What caused this law to be necessary? What challenges faced resource managers then, and how do they compare to today?



Lands and Forests

In 1911, the Division of Lands and Forests was responsible for the care and management of 1,643,244 acres of state land, the Forest Preserve, future state land acquisitions, reforestation of state lands, the state tree nursery system, forest health and tracking forest products. At the time, fire was an overwhelming priority.

Following devastating fires in 1903 and 1908 in the Adirondacks, a coordinated network of fire observation towers and telephone lines was installed in the Forest Preserve for earlier detection and notification of fires. Accordingly, Forest Rangers of the day primarily focused on fire fighting and prevention. With the advent of car-camping tourism in the 1920s, the rangers' role expanded to include educating people about fire and safety in the woods, building roadside fireplaces to reduce wildfires caused by careless campers, and rescuing lost and injured tourists. Rangers also enforced laws against timber trespass.

Another priority in 1911 was reforestation. Forested land in New York had reached an all-time low (approximately 15% of the state's land area, compared to 63% today), largely due to clearing for agriculture, rapid logging and the aforementioned fires. To combat the resulting soil erosion and flooding, billions of conifer seedlings—many grown right here in state nurseries—were planted.

Today, DEC manages more than four million acres of state land, including the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves, various state forests across New York, and nearly a million acres of working forest conservation easements. Forest Rangers continue to fight fires and educate the public, and also coordinate DEC's rapid response to environmental crises, quickly setting up incident command centers for fast and efficient mobilization of equipment and personnel.

Now consolidated into a single site, the remaining state tree nursery at Saratoga still provides seedlings. And while fewer numbers of seedlings are sold today, a wider variety of species are available; at least 50 species of trees and shrubs.



Sowing seeds, Saratoga Nursery, c. 1950.



Building Mt. Adams fire tower, 1917.



Forest ranger with firefighting tools, c. 1925.



Forest field day in Delaware Co., 1924.



Adirondack deer camp, 1920.



Chautauqua Hatchery, Bemus Pt., 1938.



Feeding chicks, Middle Island Quail Farm, 1940.

Fish and Game

In 1911, many game species had almost disappeared from the state. Years of unregulated fishing, hunting, trapping, and landscape alteration had taken their toll on New York's populations of trout, turkey, beaver, white-tailed deer, moose and numerous songbirds. To restock some depleted populations, as well as to meet sporting interests of the state's growing human population, the Department focused on propagating fish and wildlife species. Numerous fish hatcheries and game farms were built, and protective hunting and fishing regulations were established.

Large tracts of land were purchased for recreation and game management, and state game protectors (the predecessors to today's Environmental Conservation Officers) earnestly enforced hunting and fishing regulations. Over the years, the Department began to focus more on management and conservation education. Contaminants in fish and wildlife species, and the health of freshwater and tidal wetlands as important nursery grounds for numerous fish and wildlife species also became concerns. In response, the original game protector role expanded from primarily stopping poachers to include environmental enforcement issues as well.

Today, DEC continues to manage the state's fish and wildlife populations. However, the early focus of managing individual game species and their habitats has expanded to also include managing ecological communities—a reflection on today's broader and vastly more complex ecosystem focus. Education remains an important component, teaching youth the significance of environmental stewardship.



Turkey release, Bear Spring Mt., 1953.

Camping on Long Lake, Hamilton Co., 1919.





Digging tunnel for NYC water supply, early 1900s.



Transporting pipe at Bryn Mawr, early 1900s.

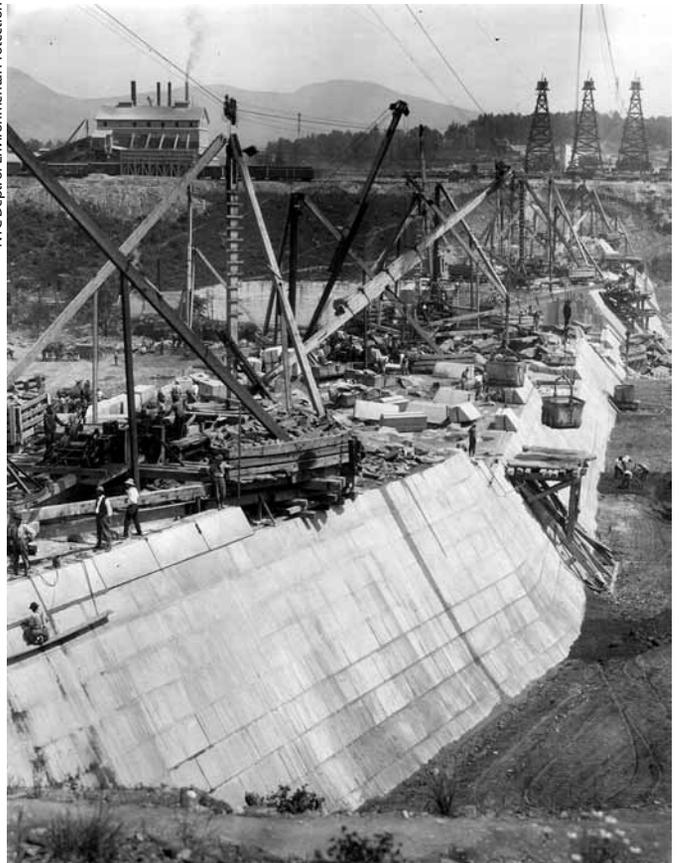


Transporting fish on Oneida Lake, 1940.

Inland Waters

During the early years, the Division of Inland Waters focused on flood control, developing hydropower resources, regulating water withdrawals for drinking water supplies, and acquiring lands to build large drinking water reservoirs. At this time, New York City was growing at a rapid pace and its existing drinking water supply was inadequate. The City had to find a larger water source, which led to the construction of six reservoirs in and around the Catskills.

Today, the Division of Water is still responsible for protecting and managing New York's waters, but there is a greater emphasis on keeping pollution out of our lakes, streams and rivers, and restoring polluted waterbodies. Water pollution comes from many sources, and the Division is often on the cutting edge of drafting and enforcing regulations and standards that keep our waters clean. The Department also continues to be responsible for protecting lives and property from flooding and storm damage, and works with local, state and federal partners on floodplain management to address concerns regarding coastal erosion, dam failures and floods.



Ashokan Dam, early 1900s.

Conservation for Tomorrow

While DEC has grown significantly and undergone numerous changes since 1911, the core issues identified then—protecting state-owned land, managing and regulating fish and wildlife populations, and protecting the state's valuable water resources—remain crucial parts of the agency today. The hard work over the last 100 years has paid off; New York's forests are healthy and plentiful, we have an abundance of good quality water, and our fish and wildlife populations have rebounded and are flourishing.

As this department begins its second century, conservation is more important than ever, and the one certainty about future environmental challenges is that they will always be changing. DEC will continue to protect the state's natural resources, and address new and sometimes unforeseen environmental challenges, such as climate change. We'll seek creative ways to provide incentives to encourage good stewardship by individuals, businesses and communities.

The role of education and outreach remains critical, especially to reach our future stewards who are growing up in an increasingly digital world, which limits their time outdoors, leaving many disconnected from nature. We need to pass on the legacy of the generations of environmentally aware people who have changed the environmental history of our state, including the private citizens, politicians, scientists and DEC staff who have led the way for the past 100 years, and who are eager to lead us into a new century of environmental conservation.

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