

HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The School was established in 1900 as “The Yale Forest School” with a founding gift from the family of Gifford Pinchot, B.A. 1889, LL.D. 1925, a pioneer in the conservation movement who would later become the first head of the U.S. Forest Service. Through Pinchot’s vision and the work of the Forest School, Yale led the way in creating a new model of forest management and natural resource conservation, educating many of the nation’s first foresters – a vanguard of professionals who shaped our modern understanding of conservation, environmental education, and public lands. In fact, during its first four decades, the School would produce the first four U.S. Forest Service chiefs.

Over the past century, however, the School has grown from a more narrowly focused forestry program to an international institution with a diverse array of students from across the world graduating each year. In 1972, in recognition of its increased scope, the School changed its name to the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies.

Then, on July 1, 2020, the School again changed its name to the Yale School of the Environment, a change that better reflects its established role as a leader in environmental scholarship and practice.

At the same time, the School established the Forest School at the Yale School of the Environment in recognition of its founding mission and of the continued importance of forestry. The teaching and study of forestry remains a core strength of the School. YSE students learn the principles of natural resource management through the innovative research and sustainable practice occurring at the School’s nearly 11,000 acres of actively managed forests, and YSE is committed to providing students multiple opportunities to study these forests and those around the world.

In addition to forest science and management, research and teaching at Yale School of the Environment now cover a broad range of other areas: ecology, ecosystems, and biodiversity; environmental management and social ecology in developing societies; global change science and policy; health and environment; industrial environmental management; policy, economics, and law; urban science, environmental planning, design, and values; and coastal watershed systems.

The School has more than 5,300 living alumni who are working across the world on a range of environmental challenges. They work in NGOs, government, business, academia, law, public health, and communications, among numerous other sectors and disciplines.

Over the past two decades, the School has strengthened its connections within the wider Yale community and with external partners. The School has introduced joint programs with Yale Law School and with the Yale Schools of Management, Public Health, and Architecture, as well as with partner universities including Pace Law School, Vermont Law School, and Tsinghua University in China. This year, the School will also introduce a joint degree with the Yale School of Engineering & Applied Science.

During the 1990s, the School established and invested in a range of new centers and programs to expand its work beyond faculty research and classroom learning. The nearly twenty centers and programs, along with other emerging initiatives, have created dynamic foci for scholarship, research, student learning, and outreach to alumni and the wider professional communities on critical issues, such as tropical forestry, environmental communication, and industrial ecology, among many others.

In 2017 the School unveiled an ambitious new Strategic Plan. Among the plan’s critical goals was the development of new curricula that track the School’s current and evolving strengths; increased programs and hiring to address environmental equity and diversity issues; a new emphasis on research and training in environmental communication; and expanded interdisciplinary research. In the three years since, the School has adopted a new curriculum for the Master of Environmental Management program, which places more emphasis on subject specialization while maintaining its signature flexibility; introduced the Yale Center for Environmental Communication; and created the Yale Environmental Dialogue, an initiative that has engaged environmental leaders from a wide range of disciplines and sectors to inject new ideas and fresh energy into the national conversation on environmental policy. The School also is continuing to develop and strengthen strategic initiatives focused on environmental data, urban science, and environmental health and justice.

The School’s faculty and students have also become more diverse and representative of the wider world, convening from a range of professional, cultural, and sociological backgrounds. In 2020 the School welcomed to the faculty Dorceta Taylor and Gerald Torres, two of the country’s preeminent scholars in the field of environmental justice, and Yuan Yao joined the faculty as an assistant professor of industrial ecology and sustainability systems.

YSE Dean Indy Burke, who had requested the name change after the strategic planning process, and in consultation with faculty, the Alumni Association Board, and other supporters, said the new name better reflects a shared commitment to achieving a more sustainable planet across many fields and sectors.

“At a time of global crisis for the planet, our faculty, students, and alumni are working with colleagues throughout Yale on a wide scope of urgent and important issues – issues that include climate change, clean energy policy, urban science, green chemistry, forestry, and environmental justice, among many others,” she said. “As the Yale School of the Environment, we will be accurately communicating the breadth and depth of our scholarship, research, impact, and mission.”