HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL OF FORESTRY &
ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Yale University has played a leading role in the development of the American conservation movement and the practice of natural resource management since the 1880s, when Yale graduates such as William Henry Brewer, Othniel C. Marsh, Clarence King, and George Bird Grinnell became deeply involved in the exploration of the West. In 1900 that tradition was further strengthened when the University established the Yale Forest School. The School was founded by Gifford Pinchot 1889 B.A., 1925 LL.D., and Henry S. Graves 1892 B.A., 1949 LL.D., with a gift from the Pinchot family, with the goal of ensuring a steady supply of American forestry professionals.

Pinchot, who became one of the leading figures in the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt, created the U.S. Forest Service and served as its first chief. Credited with coining the phrase “conservation of natural resources,” he defined conservation as “the wise use of the Earth for the good of present and future generations.”

In the School’s first four decades, it would produce the first four Forest Service chiefs. In the decades since, the School has grown from a small, narrowly focused forestry program to an international institution with a diverse array of students from across the world graduating each year. Over the past century, the School’s objectives have broadened, its mission has evolved, and its methods of instruction have changed to address the changing and increasingly complex environmental challenges facing the planet.

In 1972 the School changed its name to the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in recognition of the fact that it is, in the broadest sense, concerned with the scholarly understanding and long-term management of ecosystems for both conservation of biodiversity and for human benefit. The School’s research and teaching now are conducted across a broad range of areas: ecology, ecosystems, and biodiversity; environmental management and social ecology in developing societies; forest science and management; 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.

Over the past two decades, the School has also strengthened its connections within the larger Yale community and with external partners. The School has introduced joint programs with Yale Law School, the Yale School of Management, the Yale School of Public Health, and the Yale School of Architecture, as well as with partner universities including Pace Law School, Vermont Law School, and Tsinghua University in China. During the 1990s, the School invested in a range of new centers and programs to deepen its work beyond faculty research and classroom learning into engagement with environmental problems in a wide array of dimensions. These and other emerging initiatives have created dynamic foci for scholarship, research, student learning, and outreach to alumni and the wider professional communities.

The School’s faculty and students have also become more diverse and representative of the wider world, coming from a range of professional, cultural, and sociological backgrounds. In 2017, a new strategic plan led by Dean Indy Burke identified as a priority the establishment of programs and hiring to address diversity within the School and the environmental field.