Essential learning for sustainability: Gifford Pinchot’s lessons for educating leaders today

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Abstract
Some scholars of leadership for sustainability argue that more research needs to be done on the ‘who’ of leaders, the core drivers of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their decisions and actions. This paper looks at a leading US figure in sustainability, Gifford Pinchot, who led the establishment of the US Forest Service, and who devoted much of his career to conserving the natural world for the good of his fellow citizens. It describes the formation of the ‘who’ of Pinchot as an adult leader through a focus on his early learning environment in order to point to some essential and timeless principles for the education of leaders of sustainability.

Keywords: leadership, ethics, education, systems thinking

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This ‘blindspot’ concerns not the what and how – not what leaders do and how they do it – but the who: who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively.
- Senge, Jaworski, Scharmer and Flowers (Senge et al., 2005)

Introduction

In his 1913 autobiography, President Theodore Roosevelt declared:

_Gifford Pinchot is the man to whom the nation owes most for what has been accomplished as regards the preservation of the natural resources of our country. He led, and indeed during its most vital period embodied, the fight for the preservation through use of our forests .... He was the foremost leader in the great struggle to coordinate all our social and governmental forces in the effort to secure the adoption of a rational and far-seeing policy for securing the conservation of all our national resources. ... I believe it is but just to say that among the many, many public officials who under my administration rendered literally invaluable service to the people of the United States, he, on the whole, stood first_ (Roosevelt, 1913).

Almost a century later Pinchot’s biographer, Char Miller, titled his book _Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism_ (Miller, 2001). At least two things are apparent from these headline introductions to Pinchot. Firstly, they suggest that he was responsible for setting in place a system for sustainable management of the nation’s natural resources that took account of the social and organizational as well as the physical components of that innovation. Secondly, they imply that early twentieth century innovation contained lessons for sustainability that resonate well into the present.

Pinchot came to national prominence under the presidency of arguably the greatest champion of the natural environment in US history. They shared a conservation ethic which sought to balance the interests of nature and humans in ways that promoted the sustainability of both without privileging either (Steen, 2001). Pinchot established the US Forest Service and became its first Chief in 1905. While the preservation and expansion of the nation’s forests had been a major concern of the country’s leading foresters since the 1870s, none of his predecessors was able to secure the organizational structure - still in place today - that ensured the place of sustainable forestry as a national concern. Pinchot went on to pursue the sustainable use of many of the country’s other natural resources and to embrace a range of social justice issues in a political career that included two gubernatorial incumbencies in Pennsylvania. He died in 1946 still deeply committed to the view that issues of natural and social sustainability need to be resolved based on the ethical principle of ‘the greatest good for the greatest number…in the long run’.

How did Pinchot come to be such an influential thought leader of sustainability of natural resources and of organizations charged with that task? What learning forces shaped him? And does his educational story offer lessons for teaching sustainability leadership today?

This paper looks at Pinchot’s formation by mapping his early learning environment. Miller’s illuminating biography of Pinchot includes insightful and intriguing details about the young child’s and man’s education (Miller, 2001). The aim here is to extend those insights. The
The importance of early education for leadership

Peter Senge, a prominent scholar and trainer in leadership at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has written extensively on the need to reform industrial age assumptions about both leadership and education. Together with colleagues Scharmer, Flowers, and Jaworski, he has identified the all too common focus on examining the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of leadership practice (Senge et al, 2005). What’s missing, they say, is a much deeper examination of the ‘who’ of the leader: the operating, often hidden assumptions they use, the operating, often hidden value systems that shape them. The most effective leaders of sustainable organizations and of environmental sustainability, they argue, are those who have learned to see their physical and social environments as wholes rather than in parts. Such leaders have also learned to see and value themselves in wholes: not simply as rational beings, but as feeling and sensing beings as well. Other scholars, such as Ron Heifetz, confirm the primary attribute of successful, adaptive leadership as the ability to ‘getting on the balcony’, to see the big picture, that is to comprehend in wholes (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Senge, in particular, acknowledges that while this holistic external and internal vision can be learned later, teaching and learning these skills young is the ideal. There is considerable contemporary evidence-based educational research that aims to remedy the fragmented, linear thinking that Senge points to as a legacy of the industrial age. This research includes significant work on sustainability education (Senge, Laur, Schley & Smith, 2006). But often overlooked as evidence are historical narratives of the learning journeys of successful leaders of our past, perhaps because it is assumed that they too suffered at the hands of industrial-age educational methods. This omission means we miss out on the contribution such completed stories can make by grounding the often abstract and present focused language of innovation in real-life evidence.

Pinchot’s story: beginnings

Gifford Pinchot was born on 11 August 1865, in Simsbury, Connecticut, months after the end of the Civil War. His parents were James and Mary Eno Pinchot. Their principal residence was in New York, where James had made a fortune in interior design. Mary’s wealth derived from her father Amos’s substantial commercial success in the dry goods business. James was originally from Milford, Pennsylvania, the son and grandson of political refugees from Napoleonic France. Constantine and Maria, with their son Cyrille, arrived in America in 1816 with sufficient capital and entrepreneurial acumen to thrive. Cyrille was an astute land speculator (Miller, 1999). He acquired extensive holdings throughout north-eastern Pennsylvania and New York State, and later in Michigan and Wisconsin, and was to be Milford’s largest tax payer for some time. But by the 1850s his older children, including second son James, were forced to leave town to make their own way elsewhere because of the town’s declining economic prospects. They did so in New York. Here James not only thrived commercially but did so by embracing the new artistic interests offered by the...
burgeoning metropolis (Miller, 1999). He manufactured and bought interior furnishings in New York and Pennsylvania, and imported others from England and Europe. In so doing he began the family’s reconnection with its French origins, and political and cultural inheritance. With his wealth, urban cultural context and aesthetic interests, James became a patron of the arts. One of his artist friends was Sanford Gifford, a member of the later generation of the Hudson River School (Miller, 1999). James’ and Mary’s son was Sanford’s godson and namesake. A hint of the civic-minded citizenship that was to inform the education of young Gifford is contained in his godfather’s life and work.

Sanford Gifford had fought and lost two brothers in the Civil War (Richardson, 2014). Lung damage James sustained in the 1850s prevented him from participating in the War, but he followed it closely and avidly. Sanford later painted ‘Hunter Mountain, Twilight’. It was bought by James and remained in the family’s possession, occupying a prominent place in their homes throughout Gifford’s life. Many commentators see its depiction of the ravaged landscape as a visual story of the clear-felling of Pennsylvania forests in which the Pinchots participated with great profit. Others interpret it as a metaphor for the extraordinary human waste that war had wrought. James would strive to be instrumental in redeeming both the realist and metaphorical depictions of the painting. Their son’s name was an indicator that James and Mary wanted him to play a part in this civic and environmental activity.

Amos Eno’s move into New York real estate included the construction of an exclusive hotel on Fifth Avenue that served also as a residence for the extended family. Mary’s participation as a young woman in her twenties in New York cultural life exposed her to the same influences as James. The impact of the Civil War on her too is indicated by the substantial collection of letters she kept from her aunt, Mary Phelps, married to her mother’s brother John. The Phelps had moved ‘out west’ to Missouri in the 1830s, where John Phelps would eventually become a highly progressive Governor. While her husband and son were on the battlefield, her aunt set up the family home as a hospital, moving from there with a wagon of supplies to the front to nurse when her husband and son were in the frontline of battle.

The impact of catastrophic war on the family contrasted with a mostly joyous personal life: a marriage of sympathetic souls, the birth of a first son in 1865, the births of two daughters, Lucy and Antoinette in 1867 and 1868, and the birth of second son Amos in 1873 (Carrs, 1981). The one sadness in this notably contented family life was the untimely death of daughter Lucy in 1869. The decision to move the family to Paris in July 1871 exposed it to further national tragedy. The significant American community in the capital had been depleted during the exile that followed the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing Commune. James and Mary arrived soon after it became possible again for Americans to live in the city again. The stark reality of the physical and social destruction in Paris was all around them. From this base James commuted for business, before eventually retiring early in 1877 to commit his life to public service (Miller, 2001). Such exposure to war-ravaged societies over the course of a decade had an inevitable impact on the upbringing of their young family. It was of course made more profound by James’ familial connection, by his return to the birthplace of his father’s and grandfather’s French republicanism. James’ later involvement in the construction of the Statue of Liberty and its pedestal offers one practical outcome of this period of the integration of his French and American political
inheritance, and the hopes he had for the rebuilding of both societies to reflect the democratic principles of their foundations.

**Educating Gifford: contributing to the re-invention of the nation**
Gifford’s early years and education were experienced in the context of these times of heightened political and personal intensity. They were also influenced by James’ awareness of the educational reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century. American intellectual leaders, particularly Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and English social philosophers, particularly Herbert Spencer, profoundly influenced James’ thinking. During the nineteenth century, Western countries came to recognise the value to their economies of an educated population. But Gifford’s education bore little resemblance to the mass, regimented style initiated by the Industrial Revolution, and which educators a century and a half later are trying to correct. In both content and pedagogy he was actively encouraged in his strengths and interests in the natural world. It would be what twenty-first century educators call ‘student-centred’.

In Paris in the early 1870s James wrote home regularly to his parents in Milford of Gifford’s morning French lessons (Pinchot, 1872). He explained how younger sister Nettie had begun to benefit from the family conversations in French in which her brother was now a participant. But French lessons were completed by ten in the morning, and outdoor activities until dinner time formed the largest part of the day’s regular schedule. Visits to the Tuileries, the Bois de Bologne or the Zoo offered fresh air and physical exercise, as well as the opportunity for investigating the world of urban nature. Visits to the Jardin in 1871, following the Communards’ burning of the Tuileries Palace, also contained striking lessons in social and political history for the young boy. Body, heart and mind were all enlisted to capture the child’s interest and promote learning.

A pocket diary of Mary’s from 1871, with a preserved leaf and the letter-like markings of a young child on the page opposite his mother’s entry, reveals the shared activity of adult and child in James’ and Mary’s approach to Gifford’s learning. Engaging with nature and the lessons of outdoor activity, while modelling the daily disciplines of recording the events of his day were to become staples of Gifford’s life. By 1872 Gifford was working on his own diaries, and writing his own letters to relatives at home (Pinchot, 1872).

**Learning across the disciplines**
Between 1876 to 1879, when back in the United States, Gifford wrote regularly to his teacher as part of his school routine in a small red exercise book marked ‘Letterbook’. The educational regime of a mixture of formal indoor lessons and self-directed enquiry in the outside world continued through these years. When in 1882 James wrote to Mary to suggest they continue to keep nine-year-old Amos away from the school room for health reasons, he indicated again a parental preference for using schools as supplements to, not staples of their children’s learning. Gifford’s letters to his teacher, Mr McMullen, were on any topic that captured his interest.

Many of the letters show his enthusiastic interest in insects, in hunting and fishing, in the mechanics of vehicles, evidence of his experiential learning. By 1876 he had learned a literacy of the insect world which he was happy to describe to his teacher in this letter:
My dear teacher,
I want to tell you something about my collection of insects. This is the second year I have been at it. I have almost two hundred specimens, and when you think how many there are, this is very few, but I still have more than I thought I would have when I began. I do not confine myself strictly to these, but also take all the little curiosities I can find. I have two very nice fossils. One, a curiously shaped snail is something like this (a small, finely detailed drawing), only about five times as large... (Pinchot, 1876).

In order to communicate his point he used whatever language was available to him. If he did not know how to describe the concentric circles of a snail’s shell then he drew them.

Other letters show his developing interest in the political world, and a growing literary and linguistic understanding. In one he declared his filial as well as political connection with the French, asserting the view that the American Revolutionary War would have undoubtedly failed without the fraternal allegiance and support of France. The letter was in English but could as easily have been in French, which was by then his second language and one he continued to use while resident in the United States. If he could not translate from his French natural history book into English to relate the information he wanted to his American teacher, he relayed the information in French. He advised the teacher that he was not depending only on his capacity to collect artefacts from his surrounding neighbourhood, but was also deliberately acquiring objects of interest from other sources, in the same way that his father did: ‘the other day some furniture arrived for Papa. With it came some very nice fossils for me…’.

His interest in the natural sciences continued and with it came a growing scientific literacy. In 1878 he spent a page relaying to his teacher the gift of a microscope and how he could manipulate it to learn more detailed information about the objects of his study. Interleaved with stories of scientific enquiry were those of the hunting and fishing of larger species, which were objects both of bookish enquiry inside and of his outdoor pursuits, often accompanying his father (Pinchot, 1878).

By the early 1880s, during the family’s second extended stay in Paris, summaries of novels began to pepper the young Gifford’s letters. One retold the narrative of ‘The Peachling’, a Japanese tale that anticipated the international flavour of the notes he would write during this time. These later notes were of lectures he attended to learn more about the animal and reptile species of the world, including the peculiar versions to be found on the island continent of Australia. While the natural world would continue as his dominant interest, and with it a desire to be observing it outdoors, Gifford would also become an avid and eclectic reader, sometimes castigating himself as an adult for being consumed by a book late into the night and so compromising his efficiency the next day.

**Learning about sustainable societies**
Gifford’s learning benefited from active involvement in the lives of his parents’ adult friends. On February 21 1877, for example, he set out to provide his teacher with ‘a short account of the first half of my excursion with General Sherman and his staff’ (Pinchot, 1877). (So close a family friend had Sherman become that a dedicated room was provided for him during the
construction of the family home Grey Towers, in 1886.) After meeting up with the General’s party at the foot of 33rd street and East River, Gifford set sail with the group on the steamer ‘Henry Smith’. First stop was Willett’s Point, passing Hell Gate, where ‘all the soldiers on the wharf’ fired a salute. General Abbott, the Commandant, proceeded to give General Sherman a tour of the facilities. Gifford relates how ‘I got to go with him and so got a good deal of information’. Lunch was provided at the Commandant’s house ‘and a very good lunch it was’. Following the meal Gifford boarded the steamer with Sherman and Abbott and sailed across to Fort Schuyler. At the end of his letter Gifford suddenly remembered that he forgot to tell his teacher the story ‘about exploding the torpedo’ but, having clearly by this time satisfied the usual length requirement of letters, he signs off abruptly ‘but I will tell you about that next time, so good bye’ (Pinchot, 1877).

Gifford imbibed the lessons of physical and spiritual courage modeled by the wartime heroism Sherman, and John and Mary Phelps. Stephen Bower wrote of Sherman’s ‘theology of the battlefield’ where he believed himself to be at war with the ‘demons of disintegration and doubt that so tormented the American soul and the angels standing guard over life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. James Pinchot’s subsequent role in the construction of the Statue of Liberty is one indicator if his artistic and political contribution to the efforts towards restoration of the peace of the ‘American soul’. Gifford too showed signs of his understanding of the tragedy of the Civil War and the expectation that his family should be part of the effort to reshape a sustainable, civic society. In a letter three weeks before the excursion with the General, Gifford wrote to his teacher about his views on gunpowder in war. Arguing his case against he wrote,

*I do not see how gunpowder can do half so much good as it has done harm. In blasting I do not see why dynamite and nitro-glycerine could not be used just as well. In war not half so many men would be killed and the victory would necessarily be won by pluck and discipline. Just think how many lives are lost by the explosion of a single bomb shell in a body of troops, and if it were not for powder that bombshell would not be there to burst and the lives of so many men would not be lost. Think of the helpless women and children that are killed by the help of that vile invention, powder. ...I leave you to judge whether it does more harm than good (Pinchot, 1877).

**Student-centred schooling**

Gifford’s schooling was not formalised until the age of 16 when, in December 1881, he entered New Hampshire’s Phillips Exeter Academy. While he attended schools in New York, the family’s peripatetic lifestyle made this a frequently interrupted part of his life. And even at Exeter the culture of the school was liberally student-centred. Later in life Pinchot reflected on its positive influence and the philosophical continuity from what he had learned to expect of education as a young boy. He commented that

*as I grow older, and as my interest in the welfare and progress of our people broadens and deepens, I look back with steadily growing satisfaction [at] the time I spent at Exeter. The most useful thing about the school in those days ... was the fact that it made every student responsible to himself as well as to his teachers for what he did and how he did it, and yet gave each boy the best possible chance to follow his own bent (Pinchot, 1910).
In view of the highly varied sites and settings of Gifford’s earlier education, it is not surprising that he enjoyed the eclectic atmosphere that characterised the Academy then. On the one hand, he had been taught the basics of a classical education: French, dance, art, mathematics and literature. On the other, he was ensconced in a learning environment in which, as Char Miller put it, ‘the natural world was a consistent frame of reference in the family’s discussions’. His innate proclivities were actively encouraged and continued to gravitate strongly toward what Miller calls the ‘biotic realm’ (Miller, 2001). By seventeen he had bought an axe so that he could fell dead trees and peel the bark in search of insects. He asked his parents for his butterfly net when the season came, and began learning and recording the Latin names for the insects he was fascinated by in the notebooks he kept in Paris in 1881.

He also began to use letters home during this time to communicate a growing self-awareness. In one considering his future, he felt the responsibility of powerful family expectations for him, either in commercial or civil service. Writing to his family towards the end of his time at the Academy he gave expression to the stresses he had felt in struggling with the combination of poor eyesight and catching up to his peers in the academic work needed for entrance to Yale. He thought it best to admit temporary defeat and go to work in Amos Eno’s business for a year rather than enter Yale with the conditions he felt sure must attach to admission. But within days he regretted his failure of emotional resilience and assured his parents that he would persist in a more ‘manly’ way. The exchange showed not simply that he felt the necessity of fortitude in the face of adversity, but also that he felt able to express the truth of his vulnerability in the first place. In doing so he demonstrated the modelling in his life of significant men and women who possessed the strength of disciplined stoicism, humane and artistic sensibilities and an expressive emotional intelligence. The convergence of these human traits and their importance to the way in which James and Mary envisaged the development of their son was initially embodied in their choice of godfather, Sanford Gifford, and the painting that was a visual mainstay of Gifford Pinchot’s life.

Learning forestry: remembering early lessons

We are reminded of the impact of his early learning in nature by a diary entry made when Gifford returned much later as a Yale graduate to Paris in search of the best path for the professional study of forestry. With letters of introduction from London to the leading German figures of European forestry, Dr William Schlich and Sir Dietrich Brandis, he went first to visit the forest exhibit at the World’s Fair, held in Paris during the hundredth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. In doing so he was commemorating an event that had eventually led to his paternal family’s emigration to the United States. His recollections were only positive. He recalled the instructive delights of his early education in Paris in a diary entry of 24 October 1889, noting ‘how glad I was to be in Paris again! It seemed like the good old times, almost when I was studying at the Jardin des Plantes, and the family was here’ (Steen, 2001). Diary entries during his time as a student of forestry in Nancy, France indicate his frustration with the dry and theoretical focus of the instruction he experienced. When Pinchot cut short a full course of forestry study, he returned to the United States confident of the strength of his early education. It had generated a self-directed and experiential learning in which scientific theory was important but not sufficient. He knew not only how he learned best, but also the educational principles that led to the effective education of others in the value of forestry. And his job was more about political and public
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persuasion than it was about academic forest science and management. The Jardin des Plantes had clearly offered a wonderful laboratory for investigation to a young boy with a powerful enthusiasm for the world of nature. Established in the seventeenth century, the Jardin exists today on the same 68-acre site. It contains 23,500 species of plants. Learning the lessons of nature in the man-made creation of the Jardin was one powerful source of Pinchot’s learning the natural world situated in the midst of human activity.

Gifford’s love of being in the natural world in order to improve his understanding of it was a constant throughout his life. Hunting, fishing, camping, sailing were not only the source of deeply satisfying physical experiences but also provided irreplaceable opportunities for learning about the natural world he was to strive so hard to protect. He was later to rail against the stolid, book-heavy instruction of professors of forestry in Nancy. When the family endowed the Yale School of Forestry, he offered his eager support of young forestry students’ learning in the field by helping to establish and teaching in a Summer School camp in the woods of the family estate at Grey Towers. The method of his childhood learning – an immersion of mind, heart and body – would be his legacy to the next generation of American-trained foresters.

How had the Pinchots learned to educate Gifford?
Herbert Spencer was amongst those whose visits contributed to the reflective approach James and Mary demonstrated in their children’s spiritual, intellectual and emotional upbringing. James wrote to his father of how much he enjoyed the visit of Spencer and Professor Louman in France in October 1871 (Pinchot, 1871). The two visitors were not only engaged in philosophical conversations with the family but joined them on afternoon outings with Gifford and Nettie, on one occasion to the zoological gardens.

Spencer wrote his essays on education in the 1850s, publishing them first in prestigious journals then in book form in 1861 (Spencer, 1861). In them he warned teachers of the intellectual and physical dangers of an ‘excess of mental application’. Supporting his views Spencer cited the authority of Johann Pestalozzi – a key influence in the education of the poor following the French Revolution – and Scottish physician Sir John Forbes. He warned that

if the higher faculties are early taxed by presenting an order of knowledge more complex or abstract than can be readily assimilated; or if, by excess of culture, the intellect in general is developed to a degree beyond that which is natural to its age; the abnormal advantage gained will inevitably be accompanied by some equivalent, or more than equivalent, evil.

He decried the imbalance in the contemporary approach to children’s education. It contained too little food, too little clothing, too little exercise and an excess of mental application. He believed it was simply cruel. Reflecting the impact of this advice, James was writing to Gifford as late as has entry to Exeter to urge him to spend no more than three to four hours a day at his books, instead combining study with physical exercise outdoors and eating a nutritionally balanced diet, including fresh foods (De Stasio, 2010). What had been expressed earlier as simple joy in the company of his young children was now, in Gifford’s growing independence, expressed as rather anxious solicitude. James regularly sent Gifford and his landlady at Exeter large quantities of fresh oranges and apples in season.
Learning spiritual and ethical values

Gifford’s diary entries also show that the balance prescribed for exercising his body, heart, and mind reached into the soul (Steen, 2001). Religious practice and tolerance were integral parts of his early repertoire of experiential learning. The family were regular church goers, wherever they were in the world, but were ecumenical in their practice. Gifford continued this ecumenical practice of Christian witness into adulthood. And he continued to expand this practice through reading and reasoned critique. His spiritual and ethical life was also informed by the writings of the Romantics, who had strongly influenced the Hudson River School artists, including his godfather Sanford.

James recommended the writings of Emerson and Thoreau in numerous letters to the teenage Gifford, though with a caution that they be approached slowly and in small doses at first. The philosophy of these writers contained a level of mature, ethical and spiritual wisdom that James thought Gifford could only grasp fully and usefully as his life experience grew. Emerson and Thoreau dealt in both the physical and metaphysical stuff of nature. They synthesised spiritual and material divisions. For James the writings of both contained the articulation of an intellectual, physical, and spiritual energy demanded of a wise life, in which the individual was able continuously to embrace its complexities and difficulties.

The hopes of James for Gifford might be seen in Andrew Taylor’s description of Emerson’s maintenance of a ‘sometimes precarious balance between scepticism and belief, keen to argue against our craving for easy certainty’ while at the same time recognizing that the ‘abandonment of belief is a human impossibility’. As Thoreau’s mentor, Emerson had encouraged him in journal writing as a means of ‘sift[ing] through…conflicting thoughts regarding the conduct of life in addition to his scholarly and professional aspirations’ (Taylor, 2012). Gifford had also learnt from his parents the habit of keeping diaries that served this same heuristic purpose. Through this combination of discipline and developing insight Thoreau ‘demonstrated a life of establishing connections, observing nature and understanding its relation to his own life and to the broader society’ (Hochstetler, 2013). And, following Emerson and Thoreau, Gifford learned to see the transcendental and the immanent as part of his whole humanity.

The esteem for science that accompanied industrialisation in the nineteenth century had begun to quarantine nature as the subject of physical science alone, was insufficient in a household with a holistic understanding of the world. Mary was concerned that, as Gifford grew to maturity, his passion for the physical and material world of nature be balanced by a parallel appreciation of the metaphysical dimensions of nature. At her instigation, the Reverend A.H. Gesner, a former minister of the Pinchot’s parish at Milford, corresponded with Gifford about the integration of the physical and spiritual worlds (Miller, 2001). At a time when the scientific community was in the throes of debating Darwinian theories of natural selection, in which Spencer himself had coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’, Mary clearly felt that she could not leave to his reading alone the maturation of her son’s spiritual sensibility. Gesner shared the young man’s passionate interest in the natural world. He counselled Gifford not to become aligned with those who ‘persuade themselves that all the nice, the fine, the delicate adjustments and arrangements of beasts, birds, and flowers, came of themselves or were a spontaneous or developed form’.
Gifford realised this synthesis in his dedicated approach to continued learning and making meaning of his world. Evincing a dedication to resolve a conflict of apparent opposites, Gifford later found and read in a single sitting a copy of Henry Drummond’s *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. He was impressed and perfectly persuaded by Drummond’s argument, declaring in his diary entry of 2 June 1891 that he had ‘needed just such a book’ (Steen, 2001). Two years later, when faced with the death of his beloved fiancée, Laura Houghteling, he turned to readings of Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century scientist and spiritualist, and a favourite of his and Emerson before him, to help him in his grief (Bradley, 1999).

**Working to his strengths**

James suggested to his newly graduated son that he consider the pursuit of forestry as a profession. He could be the first American-trained forester. This suggestion echoes the call by Emerson to respect the interests of the student. Gifford’s fascination with the world of nature had remained constant throughout his childhood and actively encouraged by his parents. But they had ensured its integration with social, artistic and philosophical considerations of the natural environment. As a result the adult forester knew from his parents and their circles the political imperatives involved in the innovation of forestry, and he had also acquired an understanding of the social and philosophical basis of conservation. James’ proclivities were artistic – the Hudson River School painters, and writers such as Emerson and Thoreau – but couched within a political and social sensibility intended to have an impact on society.

By the time of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency in 1901 the ground had been laid for the establishment in 1905 of the first Forest Service. Miller notes that Pinchot’s tenure as the first Chief enabled the ‘sustained growth of its personnel, an increase in its budget, and a heightened public awareness of its work and the importance of its mission’ (Miller, 2001). His leadership depended as much on organizational and political insight as it did on his technical expertise in forest science. Though trained in forestry Pinchot later described the importance of forest conservation to a holistic conservation ethic essential to a civic society. He noted in a book written to support Roosevelt’s bull-moose candidacy that

*Equality of opportunity, a square deal for every man, the protection of the citizen against the great concentrations of capital, the intelligent use of laws and institutions for the public good, and the conservation of our natural resources, not for the trusts, but for the people; these are real issues and real problems. Upon such things as these the perpetuity of this country as a nation of homes really depends. We are coming to see that the simple things are the things to work for. More than that, we are coming to see that the plain American citizen is the man to work for* (Pinchot, 1910).

**Discussion & conclusion**

This paper has argued that the educational histories of successful leaders of the past warrant further research for what they can reveal about the education of aspiring leaders of environmental and organizational sustainability.

The key lessons of Pinchot’s story are that:
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- Sustainability demands consideration of the social, economic, political as well as natural environment so that education for sustainable outcomes must be interdisciplinary.
- The ‘who’ of the leader – the core values that shape their personal and so professional being – are more important than the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of their leadership style.

Pinchot was a leader of forestry with a conservation ethic that embraced both physical and human nature. He was a holistic thinker with specialist scientific training who contributed to the rebuilding of a more sustainable society by channelling his passion for the natural world into the political and organizational systems that would preserve the country’s natural resources for the people. His ability to lead strategically across the boundaries of specialist knowledge, organizational structures and the complex mix of public needs were an application of the first principles of what would now be called an ‘interdisciplinary’ learning that had formed his youthful education.

But at the heart of his professional expertise was a well-honed self-knowledge learned early in an education involving his rational, spiritual, ethical and sensual self, or ‘head, heart and hand’ as Pestalozzi had named his essential method (Pestalozzi, 1801).

Pinchot’s educational history confirms the core premise of the argument of Senge and his colleagues that the inner world, the ‘who’ as well as the ‘what’ and ‘how’, should form an essential component of the development of successful leaders of sustainability. And Pinchot’s story suggests that the formation of self begins early and is consciously shaped around the strengths of the individual. The ‘student-centred’ approach favoured by Pestalozzi, Spencer, Emerson and Thoreau was the foundation for Gifford’s ways of seeing and making meaning of his external, adult world, not for self-centred, but for other-centred citizenship. While Gifford’s education ranged across continents and educational settings, it contained core principles of learning which included self-knowledge, self-direction and civic responsibility as a basis for making sense of and determining action in the external environment.

This case study adds to the interrogation and understanding of the composition of the ‘who’ of effective leadership. Gifford learned early that intellectual or rational knowledge was insufficient in itself. This element of knowing needed to be balanced by ethical wisdom and experiential knowledge. A successful leader appreciated the work to be done, or problem to be managed, holistically, drawing together his understanding of both internal and external sources of knowledge to form a total picture of his world. Pinchot was taught ways of seeing his external world that were inclusive of the physical, social, economic and political components of his environment.

Pinchot’s life story provides a model of the formation of the ‘who’ of successful leaders which resonates in the present understanding of the education of leaders. Clearly, the specific historical context of Gifford Pinchot’s life bears little resemblance to present circumstances. But the broad components of the social, political, economic and natural environments he faced are constants, as are the interior dimensions of self-knowledge across which he used to filter his comprehension of the external environment. Historical case studies can provide whole evidence-based narratives that contain a beginning, middle and end, in ways that contemporary case studies seldom do. They can ground the often abstract, present or future-
focused language of current education debates in real life stories with demonstrable outcomes. And the educational history of the leader provides a whole view of the them in ways that a concentration on the adult alone may conceal.

**Reference list**


Pestalozzi, J. (1801) *How Gertrude Teachers Her Children*, archive.org/stream/howgertrudeteach00pestuoft_djvu.txt accessed June 2010


**Images**

1. For text:
Essential learning for sustainability: Gifford Pinchot’s lessons for educating leaders today

Gifford Pinchot c. 1869 (courtesy of US Forest Service)
Gifford Pinchot c. 1872 (courtesy of US Forest Service)
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