This year, New Yorkers are rightly commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964. Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, Rockefeller Institute of Government, NYS DEC, and SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry recently kicked off that anniversary with events in the Capital Region. More events and activities with students, faculty and college collaborators are planned.

2014 is also the 120th anniversary of our “forever wild” clause of the NYS Constitution protecting the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve. It was that late 19th century constitutional protection which so inspired the 20th century’s Howard Zahniser of The Wilderness Society to undertake his 18-year campaign to both author and lobby for the National Wilderness Act. That’s one reason, and there are others, why wilderness preservation, in terms of designation and protection, began in New York State. Bob, George and Jim Marshall’s upbringing in the Adirondacks by noted forever wild advocate and attorney Louis and his wife Florence Marshall, and the later creation of The Wilderness Society by Bob and allies is another reason to make this claim.
But there’s an older 19th century anniversary this year that cannot be overlooked without missing what has influenced humanity around the globe to conserve since 1864, the year a Vermonter named George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882) wrote *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. Woodstock and Burlington, respectively where Marsh was born and lived parts of his adult life and which influenced his book, could legitimately make the claim that Vermont is where wilderness preservation began in America and, indeed, in the world.

In Woodstock, young Marsh’s deteriorating eyesight led to his being outdoors much of the day. He grew up, as he wrote, “forest born: – the bubbling brook, the trees, the flowers, the wild animals were to me persons, not things.” His father taught him observational skills and what a watershed was, and much else. As he grew he witnessed dramatic changes occurring on the landscape in the early 19th century: deforestation, overgrazing, flooding and erosion of the hills he loved went on uninterrupted for decades. The loss of brook trout and other fish in warming streams were only the most visible results of grinding poverty, the urgent need for wood heat and greed for sheep and timber and railroad money.

For George Perkins Marsh, the world held positions he needed in order to earn a living. His business dealings in Vermont around the first half of the 19th century – railroads, sheep, marble – all lost him money. Life had dealt him many blows, personally, physically, and financially. Given his education and remarkable abilities in languages, he hoped to become an ambassador and earn his living through diplomacy. He did so, though the income was meager. In 1849, he and his wife sailed across the Atlantic for Constantinople as Minister to the Ottoman Empire. What he saw and experienced as he traveled through that empire, Greece, Egypt, Babylon, the Holy Land, and Persia reminded him so much of his world in Vermont – a world stripped of trees and eroded of its natural capital, the soil, leading to desertification. In Vermont, this erosional process had started 40 years earlier. In this part of the world, Marsh was witnessing the end result of centuries of land
Marsh was forced to return to Vermont as administrations changed and political enemies conspired against him. Over the ensuing years he suffered many diplomatic and personal setbacks before he began to write *Man and Nature*. But along the way his keen architectural sense strongly influenced the rebuilding of the State House in Montpelier. The corruption of the railroad and the loss of fish in Vermont rivers and streams led to his appointment as Railroad Commissioner and Fish Commissioner. He wrote and spoke frankly: “The clearing of the woods has been attended with the removal of many obstructions to the flow of water...The general character of our water courses has become in fact more torrential...In inundations, not only does the mechanical violence of the current destroy or sweep down fish and their eggs, and fill the water with mud and other impurities, but it continually changes the beds and banks of the streams, and thus renders it difficult and often impossible for the fish...to return to their breeding places to deposit their spawn.” He assigned responsibility without thought to his own advancement. The Vermont Central Railroad, Timber Barons and Governments were in collusion and were corrupt. Government regulation of corporations was far preferable, he argued, to private avarice, corruption and the loss of public resources. These views hardly made him popular in Montpelier. In 1861, eleven days after Fort Sumter lit the Civil War’s fuse, he and his wife sailed for Turin as President Lincoln’s ambassador to the newly formed kingdom of Italy.

The “little volume” begun in Burlington, VT by 1864 grew into *Man and Nature* in Genoa, Italy where he and Caroline Marsh took up residence (Turin was too expensive for his $12,000 salary). The great destruction of the forests of the
Mediterranean over many centuries and the consequences – the diminution of streams and rivers and loss of fertility – were the topics of his initial chapter and the cause was “man’s ignorant disregard of the laws of nature.” Whither the great cedars of Lebanon? Marsh turned to the forests and the waters:

"With the disappearance of the forest, all is changed. At one season, the earth parts with its warmth by radiation to an open sky, receives at another an immoderate heat from the unobstructed rays of the sun. Hence the climate becomes excessive, and the soil is alternatively parched by the fervors of summer and seared by the rigors of winter. Bleak winds sweep unresisted over its surface, drift away the snow that sheltered it from frost and dry up its scanty moisture...the melting snows and vernal rains, no longer absorbed by a loose and bibulous vegetable mold, rush over the frozen surface and pour down the valleys seaward instead of filling a retentive bed of absorbent earth, and storing up a supply of moisture to feed the perennial springs...The face of the earth is no longer a sponge, but a dust heap....Gradually it becomes altogether barren and thus the earth is rendered no longer fit for the habitation of man."

Marsh’s analysis of humankind’s interdependency with natural systems and impacts of our species on a geological scale, and our ability to better husband the earth’s resources through scientific knowledge and stewardship was pioneering. Verplanck Colvin, also a pioneer as the great Adirondack surveyor from Albany, was greatly influenced in his advocacy for an Adirondack Park or timber preserve, as historian Phil Terrie points out: "Colvin’s belief in the capacity of mountain forests to control run-off derived, almost certainly, from his reading of Man and Nature... Marsh spent several years in the Mediterranean basin, studied the history and geography of the region, and concluded that profligate abuse of primeval forests had caused dramatic changes in climate and agricultural productivity. Marsh argued that the downfall of ancient civilizations could be attributed to destruction of forests and that if modern, nineteenth century societies did not change their ways, the earth would be reduced ‘to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shattered surface, of climate excess, as to threaten the deprivation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species’ “ (from: Philip G. Terrie’s "One Grand Unbroken Domain:” Ambiguities and Lessons in the Origins of the Adirondack Park, 1988, published by the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks).

And so, Marsh surely influenced the acquisition of Yellowstone in 1872, Adirondack Park in 1892 and the creation of our National Parks here and around the globe. As we witness daily the evidence, both dramatic and more subtle, of the “excessive” human forcing of our climate due to the concentration of heat-trapping gases in our atmosphere, let us rediscover George Perkins Marsh.

I owe most of my understanding of the life of George Perkins Marsh, including the above quotes about his life and from Man and Nature, to this fine illustrated biography: The World of George Perkins Marsh – America’s First Environmentalist by Jane and Will Curtis (1982 by the Woodstock Foundation,
Woodstock, VT).