

Nature's New Deal, the California Budget, and President Obama's Success

In *Nature's New Deal*, Professor Neil Maher analyzes the impact of the New Deal and the Civilian Conservation Corps on the economic, social, environmental and political landscape of the nation in the decade from 1933 to 1942. The New Deal programs offer invaluable lessons both for the state of California, which is considering closing state parks because of the worst budget crisis since the Great Depression, and for President Barack Obama on how to make his administration a success. If California fails financially, how can President Obama be considered a success?

The Corps employed 3 million young men, planted 2 billion trees – more than half of all the trees planted in the United States up until that time – slowed soil erosion on 40 million acres of farmland, developed 800 new state parks. Visits to National Parks increased 600 percent from less than 3.5 million people in 1933, to 21 million by 1941. The rise in visitors was due to the increased facilities for recreation afforded by the completion of trails, campgrounds, roads and other projects by the CCC. The work of the CCC appealed to people across the political spectrum and across class lines. The work projects appealed to foresters in the West, to farmers in the Dust Bowl and in the soil-eroded South, and to easterners who could recreate in new state and national parks. Unemployed urban youths enrolled in the program got paid, and their minds and bodies grew stronger as they learned the benefits of hard work, conservation and recreation. Working-class families received Corps paychecks every month. Business owners sold goods and services to CCC camps and rural families benefited economically from the nearby camps. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt relied on the work relief of the CCC to raise support among the American people, on the local and national levels, and on the political Left and Right, to knit together an ideologically diverse political constituency to support the New Deal.

The following are brief excerpts from *Nature's New Deal* that address CCC programs in several areas: (1) land purchases of 20 million acres, (2) forests, (3) soil conservation, (4) parks, (5) the intersection of conservation and recreation, (6) workers, and (7) equal justice, and (8) leadership and politics.

Nature's New Deal by Neil M. Maher (2008)¹

During the summer of 1942, the Corps' second director, James McEntee, sat down at his desk in Washington, D.C., to write the CCC's final report. In an effort to record for posterity the enormity of the work undertaken by the Corps during the previous nine years, McEntee tallied the number of trees planted by CCC enrollees, computed the total acreage saved from soil erosion by Corps camps, and added up the miles of hiking

¹ The excerpts are from pages 43 to 76, 110, and 11-12. References are not included. Omissions are marked by three periods . . .

trails and motor roads built in national and state parks by the New Deal program he oversaw. He then sat back in his chair and began contemplating the bigger picture, thinking about the overall impact of Corps conservation projects and how the labor of millions of young CCC men scattered across the country had altered the United States. After admitting that “the neglect, waste and destruction of many generations could not be repaired or restored in a decade,” McEntee argued that since its creation in March 1933, “the Civilian Conservation Corps wrote its name into the economic, social, and educational history of this country.” He then incorporated nature into the CCC’s overall accomplishments. “It did even more than that,” he explained, Corps conservation work “started a change in the landscape of a Nation.” . . .

From April 1933, when CCC enrollees first began working on conservation projects, until the summer of 1942, when Congress terminated the New Deal program, the Corps was responsible for planting more than 2 billion trees, slowing soil erosion on 40 million acres of farmland, and developing 800 new state parks. It also constructed more than 10,000 small reservoirs, 46,000 vehicular bridges, 13,000 miles of hiking trails, and nearly 1 million miles of fence, while simultaneously stocking America’s rivers with 1 million fish and eradicating almost 400,000 predatory animals from the nation’s forests, farmlands, and prairies. Such efforts, moreover, were only the tip of the iceberg. All told, conservation estimates indicate that Corps work projects across the United States altered more than 118 million acres, an area approximately three times the size of Connecticut. . . .

Understanding how the CCC “wrote its name into the economic, social, and educational history of this county” is therefore dependent on the very landscape that Corps enrollees left behind. . . .

[1. *Land Buying*] Roosevelt used the law to begin a land buying frenzy that continued throughout the New Deal years and culminated in the acquisition of more than 20 million acres of private land, enlarging federal holdings by 15 percent. It was these land purchases, the great majority of which lay east of the Mississippi River, that allowed the Roosevelt administration to place CCC camps and their nearby conservation projects in every state in the union as well as in each territory Such purchases also enabled the president to spread New Deal funding, and thus to curry political favor, over a broader geographic area than would have been possible by relying solely on public lands. By buying lands in the East, Roosevelt in effect transformed the CCC into a national program. As the *New York Times* reported in July 1933, “the camps are scattered along the Pacific Coast, all through the Rockies, along the Appalachian chain in the East, down into the Great Smokies in Tennessee and up into the White and Green Mountains in new England . . . in the Middle West, the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys.” . . .

While CCC director Robert Fechner’s first annual report listed 62 varieties of Corps conservation work, a year and a half later the list had grown to include no less than 100 different types of projects, and by 1937 the director was boasting that “more than 150 types of work [were] undertaken” by CCC enrollees. . . .

[2. *Forests.*] During the first year and a half of operation the Corps quickly became associated with one resource in particular: the nation's forests. . . .

In 1932, one year before Congress created Corps, the Forests Service planted trees on only 25,000 acres of national forest land. With the aid of the CCC, the Forest Service raised this total to 70,000 acres in 1933, to 140,700 acres in 1935, and to more than 223,000 acres in 1936. Forest Service camps boosted tree planting in state forests as well, from a total of 154,302 reforested acres for the three years prior to 1933 to nearly 225,000 acres for the period from 1934 to 1937. **All told, during its existence, the CCC planted 2.3 billion trees, or 12 for every Depression era American, on 2.5 million acres of previously barren, denuded, or unproductive land. This represents half of the trees ever planted in U.S. history. . . .**

The second major category of conservation work undertaken by the CCC during the early New Deal years involved forests protection. . . . Throughout its history, the Corps expended approximately 6.5 million man-days performing such work, compelling the *New York Times* to claim in 1934, "CCC men [have] buckled down to the task of fire-proofing the forests" of the nation. . . . All told, CCC conservation projects protected more than 20 million acres of timberland from insects and tree disease during the New Deal years. . . .

[3. *Soil Conservation*] The CCC first drifted out of the nation's forests on May 12, 1934, when air currents lifted soil from parched fields in western Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and eastern Colorado and carried it eastward across the continent where it darkened the sun over the nation's capital, sifted through the screens of New York City skyscrapers, and then wafted for hundred of miles out over the Atlantic. . . .

In total, such Corps conversation projects revegetated more than 1 trillion square yards of gullied terrain and 600,000 acres of sheet-ended farmland between 1933 and 1942. . . . Between 1933 and 1942, the Corps constructed more than 300,000 temporary and permanent check dams on farms across the country. . . . Overall, the CCC constructed more than 33,000 miles of terraces and more than 430,000 terrace outlets during the New Deal years. . . . Corps enrollees performed an enormous amount of this type of soil conservation work, helping farmers to build more than 150,000 miles of contour furrows throughout the United States, and maintaining more than 27,000 miles of preexisting contour crop rows. . . .

[4. *Parks*] One year after Dust Bowl winds blew the Corps from the country's forests onto its fields, CCC conservation work expanded once again, this time into the nation's parks. This process began on June 4, 1935, when the National Park Service announced that Americans from all walks of life were in the midst of an outdoor recreation renaissance. According to the Park Service, there were three reasons for this Great Depression nature craze: high levels of unemployment resulting in increased leisure time; the inexpensiveness of outdoor recreational pursuits such as camping, hiking, and hunting; and finally the widespread use of the automobile, which more and more Americans were using to get out of the city and into the countryside. National Park

Service director Arno B. Cammerer supported such claims by noting that visits to the county's national parks rose from just under 4 million in 1934 to well over 7.5 million by the summer of 1935. . . .

The Corps divided its recreational work into three main categories, all of which helped to foster outdoor tourism on the nation's parklands. Corps enrollees first undertook structural improvement projects that welcomed visitors to the nation's parks and made their stay more comfortable. To better orient outdoor enthusiasts when they first entered these recreation areas, the CCC built dozens of visitors centers and more than 200 museums, interpretive sites and park lodges. The Corps likewise created amenities to aid more interpretive park travelers, including the construction of more than 2,000 hiking shelters and nearly 2,500 rustic cabins in which hikers could rest during the day or sleep protected from the elements through the night. Corps camps working on structural improvements projects also built sanitary facilities for visitors unwilling to rough it, and for the hikers and campers coming in from long stints outdoors. Enrollees dug 13 million feet of ditches to supply the nation's parks with running water, built nearly 400 bathhouses, and installed nearly 2,000 drinking fountains between 1933 and 1942. They also constructed more than 12,000 latrines and toilets and installed just under 6,000 sewage and waste-deposable systems. Enrollees laboring on recreation projects built tens of thousands of additional structures, such as equipment houses, storage sheds, garages, and various administration buildings, all of which helped national and state parks cater to tourism.

To better control the movement of visitors once they left the lodge, museum, or latrine, CCC camps also undertook a variety of transportation improvement projects in parks across the country. One of the most common involved motor road work, which between 1933 and 1942 included the construction of 125,000 miles of new roads, the improvement of nearly 600,000 miles of old thoroughfares, the building of approximately 40,000 vehicular bridges, and the laying out of more than 8 million square yards of parking lots, an area equivalent in size to 2,500 football fields. The Corps undertook transportation projects that enhanced foot traffic as well. The CCC improved 100,000 miles of previously existing hiking trails and blazed more than 28,000 miles of new trails. Enrollees, for instance, improved and helped to complete the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails, which each run for 2,000 miles along the spines of the Appalachian Mountains and Sierra Nevadas, respectively. Along these and other hiking trails, the CCC built more than 8,000 pedestrian bridges, almost always from local stone and wood, to help hikers ford streams, rivers, ravines, and other difficult terrains. . . .

[T]he Corps improved nearly 40,000 acres of campgrounds already in existence, created more than 50,000 acres of new campgrounds, and cleared more than 15,000 acres of picnic areas. Other landscape and recreation work focused on expanding the country's infrastructure for summer and winter activities. Enrollees not only built public swimming pools in national and state parks, such as the one at the very bottom of the Grand Canyon, but also constructed more than seventy-five artificial lakes, with beaches, mostly in state parks throughout the country. The CCC helped to expand opportunities for winter sports

as well by building ski trails in Yosemite, Sequoia, and Oregon's Mount Rainier national parks.

These projects in the nation's parks during the late 1930s, unlike earlier CCC conservation work in the country's forests and on its farms, were not aimed at increasing natural resources productivity. Instead, the CCC undertook recreational development work to accommodate and encourage visitors to the great outdoors. Here too the Corps succeeded, much as it did in increasing timber and agricultural output. **Whereas less than 3.5 million people visited national parks in 1933, by 1938, just three years after the Corps expanded its work into the nation's parks, that number had skyrocketed to 16 million and rose again to 21 million by 1941, an overall increase during the 1930s of approximately 600 percent. During the same period, state parks across the country also set new attendance records. As National Parks Service director Arno Cammerer explained, the tourist boom on the nation's parklands was "due to the increasing facilities for recreation afforded tourists by the completion of trails, camp grounds, roads and other projects by enrollees of the Civilian Conservation Corps."**

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[5. *Conservation and Recreation*] CCC projects throughout the country's parks raised the issue of outdoor recreation and its proper place within the conservation movement. Rather than separating recreation from the conservation of natural resources, as had been done during the Progressive Era, Corps work projects continued to weave Olmsted's philosophy with the idea of Gifford Pinchot, just as Roosevelt had done when he created the CCC during the spring of 1933. The result was something new and represented the broadening of conservationist thought to include not just trees, but soil and parks as well. . . .

[6. *Workers*] [W]hen James McEntee sat down to write his final report for the CCC in 1942[,] the Corps' director was nevertheless quite cognizant of the enormous amount of human labor that had been needed to alter the country's landscape. "The Nation awoke to find the landscape dotted with tented CCC camps and active young men," McEntee reflected in his report, "in the forests, on the western plains, in the mountains, on the banks of streams and lakes." McEntee obviously understood that the sweat and muscle of millions of CCC enrollees were responsible for such changes. This same outdoor work had also transformed these active young men in ways that dramatically altered both the conservation movement and the labor politics of the New Deal. . . .

[7. *Equal Justice*] African Americans who joined the CCC during the Great Depression had a very different experience than did ethnic enrollees. Despite the amendment in its original charter stipulating that the Corps could not discriminate on account of race, African Americans found their opportunities in this and other New Deal programs severely circumscribed. . . .

[8. *Leadership and Politics*] *Nature's New Deal* similarly shows how Corps landscapes straddled Progressive and postwar politics by helping Franklin Roosevelt to

forge his liberal New Deal coalition. The CCC accomplished this first by raising support for the welfare state in every region of the country. The Corps and its work projects appealed to foresters in the West, to farmers in the Dust Bowl and in the soil-eroded South, and to easterners who could now recreate in hundreds of new state and national parks in their cities' backyards. It also attracted both urban youths flocking into the program and rural Americans who benefited economically from nearby CCC camps. Franklin Roosevelt was well aware of the political support he could raise, not to mention the political power he could wield, through the strategic placement of Corps camps and work projects nationwide. Thus, while the public works of the CCC introduced conservation to the nation, altering the conservation movement in the process, the work relief of the Corps presented the welfare state to the American people, and in doing so helped to raise broad geographic support for the New Deal.

While the CCC helped Roosevelt to introduce his policies to every corner of the country, the Corps appealed across ideological divides as well. The New Deal program was popular both with liberal working-class families, which received Corps pay checks every month because of sons enrolled in the program, and with conservative upper-class business owners, who each day sold goods and services to CCC camps. It proved equally attractive to local politicians, from both political parties, who had Corps camps assigned to their districts, and to federal administrators in Washington, D.C., whom Roosevelt rewarded with key CCC appointments. Just as he was sensitive to the broad geographic appeal of the Corps, so too was Franklin Roosevelt aware that the CCC could bring together often competing special interests under the banner of New Deal liberalism. The president consciously used the CCC's popularity among both the working and upper classes, on the local and national levels, and on the political Left and political Right, to knit together an ideologically diverse political constituency that supported the New Deal.