

American progress: US assault on conservation is turning back the clock

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I remember how taken I was – fascinated in a grisly way – by the late-19th century painting called *American progress* (Figure 1) that I ran across several years ago, once enormously popular and now largely obscure, at least before it got posted on X recently by the US Department of Homeland Security, racking up 16.8 million views in two weeks.



Figure 1. *American progress*, the 1872 painting by John Gast (public domain).

It's an unsettling image about the settling of the American West, and I'd thought I could rescue it from the dustbin of history as a 'before' shot for the book I was writing about the biodiversity crisis, the imminent loss of millions of other species – so many the English language has invented a word, *ending*, meaning the last of its kind.

In the painting, a young white woman, who is 'Progress' personified, appears barefoot, with long golden tresses, scantily clad in a diaphanous gown. She hovers over the American landscape, facing west and bobbing at about Thanksgiving-Day-Parade balloon height, while ahead of her a dazed Native American family, a herd of buffalos and a snarling bear are in steady retreat. Behind 'Progress', back on the East Coast, a brilliant sun is rising over a great waterfront city. Beneath her dangling toes are six men, all white, four miners and two farmers. She (implausibly) seems to have a coil of telegraph wire looped around her right elbow and, as she trails it, it gets neatly pinned to a long line of poles stretching back alongside new train tracks bearing a steam engine, with freight and passenger cars, puffing mightily and heading away from that dazzling city's shore.

Technology in service of mass eviction

On display: the idea that subtraction must precede addition, that the land can benefit only after the earlier occupants, people and creatures who in their ignorance had been misusing it, are no longer ... in the picture?

As art, *American progress* is frankly not very good: both heroes and villains look ill at ease, and the pace of 'Progress' seems joyless, even grudging. But the picture's mediocrity is its integrity. There's no dissembling here; it so honestly proclaims its values that it still speaks clearly from the year it was painted by John Gast: 1872.

1872 – the same year Yellowstone became, by Act of the United States Congress, the world's first national park, "hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States" (US Congress, 1872: 32). I was privileged to know and work with EO Wilson, the great conservation biologist known as the 'father of biodiversity'. It was necessary to keep the other forms of life alive, Wilson said, because so many were a living structure keeping all of life alive, including us. Creatures that could thrive only if we made sure enough land was left unbuilt, and that process began with Yellowstone. Over the following 150 years, it was up to fifteen per cent globally set aside, but now, Wilson kept saying, it had to reach higher and faster, a 50 per cent goal, known as 'Half Earth', a phrase I coined. In 2022, 188 governments meeting in Montreal took the first step, pledging to protect 30 per cent of the Earth by 2030.

American progress gave us insight into how we'd gotten from zero to fifteen per cent by reminding us of the attitudes those first land protectors were up against. As Seneca, the Roman philosopher, who died in 65CE, said, "There will come a day when our descendants are astonished that we did not know such obvious facts" (2010: 7:3).

Even while the paint was drying on *American progress*, protection for biodiversity advanced while the picture's premise slowly eroded. Which was

why, this summer, my jaw literally dropped. I thought I was looking at a ghost. Only I wasn't. There she was, *American progress*, on the Department of Homeland Security X account under the headline: "A Heritage to be proud of, a Homeland worth defending" (see CNN, 2025).

As if the last 150 years never happened. As if, therefore, the true math of human advancement can reassert itself: the one where subtraction precedes addition. The current US administration is clearing the ground, poking the snarling bear, when it removes protections from millions of acres of public land, and fires thousands of people who have been looking after them.

What's happening in the United States is the jagged sharp edge of something also happening across the world. The savagery of the US assault on conservation is unprecedented and unrivaled; it differs in degree, not kind, from the ongoing ecocidal pushback.

Still, the last 150 years *did* happen, and the urgency of what's ahead is already fused within our bones. Here in the United States – and globally – let's put *American progress* back where she belongs, as a 'before' picture, something our descendants will be astonished by as they, too, remember the pain that often precedes understanding. And now let's paint a better 'after'.

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