Alaska’s earliest contacts with Western civilization and the resulting environmental crises occurred mainly on the seacoast. There acquisitive nations found valuable fish stocks and the fur, oil, baleen, and ivory of sea mammals. Later, during the gold rushes, the focus of attention shifted inland. Gold seeking introduced unpleasant side effects of forest fires and depletion of fur and game mammals. Physical and psychological separation from centers of civilization made rational resource management difficult and encouraged destructive behavior by Russians and Americans as well as seafarers and explorers from other nations. Disease, liquor, cultural influences, and modern technology weakened Alaska Native societies, and many Natives participated in irresponsible killing of wildlife. Conservation measures ordered by the Russian government, while effecting gains, did not inspire similar behavior by Americans. Repeating the pattern of conquest of the American West, weak and poorly enforced laws governed the disposal of Alaska’s natural resources between the purchase of Alaska in 1867 and the 1920s. Such an assault on Nature bore a high potential for ecological damage.
Owing to its wealth of resources and its status as the new American frontier, Alaska attracted numerous government and private scientists, hunters, and adventurers. Some possessed little or no higher education; others held doctorates in science. Their tenures in Alaska ranged from summer trips to decades of residence. Some became prominent government officials, others museum directors or academics. Of those concerned about natural resource policy, most worked out of Washington or New York City. Many wrote for wide audiences, and several founded or led environmental organizations. Some influenced Alaskan environmental issues directly, others indirectly.

Among the pioneer naturalists, private citizens led the way in Alaskan environmental protection. Having come as hunters, adventurers, or young government officials, they fell in love with the scenery and wildlife, especially some of the more visible species of mammals, and did not want to see them disappear. Mainly from privileged backgrounds, they possessed the means to travel, sound education and communication skills, and access to high-level government decision makers. A dozen or more knew and dealt with each other as a social and political elite. In an age when mass public opinion played a relatively minor role, they belonged to a small number of individuals in a position to prod the government into conservation action. Their most influential period extended from about 1890 to 1930. It drew strength from the Progressive movement, a rebellion against the unbridled exploitative behavior of powerful corporations.

Conservationists acted within the context of an upsurge of national interest in Nature, a reaction to rapid urbanization and the loss of natural areas and wildlife. Some, notably John Muir, perceived Nature in spiritual terms and viewed its destruction as a transgression against humankind’s proper place in life. They placed a high value on preservation of wildlife habitat and species. Academic scientists and nature enthusiasts worked to set aside unique sites for study of glaciology, vulcanology, or ecology. Others thought it best to manage Nature intelligently for the sustained benefit of humans. Of these utilitarians, outdoor sportsmen tended to focus on maintaining stocks of favorite fish and game species. Government leaders in the conservation movement advocated the controlled use of all natural resources—including water, wood, minerals, soil, and wildlife—to advance human society as a whole. Many activists held elements of both utilitarian and preservationist perspectives, often becoming more preservationist as they advanced in age.

The wholesale slaughter of Western animals, the buffalo in particular, engendered the conservationist conviction that such behavior must not be repeated in Alaska. The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, a personal acquaintance of several early “Alaskan” conservationists, conferred power and legitimacy on their efforts. Roosevelt espoused a heavily utilitarian variety of conservation that called for scientifically grounded management of natural resources by federal
government experts to maximize efficient application of those resources to the needs of the nation. Yet he appreciated birds and other wildlife and responded to preservationist appeals when they did not threaten more frankly utilitarian values. He set aside Alaska lands, and the momentum generated during his presidential terms carried forward for decades, undergirding a broad range of measures to conserve lands and wildlife nationwide.

Through writings and political action supported by sympathetic federal officials, the early private naturalists established legal and administrative foundations for sound management of American, and thus Alaskan, natural resources. They pushed successfully for the first Alaska game laws. They moved the government to set aside special tracts of land for posterity, presaging the world’s largest complex of wild parks and refuges, and awakened American elites to the need for conservation of the remaining frontier. Collectively they pioneered modern environmental values of ecosystem sustainability, sustainable utilitarianism, nonconsumptive resource use, science-based management, public participation, and government and corporate accountability. They served as founding environmentalists for Alaska and for the nation.