

I'm pretty sure that William E. Colby qualifies as the nation's first environmentalist law teacher, if only because environmentalism was very young at the time.. Colby was a lecturer on mining law and water law at Berkeley for twenty-one years, retiring in 1936. (That doesn't make him the first natural resources teacher; Judge Lindley had taught mining and water law before him.) Colby was a close friend of John Muir. He joined the Sierra Club in 1898 and, except for two years, was the Secretary of the Sierra Club from 1900 to 1946. The Sierra Club credits him with contributing substantially to saving redwoods, enlarging Sequoia National Park, and establishing Kings Canyon and Olympic national parks. He was also the first Chair of the California State Parks Commission.

I was originally going to call Colby the first "environmental law" professor, but it's not clear how much his environmental concerns entered into his teaching or scholarship about environmental law. Even then, the environmental impacts of mining were not unknown or without a legal dimension: a federal judge in the Nineteenth Century had halted hydraulic mining in California because of its devastating impacts on the state's rivers. His Sierra Club bio does link his legal and environmental work, saying that his "notable eminence as an attorney who specialized in mining and water law . . . served him well in his conservation work." He did represent environmental interests in a couple of cases.

At the outset, I called Colby the nation's first environmentalist law professor. Obviously, I'd be very interested to learn if there were others from the era, but I'm guessing the title will stand. (I'd also love to hear from anyone who knows more about Colby). Either way, it's nice to know that law teachers became involved in environmental issues at such an early stage.