

**John Muir: Breaking Barriers in U.S Conservatism and Nature Preservation**

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John Muir was known as “Muir of the Mountains” and for good reason. Through his life, Muir was never away from the mountains for too long. Muir would always find his way back to the mountains whether it was for research on the Yosemite, or for his health trips, as he believed the mountains had healing properties. Yet during these trips Muir would realize that his obligation to protect the very environment that brought him joy and solace would require his return to the busy city. Muir’s most tangible legacy lies in his writings, his part in the creation of the United State’s National Park System, his co-founding of the Sierra Club in 1892, and ultimately the political shift that stemmed from his environmental advocacy. However Muir’s creation of a school of thought that champions the notion that the environment should be treated with humility and respect is his true offering to the world.

Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland on April 21st, 1838. (see Appendix 1). He moved to America in 1849 as a boy of eleven years old and fell in love with nature the first time he found himself immersed in it. He spent his childhood in Wisconsin working 16 hours of hard labor every day on a farm. Muir had no formal education and self-educated himself through books. He spent most of his life in or around Yosemite National Park in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. He became a famous mountaineer who advanced environmental thinking and policy on many fronts.

Muir’s writings broke barriers in the sense that they heavily influenced the opinion of the masses into believing that the environment should be treated with respect and his widespread notoriety put him into a position of influence both socially and politically. In the 1909 New York Times article *National Parks By John Muir* it states that,

“Men who will sit tight and cold when somebody tells them there is danger of a lumber famine in the days of their somewhat remote posterity, will become tremendously interested under such preachments as Mr. Muir delivers and say amen—and mean it—to the plea that we must recreate our wildernesses so that the people may go into them and visit with Dame Nature.”

This high opinion of Muir and his environmental ideologies indicates how much the public revered and had faith in Muir to transform a predominantly industrial mindset into one that recognized nature as a finite resource often greatly compromised and overused by industrial activities to serve greed and nothing more. According to the 1909 New York Times article, *National Parks By John Muir* it states that, “Mr. Muir is a distinctly infectious person when, in a glow of enthusiasm, he pictures the beauties of the Yosemite, Yellowstone park, and the regions of the great Sequoias, and tells of the joys of living in these earthly paradises.” The New York Times’ assertion that nature writing is captivating and “infectious” speaks to how much of an influence Muir had on the genre of nature writing. Muir took nature writing from being considered a bore by most to being described as “infectious”.

The recognition by the New York Times, a national and even international newspaper is a testament to Muir’s popularity and influence as a public figure. In one of Muir’s most famous works, “Save the Redwoods 1” Muir writes, “Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot defend themselves or run away. And few destroyers of trees ever plant any; nor can planting avail much toward restoring our grand aboriginal giants.” This article changed the ideas of many, but more importantly made people turn from having conservationist ideals and morals into being outspoken enough to mail letters to the senate that made them feel pressured to turn down a bill which would have cut Yosemite’s square mileage in half. This article also worked to definitively

establish who the newly outspoken environmentalists had to speak out against. This was lumbermen, lumber companies and the government.

Theodore Roosevelt, who was influenced by Muir's writings, joined him in his mission to break environmental policy barriers. Roosevelt invited Muir to go on a camping trip through Yosemite with him because he had read his masterful description of the gorgeous area. Muir accepted this invitation because he thought it could aid him in his campaign to make Yosemite Valley part of Yosemite National Park and make Yosemite National Park Federally owned and protected land. According to the Library of Congress article, *Roosevelt, Muir and The Camping Trip*, "Roosevelt had read some of Muir's writings in which he explained how the wild forests were vanishing as ranchers and developers destroyed the wilderness for their own uses and financial gain. While most of Roosevelt's advisors thought that America's wilderness was too large to ever be depleted, Roosevelt wondered if this were really so, and could the government help?" This hesitant ideology is not evident in Theodore Roosevelt's further actions as President which are heavily in favor of taking large strides to protect the environment. Therefore, this camping trip must have changed his ideology in favor of environmentalism and environmental causes. The camping trip was reported by many large newspapers, including the New York Times. In the New York Times 1903 article *Roosevelt Has Supper In Camp* it states "When the president pitched camp tonight there with him were Muir and rangers Leodig and Leonard." The same New York Times 1903 article details what Theodore Roosevelt said retrospectively how he felt about the situation, "This is the one day of my life, said he [Teddy Roosevelt], 'and one that I will always remember with pleasure.'" The days that Muir spent with Roosevelt (see Appendix 2) had a dramatic impact on his thinking regarding nature and inspired a realization in Roosevelt

that without government protection these awe-inspiring wild spaces would quickly be dramatically diminished. According to the Library of Congress, “Roosevelt returned to Washington refreshed and enthusiastic about conserving America’s forests and its wilderness areas. He pushed Congress to pass laws to protect the wild lands.” He also returned enthusiastic and eager to make new laws to protect the wilderness. Without this trip, Theodore Roosevelt likely would not have taken such aggressive measures to protect the environment. Being immersed in nature, like the 11 year old Muir had been so long ago, Roosevelt was captivated by the beauty and calming, restorative properties of the environment and intrigued by the man, Muir, who was the champion of this cause. Roosevelt had been a conservationist all his life, yet this meeting with Muir solidified his belief that action was necessary in order to save the environment from more malpractice from greedy senators and lumbermen alike. According to the National Park Service article *Theodore Roosevelt and Conservation*, “in 1906[three years after Roosevelt’s meeting with Muir] Roosevelt established the American Antiquities Act, which put into effect 150 national forests, 51 federal bird reserves, four national game preserves, 18 national monuments, and five national parks.” Roosevelt used the United States Park Service which he established in 1901 to strictly enforce policies created to protect these areas. He also ultimately accomplished Muir’s two goals for going on the trip. These goals were to make Yosemite Valley part of Yosemite National Park and make Yosemite federally owned and protected land. Muir’s sharing of his infectious environmentalistic ideals with Roosevelt undoubtedly influenced his decision to protect wildlife and create the 1906 American Antiquities Act which was a monumental step forward in breaking the barrier of the all too common

industrial and commercial driven mindset of strictly using natural resources for commercial use without regard for the realization that natural resources are finite.

By the year 1892, Muir had realized that he could break so many barriers by using his limited influence as an individual and his school of thought. His solution was to co-found the Sierra Club, which was to be a grassroots environmental organization that broke the barrier of the conventional wisdom that the environment was an infinite resource. It was to be comprised of like-minded individuals who shared similar pro-environment and conservationist ideologies with Muir. According to Micheal Edmonds, the curator of the country's traveling Muir exhibit, "He viewed it[nature] as divine inspiration and 'the inventions of god'." This mindset differs heavily from that of the masses at the time that nature was just resources to be exploited. The Sierra Club's ambition was to explore, enjoy and protect the planet. Originally the Sierra Club had 182 members, with Muir being unanimously voted to assume the position of president. According to the *Sierra Club: 100 Years of Protecting Nature*, "They spoke of creating an organization of citizens to keep pressure on the government to protect the park and to discourage attempts to have its boundaries shrunk at the behest of loggers, stockmen, and would-be Dam builders..." (32). Also, according to *Sierra Club: 100 Years of Protecting Nature*, "In its first conservation campaign, The Club leads efforts to defeat a proposed reduction in the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, California." (36). Such a large triumph for the Sierra Club led to a bolstering of its name and a national awareness that inspired it's membership to grow rapidly. Without the Sierra Club, it's unlikely that Muir would have been able to put enough pressure on Congress to override the bill. This huge victory proves how Muir's influence increased by virtue of being the

president of The Sierra Club. An organization that under Muir's leadership had become an unavoidable entity for policy makers that may endanger the environment in the future.

The Sierra Club went on to be the nation's largest grassroots environmentalist organization. According to the Sierra Club, it currently has 3.5 million members nationwide. Today, the Sierra Club is more effective than it has ever been, in large part due to the ideology of its founder. According to the Sierra Club, its ongoing Beyond Coal initiative has led to the retirement or anticipated retirement of 299 coal plants. The Sierra Club has done this by the mobilization of local communities against nearby coal plants. According to the Sierra Club article *Major Accomplishments*, "[the Sierra Club] stops the construction of 170 proposed new coal fired plants, and [in 2010]the club's beyond coal campaign becomes the most successful environmental initiative in history and is complemented by the Ready for 100 campaign, which encourages more than 100 U.S municipalities to formally commit to transition to 100% clean, renewable energy for generating electricity." The Sierra Club, having the most successful environmental initiative in history is testament to its influence and how much it has affected modern environmental thinking and environmental policy making. John Muir's barrier breaking role in the Sierra Club, and current regulation that works to protect the environment, cannot be overstated. His thinking and decisive action to save the environment constituted the foundation upon which all later successes in conservationism rest. He was the architect of the environmental shrine that so many kneel by to this day.

Although Muir himself was disinterested in politics, he broke a barrier in making the government recognize environmental protection policy and changing the necessary criteria for politicians in order to be in the public's good graces and get re-elected is undeniable. According

to the Sierra Club article “John Muir”, “[Muir] forced political leaders to join his cause and changed not only hearts, but minds.” Through Muir’s garnering of public support behind his campaigns and his influence on an overall shift in the ideas about nature, politicians in many cases had to change their position pertaining to nature and conservationist movement in order to get re-elected and stay in the good graces of the public. Muir did this by putting pressure on Congress through having the public mail Congress and demand that nature be protected. This is clearly demonstrated in Muir's pamphlet created to save Hetch-Hetchy Valley from being turned into a reservoir for the city of San Francisco. In the pamphlet, which is written after the bill is re-introduced to Congress, Muir writes,

“Let all those who believe that our great national wonderlands should be preserved unmarried a places of rest and recreation for the use of all the people, now enter their protests. Ask Congress to reject the destructive bill, and also urge that the present laws be so amended as to put an end to all such assaults on our system of National Parks.”

Although Muir and the Sierra Club ultimately lost the campaign to save Hetch-Hetchy Valley, lots of pressure was put on Congress to suspend the bill and to amend the laws surrounding National Parks. The campaign was heavily publicized and despite it failing, it brought unprecedented awareness to the conservationist movement in the United States. This was one of Muir’s major strategies for inspiring change at the federal level. He also influenced many people in positions of power, like President Theodore Roosevelt and Robert Underwood Johnson (editor for Century Magazine 1909-1913). In Johnson’s camping trip with Muir, he emphasized how the Yosemite was being overgrazed and compromised by various other practices that ran counter to Muir’s protective ideology. Johnson and Muir lobbied for the creation of Yosemite through Johnson’s ability to put Muir’s writings in a position where their brilliance could be easily

recognized by the common public. Without Johnson, Muir would not have had a platform for his articles. With the aid of Johnson, articles by Muir campaigning for Yosemite frequently received mass attention. Muir networked intelligently and used the connections that he made to influence and pressure many prominent politicians and public figures of his era.

Although Muir's most concrete legacy is in his literature, a greater significance is in his role in the founding of the United State's National Park System, the founding of the Sierra Club, and the political shift that he in large part caused, his most impactful legacy lies in his most widespread notion that the environment should be treated with reverence. John Muir was truly the first influential American environmentalist to change mass ideals involving nature conservation. He sparked a conversation that brought into question the treatment of the environment and how dangerous overuse could potentially be to the future.

## Appendix 1



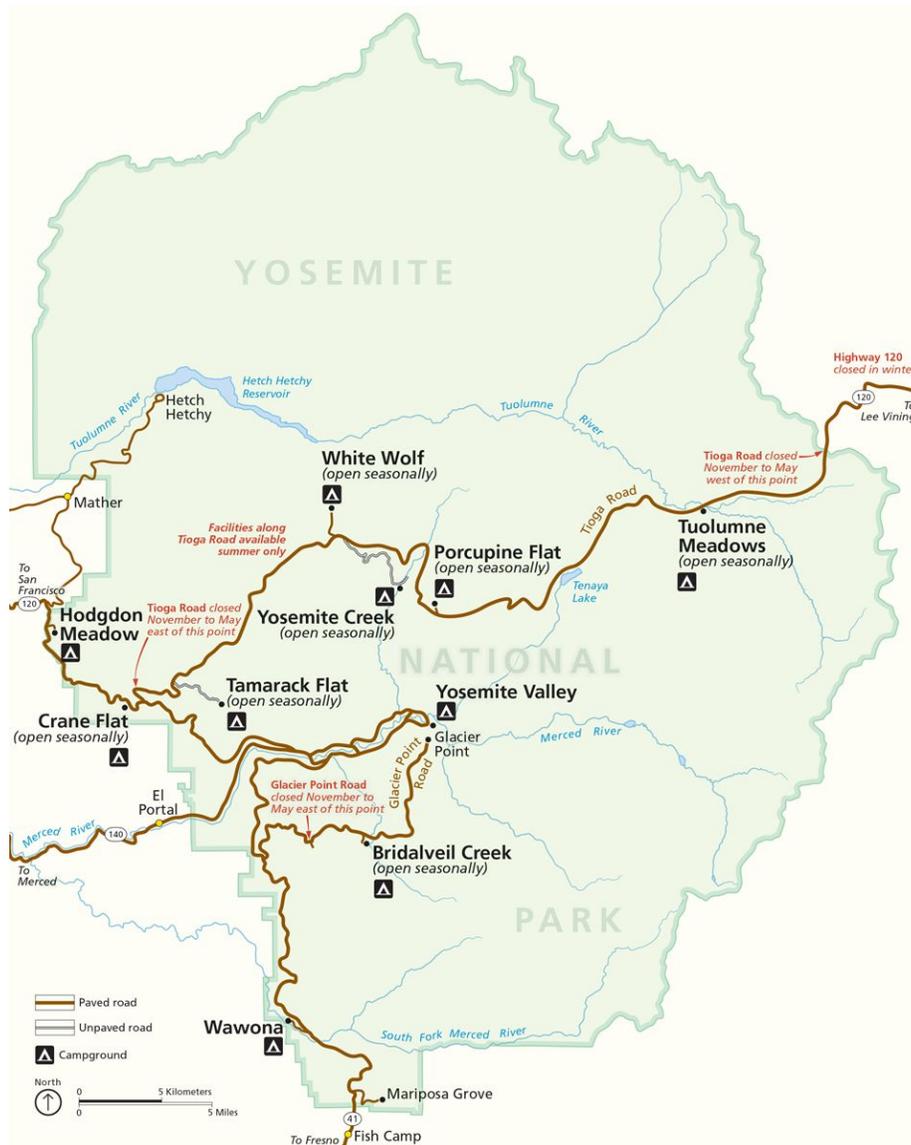
This image shows Muir in the latter years of his life at Mirror Park in Yosemite.

## Appendix 2



Muir and Roosevelt standing atop Glacier Point in Yosemite Valley. This is an incredibly famous photo, in large part due to how highly publicized this trip was in the mainstream media as well as in conservationist media. Due to how important this trip was for the future of conservatism in the U.S, this is one of the photos by which Muir is most remembered.

## Appendix 3



This map of Yosemite puts how large the park is into perspective and gives an idea of the layout of the park. Today, four million people visit Yosemite each year.

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