

John Muir

National Historic Site
California

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



“Wildness Is A Necessity”

John of the Mountains they called him, and rightly so. He lived and earned the title. Intimately linked, John Muir's life and writing championed American wilderness at a crucial point in history. He moved us to preserve exquisite samples of our natural heritage before it was too late, before the last remnants were gobbled up by the relentless wheels of industry.

Muir spoke out for saving wilderness just when the frontier that molded our pioneer character disappeared. The important change of national attitude this represented in the late 1800s is difficult to appreciate today. We now recognize our culture's close link to our environment's fate—thanks in large part to John Muir. He bridged the gap between earlier exploitive attitudes toward wildlands and today's environmental outlook. Nature does not exist solely to be exploited economically by man. It exists in its own right and, if protected, can benefit us in myriad ways.

Forever footloose, Muir tracked the meaning of nature itself. Before he settled into this California house he had walked several thousand miles. On one walking trip alone, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, he chalked up a thousand miles. His long walks, “hikes,” or even expeditions, we would call them, gave him time to formulate his thoughts about the role of nature in maintaining civilization and human values.

California became his home and its mountains the dwelling place of his spirit, the setting for his influential writings. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Burroughs had also written of wild nature, but they had not lived it as Muir did. Muir's writing has the force of his personal experience and keen observations behind it. As a spokesman for nature Muir supported his arguments with facts, wild, natural facts that said, “Save the Wilderness.”

Professional geologists said glaciers did not create Yosemite valley. Muir suspected

otherwise. Scrambling its mountainous valleys and crests he discovered numerous active glaciers and abundant scars of ancient ice sheets' massive sculpting. Muir's facts changed experts' minds about glaciers and the California mountains. His facts changed politicians' minds about how mountain forests save city water supplies. Facts on foot were John Muir's stock in trade.

Even President Theodore Roosevelt listened. Muir led him through Yosemite, camping and tramping at will as befitted both rugged outdoorsmen. They even slept out in a four-inch snowfall. Muir convinced Roosevelt that large tracts of forest lands should be protected from commercial exploitation. He also chided the President about his “childish” big game hunting.

All life is one, Muir believed. Human life is just one form of life and all forms have their significance and purpose. He pioneered what we now know as an ecological viewpoint, arguing that wildlands and wildlife had values of their own apart from their usefulness to man. He publicized, promoted, urged, and thrust this view upon the nation in a barrage of magazine and newspaper articles.

Muir traveled the wilderness in simplicity but publicized it with great sophistication. He once walked across Michigan and into Canada with a small knapsack containing only a change of underwear, pencil and notebook, bartering labor for food en route. Yet Muir also persuaded the Southern Pacific Railway to put pressure on Congress to protect wilderness.

Muir saw America ready to change its idea of nature and determined to spearhead the change. “I care to live only to entice people to look at nature's loveliness,” he wrote to a friend. Emerson's nature philosophy was then widely popular and the Darwinian revolution was giving increased weight to observed facts in science. Muir's writing combined cogent philosophical thought

with hard observation of natural phenomena. He focused public concern until it sharpened into political action to protect the vanishing wilderness.

Muir could not hold together the infant conservation movement he helped generate. It soon split into two camps. At first, “conservationists” included all who sought to prevent despoilation of wild lands. But Muir soon found that many simply advocated careful management for long-term economic use. Muir wanted large samples of wild nature preserved forever, unaltered. Man could consequently enjoy and be enriched by them in perpetuity. This controversy within the conservation movement persists today.

Muir successfully established preservation as a national land policy. Earlier preserves had been set aside to protect natural oddities or timber and water supplies. At Muir's urging, Yosemite National Park was created in 1890, specifically to preserve its wilderness character.

Muir's message was this: “Wildness is a necessity. Mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.” For Muir taught us on two levels, as a nature philosopher and social critic. He held up the mirror of untamed nature to our mechanical culture. We are insecure, Muir believed, only because we fail to see nature's true bounty and our perfect security within the scheme of things.

Muir's writing, largely accomplished in his study here, was highly influential. In part, its success can be measured by its wide acceptance. Henry Thoreau's audience had consisted of friends, family and a few curious neighbors. Muir wrote for first rate national magazines and his books sold widely. He helped establish conservation as an accepted outlook on our environment and its natural resources. It is an outlook which still requires championing today.

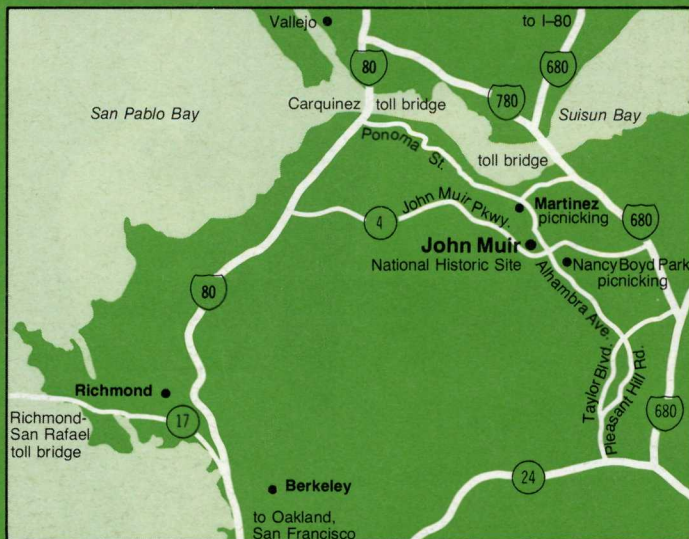
About Your Visit

This 8.8-acre park preserves the residence of John Muir, as well as a small part of the fruit ranch where he lived from 1890 until his death in 1914.

The house and grounds are open each day except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. A self-guiding tour booklet is available at the visitor center; visitors should count on about an hour and a half for the house tour and orchard walk, and the audio-visual program. Groups must arrange in advance for guided tours.

For those who need assistance to the house, special transportation arrangements may be made upon request.

For Your Safety
Please be extra cautious while visiting the park. Your best defense against accidents is common sense.



A very different man, seen now and then at long intervals but usually invisible, is the free roamer of the wilderness....



Bancroft Library, University of California

Lithe and sinewy, he walks erect, making his way with the skill of wild animals, all his senses in action, watchful and alert,...his imagination well nourished in the wealth of the wilderness.... and all the wilderness is home.

On almost any Saturday in the early 1840s, a small lad named Johnny Muir could be found wandering joyously in the fields and along the shore near Dunbar, Scotland, where he was born in 1838. "I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I've been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures," Muir later recalled. He never really changed, but as he matured his goal in life became one of sharing that love of wildness with others so that a portion of America's once-great wilderness could be saved for future generations.

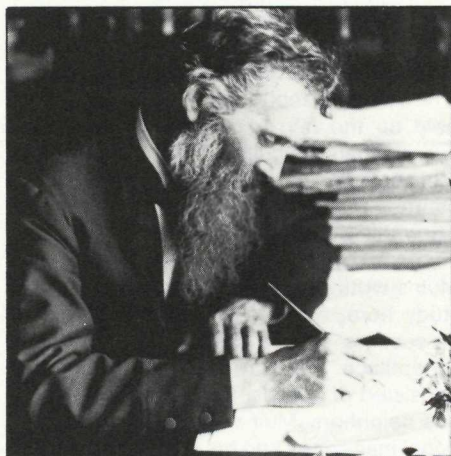
In 1848, when he was ten, John Muir immigrated with his family to the Wisconsin frontier. Under the stern hand of his father, who was a preacher and a farmer, John was forced to turn his energies to clearing trees, planting crops, and building—to taming the American wilderness he would later

struggle to preserve. After attending the University of Wisconsin, John eventually turned to the "university of the wilderness", a lifelong course of study. He set out on foot, crossing the country from North to South, and ended up finally in the High Sierras of California—ever after to be the center of his quest for wild nature's meaning.

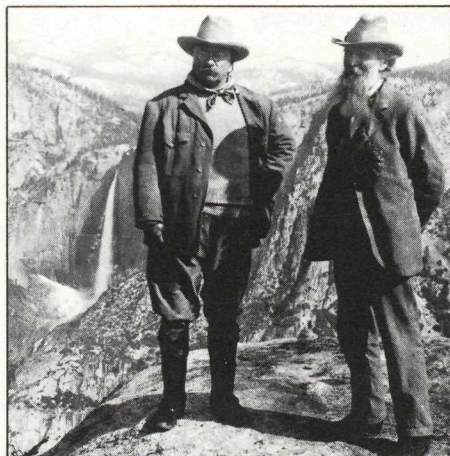
In the 1880s, he married Louie Strentzel and had two children. During the same period, he secured a modest fortune in fruit-ranching here in the Alhambra Valley. Having provided for his family, he resumed his wilderness travels and studies in areas scattered around the globe from Alaska to Africa, but concentrating in the nearby Sierras. Returning home periodically, Muir did a great deal of writing in his study, pointing out the urgent need to save America's vanishing wilderness.

Muir made his most valuable contributions to scientific knowledge in the field of glaciology. He personally discovered several glaciers, including the one in Alaska that bears his name.

In addition to publishing prolifically in important American magazines and newspapers to publicize the preservation ethic, Muir was one of the founders of the Sierra Club in 1892, and served as its president until he died. His books began coming out in 1894, and are republished today. For all his literary and political activity, however, Muir tended to become physically ill when he stayed too long confined by civilization. He remained a man of the wilderness until his death in 1914. His words in a letter to his sister in 1873 summarize his life: "The mountains are calling and I must go."



After 1866, Muir devoted himself to the study of "wild nature" and its preservation. Here at his desk (above, left) he worked on many articles and books urging conservation. As Muir and Theodore



Roosevelt explored Yosemite (center), Muir pled for favorable legislation. Muir often dined at the Martinez adobe (above right), which became the home of Muir's daughter Wanda and her husband,



Thomas Hanna, in 1906. Below, Muir, his wife Louie, and daughters, Wanda (left) and Helen, are shown on the front porch of the main house about 1904.

University of the Pacific

