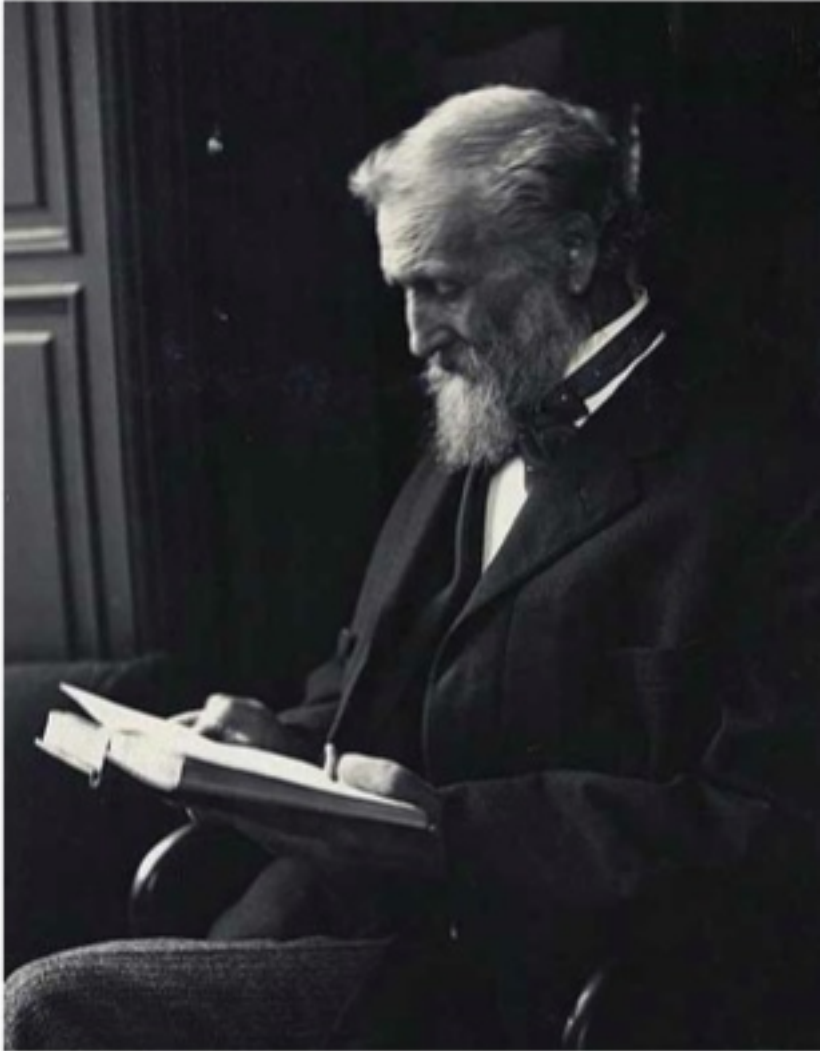


John Muir: A man full of wonder and joy

By Bruce Hamilton, Deputy Director of the Sierra Club

Bruce Hamilton, deputy executive director of the Sierra Club, was the keynote speaker at the Angeles Chapter Awards Banquet on May 13. The subject: John Muir, and his connection to us all. Here's a transcript of the speech he gave that places the Club founder in perspective.



John Muir
April 21, 1838 - December 24, 1914

Thank you for inviting me. It is always great to escape Sierra Club headquarters and meet with the grassroots lifeblood of the Sierra Club. While I have worked for the Club for 38 years, and supposedly know what is going on all around the Club, I am always pleased and amazed to travel or learn of your local successes and innovative work.

In this year when your Chapter is celebrating John Muir, I have been asked to talk about Muir. First, no, despite my white beard and Scottish heritage, I did not know John Muir personally. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his death in Los Angeles and I dare say I am not that old.

But I can say that John Muir has shaped my life, and I hope that by learning a little bit more about this remarkable man he will shape your lives, too.

Muir's California legacy

Here in California, we seem surrounded by reminders of John Muir. I live up by Martinez where there is the John Muir National Historic Site. His image graces the California quarter as a symbol of our state. Of course, we all know Muir Woods National Monument in Marin County. When we go to Yosemite National Park we learn the story of when he first developed the theory of how glaciers formed Yosemite Valley and how he organized the campaign to expand and defend the park from loggers, miners, overgrazing and water developers.

If you travel to Glacier Bay in Alaska, you can stand in awe of Muir Glacier. In his native Scotland they have just dedicated a major hiking trail as the John Muir Way. Here in the Sierra Nevada, the John Muir Trail runs along the crest from Yosemite Valley to Mount Whitney and it passes through the John Muir Wilderness. We have hospitals, schools, roads, and a brand of fine California wine named for him and bottled by his descendants. An astronomer in 2006 even named a minor planet after him (Planet Johnmuir is between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter).

John Muir is probably best known for founding the Sierra Club; writing over a dozen books on parks, wild places, and natural history; and his fight to save Yosemite. So, if you think you are incapable of founding a powerful conservation organization, saving a national park, or writing a best-selling nature appreciation book, maybe you think you have nothing to learn from John Muir. But you would be wrong.

Lessons for us and future generations

I believe the lessons John Muir has for present and future generations are not about inspiring others to match his major accomplishments. Instead, the lesson John Muir holds for us every day is to enjoy, explore, and protect the Earth in our daily lives. And when you look into the life of John Muir it is hard to find anyone else in history who excelled more at enjoying, exploring and protecting this beautiful planet. So here are the qualities of John Muir that I think we need to emulate and remember him for:

Muir had contagious enthusiasm for the natural world. He was personally excited by witnessing a fairy orchid or a water ouzel, but he then felt compelled to share that enthusiasm with everyone he met and all his readers. His magazine articles, books, public speeches, hikes, and meetings with influential decision-makers were magical and transformative.

It is no wonder that when President Theodore Roosevelt decided to visit Yosemite, he insisted that John Muir accompany him and be his guide. He was not a scold or a preachy doomsayer of an environmentalist, I imagine that he was fun to be around.

Muir was always full of wonder. He was trained as a scientist and he was a renowned inventor, but Muir was not made to be a cold lab-bound government scientist. In fact, after he nearly went blind from an industrial accident he decided to abandon toying with the inventions of man and instead chose to dedicate himself to studying and reveling in the wonders of nature. His laboratory became the world and he was full of endless questions about the wonders and glories of the natural world.

He would see a glacier in Alaska and wonder how fast it was moving. He would see a tall pine tree whipping around in a strong wind and wonder what it would feel like to be in that tree top swaying in the gale force winds. He would see a waterfall and wonder what it would look like to see the moon from behind the falls at night. He would then follow his curiosity to its logical conclusion and then recount his

adventures and findings in a way that filled all he met and all who read him with that same sense of wonder and discovery.

Muir was joyful, not a sourpuss. You can't read Muir today without sensing his almost boundless energy and rapture: "Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality." He felt divine beauty everywhere: "God never made an ugly landscape. All that the sun shines on is beautiful, so long as it is wild." He overflowed with emotion: "Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue."

A 'humble man'

Despite the fact that he would occasionally hob-nob with presidents, governors, captains of industry, and the elite, he was also a humble man who saw himself as a tiny speck in the broader universe and someone who was at ease hanging out with laborers, Native Americans in an Alaskan village, or the crew on a boat trip. When he set out on his famous 1,000 mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico he scrawled in the front of his journal, "John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe" as his address, demonstrating his humble sense of place. "The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge," he wrote. "From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals...."

John Muir was a storyteller, but one who would tell stories to teach a lesson or inspire the reader rather than to draw attention to himself or try to impress his audience. The wonderful part of Muir's writings that allows them to stand the test of time and still inspire readers 100 years after his death is that he knew how to draw people into the experience he was conveying and keep the reader engaged as the story unfolds. So you can read about him riding an avalanche, almost falling off a Sierra peak, crossing a glacier with his dog Stickeen, or witnessing the glories of a water ouzel and just get enthralled in the shared experience.

Muir was a risk taker. He was not one to think small and settle for easy victories because they would take less effort. All his life he had taken on big challenges and as a result he managed to achieve big victories. He was perfectly willing to take on the biggest and most powerful forces in the United States in the cause of protecting wildness and beauty.

The loggers, dam builders, ranchers and miners had more money and influence at the outset of every conservation campaign, but that did not stop John Muir from taking them on and waging the good fight. Yosemite would just be a state park only protecting Yosemite Valley floor and the Mariposa Grove of sequoias, except John Muir had the courage and conviction and guts to fight for the bigger park that we know and love today.

He was a visionary in the best sense of the word – he dreamed big dreams but not impractical dreams and then dedicated himself to making those dreams come true.

So put this all together, and what I am proposing is that to be a modern day John Muir you need to be joyful, full of wonder, enthusiastic, humble, willing to take risks, and able to tell a good story. Is that too much to ask of any of us?

So once we've marshaled these essential qualities of our character, what is it we can do with them to help protect the natural world? People of Faith regularly ask themselves: What would Jesus do? I think we should all ask ourselves: What would John Muir do? That might not make such a bad bumper sticker.

Today's Sierra Club

I can tell you one thing John Muir did not do. John Muir didn't send \$39 off to the Sierra Club and urge its staff to go save Yosemite for him. He assembled his friends, family and colleagues and asked them to join with him to explore, enjoy and protect the Sierra Nevada by joining the Sierra Club. Together they would make a difference by taking personal responsibility for protecting the earth. So, first I would suggest that each of you make a pledge to take personal responsibility for protecting some part of the natural world that you care about the most. It may be in your neighborhood, in the surrounding mountains, out in the spectacular California Desert, on the coast, in the Sierra, or in Alaska. The important thing is that you are passionate about protecting that place and its beauty.

Some people think the Sierra Club has lost its roots, because we no longer focus exclusively on national parks and wilderness and now devote so much time and energy to combatting climate change. But I will tell you that one of John Muir's greatest loves were glaciers, and the biggest threat to glaciers is climate change. Muir Glacier, named for the explorer after his first visits (beginning in 1879) to what is now Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska, terminates 35 miles farther north than it did in Muir's time. Muir was the first to recognize that Yosemite was carved by glaciers, and he then went on and discovered the Yosemite glaciers that had retreated to the highest peaks to prove his point. But now glaciers from California to Montana to Alaska are rapidly disappearing and most glaciers in the Lower 48 states may soon only be a memory.

Muir was a bird-lover and a botanist, but he reserved his greatest ardor for the "blue ice rivers" that helped shape the entire planet. Awe was Muir's daily pursuit. With friends once on a hike in the High Sierras, he scoffed at their elaborate picnic as he nibbled on a piece of crust. "To dine with a glacier on a sunny day is a glorious thing and makes common feasts of meat and wine ridiculous," he wrote to his sister. "A glacier eats hills and drinks sunbeams."

Over time, the mighty glaciers have been forced to retreat. Muir even speculated about global warming and climate change over 100 years ago. While he was clearly a man ahead of his time and a visionary when it came to glaciers and climate change, even he could not foresee just how destructive the planet's exploiters could become. In "Steep Trails" he wrote: "Fortunately, Nature has a few big places beyond man's power to spoil -- the ocean, the two icy ends of the globe, and the Grand Canyon."

Today we see massive ice loss at both icy ends of the globe, the oceans being threatened by acidification from fossil fuel pollution and climate change, and the Grand Canyon at risk from drought, dams, and proposed uranium development. Luckily, we still have John Muir's Sierra Club around to take action on these global assaults to the wildest places on earth.

But the Sierra Club doesn't save the Earth without you. Since its founding by John Muir and his friends 122 years ago, the secret of our success has been the power of common citizens to rise up and take action to defend the Earth.

Our mission since John Muir set us on our path over a century ago to explore, enjoy and protect the planet. So please take John Muir's advice this week and "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." But when you climb that mountain, remember that you need to return the favor and find some way to make sure that mountain is safe from harm. When Muir decided to start the Sierra Club he told his friend, "Let us do something to make the mountains glad."

I know that there was a very passionate debate in the Los Angeles media about whether or not John Muir had any relevance today and if people should dismiss him as an irrelevant and outdated historic figure. That argument brought out of the woodwork an entire army of modern day Muirs who rose to his defense, myself included.

Yes, we need new heroes and heroines and role models. But we would be foolish to cast aside some of the most inspirational leaders who ever lived. The qualities that John Muir brought to the fight for protection of our planet that I detailed earlier not only inspired me and the people in this room, but he is revered and read all around the world.

A simple farm boy, an immigrant, a tramp by his own admission. But he rose to dine and camp with presidents, travel with the leading scientists and scholars of his day, and inspire a world-wide movement to protect parks and wilderness areas. On this 100th anniversary of his death, there is no better time than now to celebrate his life and give his message and mission new life.