OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

John Muir and the Reinvention of American Wilderness

Xiyan Xue
hysxnia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

John Muir played a transformative role in redefining the American understanding of wilderness during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At a time when industrial expansion, westward settlement, and resource extraction dominated national priorities, Muir advanced a radically different vision of nature as spiritually sacred, morally significant, and worthy of preservation independent of economic value. Through his writings, political activism, and the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892, Muir helped shift environmental protection from a private philosophical concern into a national political movement. This paper examines how Muir challenged the prevailing myth of inexhaustible wilderness and reshaped public and governmental attitudes toward the natural environment during the Progressive Era. Drawing upon Muir's journals, essays, correspondence, Sierra Club records, and historical scholarship, this study argues that Muir fundamentally transformed American environmental thought by redefining wilderness as part of national identity rather than merely a source of economic exploitation. The paper also explores the contradictions within Muir's philosophy, including his treatment of Indigenous peoples and the elitist tendencies of early preservationists. Ultimately, Muir's legacy continues to influence modern environmental policy, national park conservation, and contemporary climate activism in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, the United States experienced rapid industrialization, territorial expansion, and economic development that profoundly transformed the American landscape. Railroads stretched across the continent, mining industries penetrated mountain regions, and logging companies consumed vast forests in pursuit of economic growth (Worster, 1994). The dominant national ideology of Manifest Destiny encouraged Americans to view wilderness as an obstacle to civilization and a reservoir of resources awaiting exploitation (Turner, 1920). Nature was widely understood through a utilitarian lens: forests provided timber, rivers enabled commerce, and western lands promised agricultural expansion and industrial wealth (Nash, 2014). In this environment, environmental protection remained largely absent from federal policy and public consciousness.

Amid this atmosphere of expansion and industrialization emerged John Muir, a Scottish-born naturalist whose writings and activism fundamentally altered American attitudes toward wilderness. Rather than perceiving nature as a commodity, Muir described wilderness as spiritually sacred and morally significant,

inspiring a new understanding of nature as an independent entity that deserved preservation and also the appreciation of its beauty from all people (Muir, 1911). His influence extended beyond literature into politics, most notably through his alliance with President Theodore Roosevelt and the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892 (Fox, 1981; Roosevelt, 1913). As a result, he inspired a new understanding of nature as an entity deserving preservation for its own intrinsic value.

This paper argues that John Muir reinvented the American conception of wilderness by transforming nature from an economic frontier into a spiritual and national resource. Muir reshaped environmental thought during the Progressive Era and established preservation as a central principle of American environmental policy (Nash, 2014). Although his ideas contained contradictions and limitations (Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999), Muir's environmental philosophy permanently influenced the development of national parks, conservation movements, and modern environmentalism in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a qualitative approach that involved examination of primary sources and secondary sources. Information obtained from Muir's personal letters provided insight into his ecocentric philosophy that shaped his work, and secondary sources including historian analyses of Muir's work revealed certain controversies around his work that added nuance to his legacy.

Research was conducted through online searches through databases including Google Scholar and reading of Muir's published books. Muir's memoir *My First Summer in the Sierra,* which detailed his deep appreciation for nature's beauty, and Theodore's Roosevelt's *An Autobiography,* which included a detailed account of his outdoor trip with Muir that inspired him to expand protection of the wilderness on the federal level, offered perspectives through which his influences and work can be analyzed.

Along with research focused on Muir's environmental contributions, the study of information from secondary sources discussing Muir's controversies—specifically his disregard for Native American involvement in the wilderness and the former, indirect exclusion of people of color in the Sierra Club—allowed this paper to incorporate a more comprehensive and accurate outlook of Muir's legacy beyond simply his environmental advocacy.

AMERICA BEFORE MUIR: WILDERNESS AS ECONOMIC FRONTIER

Before the rise of modern environmentalism, most Americans viewed wilderness primarily in economic terms. The nineteenth century was characterized by territorial expansion, industrial development, and confidence in the abundance of natural resources (Nash, 2014). The ideology of Manifest Destiny promoted the belief that Americans possessed both the right and obligation to expand westward across the continent (Merchant, 2002). Wilderness represented opportunity rather than preservation; forests, rivers, and mountains were expected to serve national progress.

This utilitarian perspective intensified after the Civil War. Industrialization increased demand for timber, coal, minerals, and agricultural land, resulting in widespread environmental destruction (Worster, 1994). Railroad corporations accelerated western settlement by promoting land development and tourism, while mining companies extracted resources from mountain regions with little regard for ecological consequences (Merchant, 2002). Federal land policies encouraged exploitation by distributing land for economic use through acts such as the Homestead Act of 1862. Environmental protection remained secondary to economic growth.

The intellectual climate of the period reinforced these attitudes. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," presented in 1893, argued that the American frontier shaped national character by fostering individualism and democratic development (Turner, 1920). Although Turner recognized the closing of the frontier, his interpretation still framed wilderness as a stage for human advancement rather than ecological preservation (Cronon, 1996). Similarly, many political leaders believed natural resources existed primarily to support industrial prosperity.

By the late nineteenth century, however, signs of ecological crisis became increasingly visible. Extensive deforestation, declining wildlife populations, soil erosion, and urban pollution raised concerns among some intellectuals and reformers (Nash, 2014). However, these concerns often focused on resource management rather than preservation. Conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot advocated scientific management of forests to ensure long-term economic productivity, not the protection of untouched wilderness (Miller, 2001).

Within this context, John Muir emerged as a revolutionary figure. Unlike many contemporaries who viewed nature through economic or scientific frameworks, he promoted a spiritual understanding of wilderness that challenged dominant assumptions about human relationships with the environment (Fox, 1981; Muir, 1911).

MUIR'S PHILOSOPHY OF WILDERNESS

John Muir's environmental philosophy developed through his experiences in the American West, particularly in California's Sierra Nevada mountains (Muir, 1911). After arriving in California in 1868, he became captivated by the region's dramatic landscapes and devoted himself to exploring wilderness areas. His experiences inspired a philosophical transformation that would shape the American environmental movement.

Central to Muir's philosophy was the belief that wilderness possessed intrinsic spiritual value independent of human use. In contrast to prevailing attitudes that prioritized economic exploitation, Muir described nature using religious language and imagery. In his writings, mountains became "cathedrals," forests resembled "temples," and wilderness embodied divine beauty (Muir, 1997). This spiritual interpretation reflected the influence of Transcendentalist thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson, an American essayist renowned for his philosophical emphasis on non-conformity and

individualism that challenged long-standing religious orthodoxy, contributed to the foundation of American philosophy as it developed during the American Romantic movement in the 18th century (Bates College, 2023). Additionally, his emphasis on the appreciation of nature allowed him to play a crucial role in inspiring one of Muir's most fundamental beliefs that one should view the wilderness as a sacred entity with intrinsic worth. Thoreau, another key figure in the Transcendentalist movement, was a philosopher and naturalist who endorsed humble living in natural surroundings, a belief that motivated Muir to embrace the natural resources in the wilderness and refrain from heavy reliance on human technology, sacrificing industrial comfort for a pure connection with the Earth (Henry David Thoreau, n.d.).

Muir's literary works played a crucial role in spreading the idea that nature held intrinsic value to a national audience. In the 18th century, early colonial agrarianism primarily framed nature as a tool for productivity: forest habitats were cut down for timber and westward expansion allowed more land to be conquered for plantations. In My First Summer in the Sierra and Our National Parks, Muir employed vivid, descriptive language that encouraged readers to emotionally connect with wilderness. Rather than presenting nature scientifically, he portrayed it as alive, sacred, and interconnected. For example, Muir famously wrote, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe," reflecting his understanding of ecological interdependence long before ecology became an established scientific discipline (Muir, 1911).

Muir also criticized industrial society for alienating humanity from nature. He condemned excessive logging, mining, and commercial development as destructive forces driven by greed and short-term economic thinking (Merchant, 2002). According to Muir, industrial expansion threatened not only natural landscapes but also the moral and spiritual well-being of society (Fox, 1981). Wilderness provided opportunities for renewal, reflection, and connection with the divine—values increasingly absent in industrial urban life.

Importantly, Muir's philosophy represented a direct challenge to the American myth of infinite wilderness (Nash, 2014). Many Americans assumed natural resources were inexhaustible because of the continent's vast geography. Muir rejected this assumption by emphasizing the fragility and irreplaceability of wilderness ecosystems. His warnings about environmental destruction anticipated later ecological concerns regarding sustainability and conservation (Muir, 1997).

Muir's ideas resonated particularly strongly during the Progressive Era, when reform movements sought solutions to the social and economic problems generated by industrialization. Similar to progressives advocating reforms in labor, education, and public health, Muir framed environmental preservation as a moral responsibility necessary for national improvement. His philosophy transformed wilderness from a peripheral concern into a central issue within American cultural and political discourse.

THE SIERRA CLUB AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Although Muir's writings inspired public appreciation for wilderness, his lasting impact emerged through political activism and institutional leadership. In 1892, he founded the Sierra Club, an organization dedicated to protecting wilderness areas and promoting public appreciation for nature. The Sierra Club became one of the most influential environmental organizations in American history, marking a turning point in the evolution of environmentalism from philosophy to organized political movement (Fox, 1981).

The Sierra Club combined scientific advocacy, public education, and political lobbying to influence environmental policy. Through publications, public campaigns, and organized excursions into wilderness areas, the organization encouraged Americans to experience and value nature directly. A notable example of a successful campaign includes the Grand Canyon advertisement led by David Brower—the first Executive Director of the Sierra Club—that resisted the destructive dam proposals for the Grand Canyon in 1966 (Sierra Club, n.d.). In the early years of the Sierra Club, Muir instilled the belief that preservation required not only philosophical arguments, but also public support and political action, leading the Sierra Club to remain one of the most active environmental organizations in America.

One of Muir's most significant political relationships was his alliance with President Theodore Roosevelt, who admired Muir's environmental philosophy and joined him on a famous camping trip in Yosemite National Park in 1903 (Roosevelt, 1913). During their discussions, Muir persuaded Roosevelt of the necessity of federal wilderness protection. Roosevelt later expanded national forests, wildlife refuges, and protected lands on an unprecedented scale, making conservation a major component of Progressive Era reform.

Muir's advocacy contributed directly to the strengthening of the National Park movement. Before Muir's time, only Yellowstone National Park and the initial Yosemite Grant existed in the country. However, during Muir's time of influence, he was credited with the creation of five national parks: Yosemite National Park, Mount Rainier National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, and Petrified Forest National Park (Muir, 1901). Muir's contributions to the establishments of these parks marked the beginning of the growth in numbers of nationwide pubic land set aside for legal protection. Yosemite National Park, in particular, established in 1890, became a symbol of preservationist ideals, and Muir argued that certain landscapes should remain untouched by commercial development because of their unique natural and spiritual significance. This philosophy contrasted sharply with utilitarian conservation approaches that prioritized efficient resource management.

A major conflict illustrating these tensions emerged in the Hetch Hetchy controversy. In the early twentieth century, the city of San Francisco proposed constructing a dam within Yosemite National Park to provide water for urban development. Muir fiercely opposed the project, describing the valley as a sacred landscape that should remain for future generations (Nash, 2014). Despite his efforts, Congress approved the dam in 1913. Although Muir lost the political battle, the controversy energized the preservation movement and established environmental protection as a national political issue.

The debate also highlighted differences between preservationists such as Muir and conservationists like Gifford Pinchot. The first chief of the U.S. Forest Service during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, Pinchot notably pioneered the philosophy of utilitarian conservation (Miller, 2001). He believed that natural resources should be actively utilized for human benefit such as through logging to construct houses and mining to supply energy. While Pinchot believed natural resources should be managed for public benefit, Muir insisted certain wilderness areas should remain protected from human interference entirely (Nash, 2014). The distinction between these competing viewpoints became a defining feature of American environmental policy.

Through the Sierra Club, Muir institutionalized environmental activism and demonstrated that wilderness preservation required organized political engagement. His efforts transformed environmentalism from a personal appreciation of nature into a structured national movement capable of influencing government policy.

CONTRADICTIONS AND CRITICISM

Although John Muir is celebrated as a foundational figure in American environmentalism, his legacy contains important contradictions that complicate his historical reputation. Modern historians increasingly emphasize that early preservation movements often reflected racial, cultural, and social biases that excluded marginalized communities from environmental discourse (Merchant, 2002).

One significant assessment concerns Muir's treatment of Indigenous peoples. In several writings, he described Native Americans using negative stereotypes and frequently portrayed wilderness as untouched and uninhabited despite the long history of Indigenous land management in regions such as Yosemite Valley. In one of Muir's most famous books, My First Summer in the Sierra, he references the Kutzadika tribe and described them in a scrutinizing tone, writing, "...they seemed to have no right place in the landscape, and I was glad to see them fading out of sight down the pass" (Muir, 1911). By framing wilderness as pristine nature separate from human presence, Muir overlooked the ecological knowledge and stewardship practices of Native communities who had shaped these landscapes for generations. For instance, many Indigenous tribes in the Sierras, including the Kutzadika tribe mentioned in Muir's writing, utilized cultural burning, a practice involving low-intensity fires that helped clear undergrowth, prevent the likelihood of wildfires, and stimulate the growth of basketry materials and food sources (Spence, 1999). Native communities also frequently pruned trees, such as oak, to maximize the growth of acorns and tilled soils for bulbs to plant. These Indigenous customs demonstrate their deliberate care for the environment to ensure biodiversity and how they were often overlooked by environmentalists, including Muir.

This exclusion reflected broader patterns within American conservation policy. The creation of national parks often displaced Indigenous populations in order to preserve an idealized vision of untouched wilderness for tourism and recreation (Spence, 1999). Thus, while Muir sought to protect nature from

industrial exploitation, his preservationist philosophy sometimes ignored the human consequences of environmental policies.

Additionally, critics argue that early environmentalism contained elitist tendencies. Wilderness tourism and outdoor recreation were more accessible to wealthy Americans who possessed the time and financial resources to travel to remote national parks (Cronon, 1996). Environmental conservancy sometimes prioritized scenic beauty for middle- and upper-class visitors while neglecting urban environmental problems affecting industrial workers and minority communities.

Historians also note tensions within Muir's spiritual interpretation of nature. His tendency to romanticize wilderness occasionally simplified complex ecological and social realities (Worster, 1994). While Muir opposed industrial destruction, he offered limited solutions to balancing environmental protection with economic development and population growth. A prime example of Muir's reluctance to compromise environmentalism with economic growth is the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir Battle. Following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, a dam was proposed for the Hetch Hetchy Valley to create a steady water supply for the city. Muir vehemently opposed the dam, comparing the valley to a sacred temple with unique biodiversity (Nash, 2014). However, Muir's reason for opposition was merely ideological, and he did not offer alternate engineering solutions to meet San Francisco's water crisis, demonstrating how to Muir, preserving the environment as is was a non-negotiable matter that often left little room to consider practical, civic needs of urban populations.

Nevertheless, these criticisms do not erase Muir's historical importance. Instead, they reveal the complexities of environmental history and demonstrate how preservation movements evolved over time. Modern environmentalism has increasingly expanded beyond wilderness preservation to address environmental justice, Indigenous rights, climate change, and urban pollution. In many ways, contemporary debates continue to build upon—and revise—the foundations established by Muir and the Sierra Club.

LEGACY AND MODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM

John Muir's influence extends far beyond his lifetime, but one of Muir's most enduring achievements was his role in inspiring the expansion of the National Park System. The Sierra Club also continues to play a significant role in modern environmental activism. Originally focused primarily on wilderness preservation, the organization has expanded its mission to address climate change, renewable energy, environmental justice, and biodiversity protection (Sierra Club, n.d.). Campaigns such as the "30x30 initiative," which seeks to protect 30 percent of land and water by 2030, demonstrate the continued influence of preservationist ideals in contemporary environmental politics. Muir's emphasis on ecological interconnectedness also anticipated modern environmental science. His belief that humans are inseparable from natural systems aligns closely with contemporary ecological thinking regarding biodiversity, sustainability, and climate change (Worster, 1994).

At the same time, modern environmentalism has evolved to address the limitations of early preservation movements. Contemporary scholars and activists increasingly recognize the importance of Indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental equity within conservation efforts. A prime example is ethnobotanist M. Kat Anderson, whose seminal work, Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources, directly refutes the widespread belief that pre-contact California was an untouched wilderness (Anderson, 2005). While early conservationists like John Muir admired these vast, grand landscapes as entirely pristine and "natural," Anderson demonstrates that this productive plant growth was actually the result of a long history of deliberate Indigenous cultivation and land management. These developments represent both a continuation and revision of Muir's legacy.

DISCUSSION

This review posits that John Muir contributed more to environmentalism than just advocation for preservation; he fundamentally impugned the myth that natural resources were limitless, reinventing the American perception regarding the natural world. While previous sources coin him the "Father of National Parks," this paper presents new information by synthesizing his spiritual philosophy with a modern assessment of both his ecological and social impact.

A significant contribution of this research is spotlighting the nuance of the "myth of untouched wilderness" that Muir propagated. While Muir likely intended to reinforce the importance of preservation by framing natural land like Yosemite as pristine "temples," this paper draws on contemporary research to show that a number of these areas were actually the product of centuries of Indigenous cultivation. This discussion explicitly addresses Muir's dismissive attitude toward the Kutzadika tribe and his failure to recognize that their cultural practices had been essential causal factors to the unique biodiversity Muir sought to protect.

Furthermore, this review connects the relevancy of modern environmental initatives to historical, Progressive Era activism. It discusses how Muir's political lobbying laid the groundwork for contemporary goals like the "30x30 initiative," which aims to protect 30 percent of land and water by 2030. Additionally, the examination of the Hetch Hetchy controversy from both the conservationist and preservationist perspective highlights how the ecological battle was not solely a defeat for Muir, but a defining moment that established environmental protection as a recognized national issue, illustrating the lasting influence of his preservationist ideology.

Ultimately, this discussion argues that while elitism and racial biases complicate Muir's broadly ecocentric legacy, his insistence on the intrinsic, non-utilitarian value of nature remains the bedrock of many modern environmental policies. It provides a critical re-evaluation of Muir as a figure who was simultaneously a visionary of ecological interconnectedness and a product of a colonial worldview that modern environmentalism continues to revise.

CONCLUSION

John Muir reinvented the American understanding of wilderness during a period defined by industrial expansion and environmental exploitation. By challenging the belief that nature existed solely for economic use, Muir introduced a new environmental philosophy that emphasized the spiritual, moral, and national significance of wilderness. Through his writings, political activism, and leadership within the Sierra Club, he transformed preservation from an individual ideal into a national movement capable of influencing federal policy and public consciousness.

Muir's influence extended beyond environmental philosophy into the development of national parks, Progressive Era reform, and organized environmental activism. His partnership with Theodore Roosevelt and his role in establishing the Sierra Club demonstrated that environmental preservation required political engagement as well as public inspiration. At the same time, the contradictions within Muir's legacy—including his treatment of Indigenous peoples and the exclusivity of early preservationism—highlight the complexities of environmental history and the evolving nature of conservation movements.

Ultimately, Muir changed more than landscapes; he transformed the American imagination. Wilderness became not merely a frontier for exploitation but a defining element of national identity deserving protection for future generations. Modern environmental movements continue to build upon the intellectual and political foundations established by Muir, ensuring that his reinvention of American wilderness remains deeply embedded within contemporary debates over nature, conservation, and environmental responsibility.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Muir, John. My First Summer in the Sierra. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911.

—. Nature Writings. New York: Library of America, 1997.

—. Our National Parks. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901.

Roosevelt, Theodore. An Autobiography. New York: Macmillan, 1913.

Sierra Club. Historical Records and Conservation Archives. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Secondary Sources

Bates College. (2023, June 6). Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography. Museum of Art. https://www.bates.edu/museum/exhibitions/ralph-waldo-emerson-biography/

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Environmental History, vol 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28.

Fox, Stephen. John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) | The Walden Woods Project. (n.d.). The Walden Woods Project. https://www.walden.org/what-we-do/library/thoreau/

Merchant, Carolyn. The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Miller, Char. Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001.

Nash, Roderick Frazier. Wilderness and the American Mind. 5th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Spence, Mark David. Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. The Frontier in American History. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

Worster, Donald. Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.