

# John Muir's Last Stand

*Tom Butler and Eileen Crist*



JOHN MUIR, a man whose love for nature seemed almost to transcend Earthly limits, was not immortal. One hundred years ago, on Christmas eve 1914, Muir's spirit set off into the pathless wild. The great naturalist's obituary in the *New York Times* was effusive, listing professional accomplishments after recounting his emigration from Scotland ("the youth who was destined to become one of the greatest thinkers of America came to this country when he was 11 years old") and hardscrabble boyhood on a Wisconsin farm hewed from the wilderness.

Later, as a champion for national parks and founder of the Sierra Club, Muir would become, and remains, the personification of conservation focused on preserving parks and wilderness areas. The early American conservation movement was profoundly influenced by Muir's philosophy and charisma. Literary lions and politicians from the East—Ralph Waldo Emerson and Teddy Roosevelt among them—sought him out, wanting to be introduced to the great temple of Yosemite by its leading acolyte.

Muir was a self-taught naturalist in a day when amateurs could make significant advancements in science—which he did, in botany, geology, glaciology, and other fields. Whereas Henry David Thoreau was little known in his day, Muir became a public figure engaged in political battles for land preservation. Through much of his early adult-

hood Muir supported himself by writing about wild places and wild life in such prominent outlets as *Century Magazine* and *The Atlantic*. His articles and books enjoyed wide popularity, and many of us still revel in Muir's stories—the adventure with that brave little dog Stickeen on an Alaskan glacier, or the account of a December day in 1874 when Muir was rambling in the northern part of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains and a storm kicked up.

A cautious mountaineer would have sought shelter in the low country. Muir went up, climbing a ridge to experience the weather's full force. At the height of land, he noted a cluster of hundred-foot-tall Douglas fir trees whose "lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy." Muir was accustomed to climbing trees for his botanical studies, so he easily ascended the tallest fir and spent hours riding the storm's currents.

"The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed," he later wrote. During his time aloft, Muir reveled in the "the high festival" of fragrant air, sublime light, and the "music" of windswept trees. "The sounds of the storm," he noted, "corresponded gloriously with this wild exuberance of light and motion."

Like no one before him, Muir was able both to hear the music of the mountains and to communicate that song to the public. Muir's writing was a practical way to support his wilderness adventuring, but more importantly it was outreach to promote conservation of America's remaining wilderness. While compelling, literary, and often tinged with religious sentiment, his was prose with an agenda: conservation activism.

In this centennial anniversary of Muir's death, it is disturbing, but not surprising, that the man and his legacy are suffering the slings and arrows of critics. These attacks are concurrent with an ongoing assault on traditional conservation ideas and tactics from some academics, think tanks, and practitioners affiliated with large nonprofits. This body of thinkers, variously called "new conservationists," "eco-pragmatists," or "postmodern greens," have articulated a set of views about where they think conservation should go in the so-called Anthropocene, the new epoch of human dominion. Wilderness preservation is not on their wish list this Christmas, though corporate partnerships are.

The postmodern greens aim to reorient conservation's primary focus away from establishing protected areas intended to help prevent human-caused extinctions and to sustain large-scale natural ecosystems. Instead, they advocate sustainable management of the biosphere to support human aspirations, particularly for a growing global economy. If some species go extinct that may be regrettable, goes their thinking, but the bottom line is that nature is resilient. As long as "working landscapes" (places we manipulate to produce commodities) are managed well enough to sustain "ecosystem services" (things like water filtration, soil health, and crop pollination), human welfare can be supported without lots of new protected areas (habitat for other species) getting in the way of economic growth.

Some of the most prominent of these new conservationists have warned against critiquing the techno-industrial growth economy that is every-

where gobbling up wild nature. "Instead of scolding capitalism," they write, "conservationists should partner with corporations in a science-based effort to integrate the value of nature's benefits into their operations and cultures."

Ironically, their critique of "old" conservation comes amidst a flurry of landmarks achieved by the historical conservation movement that the "new" environmentalists denigrate:

2014 is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Yosemite land grant of 1864, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation granting the Yosemite Valley to the state of California with the condition that the land "be held for public use, resort, and recreation." That action put the federal government in the wildlands preservation business, setting the stage for the creation of Yellowstone, the world's first national park, in 1872. Yosemite Valley itself would come back into the federal domain several decades later, following Yosemite National Park's designation; Muir's public and private advocacy for the new park was crucial.

This year also marks the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the New York state constitutional convention that enshrined the "forever wild" protections for the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves. One of the leading lights of early efforts to protect the Adirondacks was New York attorney Louis Marshall, whose work to expand justice and fight anti-Semitism went hand in hand with his work to expand justice for nonhuman nature and gain protections for the wild landscape he loved. The legacy of that effort is an Adirondack Park that is the most wild and ecologically intact part of the Northeast, graced once again by populations of iconic species such as otters, bobcats, and moose.

Marshall's sons Bob and George would become prominent conservationists also, with Bob founding the Wilderness Society in the 1930s. That organization spearheaded national wilderness legislation inspired in part by New York's protection of the public lands in the Adirondacks and Catskills. And so this year also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> an-

niversary of the Wilderness Act of 1964 that created America's wilderness preservation system; today it safeguards roughly 110 million acres of wildlife habitat and places for primitive recreation, open to all.

Those of us who value untrammelled landscapes—areas not yoked to human will but free to follow their own course—do not argue that conservation should preclude human economic welfare among its objectives. From the early days of conservation practice, utilitarian aims have always been included. But a primary focus on such aims—rather than on the health of the biotic community as a whole—is a strategic dead end for nature protection as it spells increasing losses of species, wildlife populations, and wild ecosystems.

With the Sixth Mass Extinction event looming and global climate chaos accelerating, the question of conservation strategy is neither trivial nor a minor internecine squabble in the environmental movement. Why, where, and how we focus our conservation energies is a question of life or death for other species, and ultimately, perhaps our own. The trajectory of modernity has precipitated a global holocaust of nonhuman nature. John Muir said that if it came to a war between humans and bears, he'd side with the bears. That war has come, and "the bears" are losing.

The last stronghold of colonialism is the way modern humans have seized the biosphere, the living web of creatures and processes that we have taken to pervasively describing as "resources," "ecosystem services," "working landscapes," or "natural capital." Such language advances a human-centered cognitive frame that presumes our domination of Earth to be entirely normal. It assumes that the planet's diversity and ecological richness exist *for us*, to be shaped and manipulated to serve our aspirations, and that this is Progress.

The present schism among conservationists reflects profoundly different viewpoints on the latest human ambition to become Earth manager and global gardener-in-chief, undertaking to man-

ufacture new life forms via synthetic biology or to control the planetary thermostat via geoengineering. Will conservation aid and abet such hubris, or resist it, encouraging our species to become a "plain member and citizen of the biotic community" as conservationist Aldo Leopold phrased it? Choosing the latter path means that along with protecting wild nature for its own sake, we must limit our expansionism within the biosphere, reducing our global numbers and curtailing excessive consumption while trying to improve living standards among the poor.

Humanity is the product of the same processes as all other species that have dwelt on Earth, with our well-being inextricably tied to the health of the biosphere. Contemporary science has confirmed nature's myriad links, but as early as 1911 John Muir poetically expressed ecology's central insight. "When we try to pick out anything by itself," Muir wrote in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, "we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." The twin ideas of evolutionary kinship and ecological connectivity are profoundly disruptive to the delusion of human exceptionalism, that somehow the rules don't apply to us, that our cleverness is boundless, even to the point of transcending biological limits.

One hundred years after his death, John Muir's legacy could not be more vital. Inspired by the love he felt for the wild world, today's vision for the future of conservation—and the future of the Earth—is one of planetary *rewilding*, where a scaled-back human civilization is embedded in a matrix of wildness, and where at least half of the globe is left to nature. It is a vision both idealistic and achievable: Broad swaths of green and blue—beautiful, untrammelled, evolution-supporting lands and waters encircling the Earth, where wild life and people flourish together.

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