

# John Muir: The Father of Our National Parks

Themes: Care and appreciation for God's creation and our environment; Common sense conservation and responsible stewardship

Take a moment to close your eyes and think about the most beautiful place you have ever seen. What comes to mind?

Perhaps the colorful sky as the sun sets on a sandy beach? Or towering, snowy mountains peppered with pine trees? Maybe a grassy meadow that's awakened by a crisp, cool breeze? There is so much beauty to explore and appreciate in the world around us. But we have a big responsibility. God, as the creator of the universe, has entrusted us to take care of his rich and abundant creation.

John Muir, known by some as "The Father of Our National Parks," was one of the most influential naturalists and conservationists in America's history.<sup>1</sup> He is an example of a citizen who impacted government without ever holding public office.

Muir spent his life exploring the wonders of the natural world and advocating for its preservation. As Muir later 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."<sup>2</sup> Muir's life is a testament to the fact that ideas matter. It was his passionate commitment to the American wilderness that ultimately changed America's history.

Muir was born on April 21, 1838, in Dunbar, Scotland. Muir developed his love and curiosity for nature as a young boy. As a child, he would take walks in the Scottish countryside with his grandfather.<sup>3</sup> His family moved to Wisconsin in 1849, and whenever he wasn't working on the farm, Muir would explore the surrounding Wisconsin countryside, wandering the surrounding fields and woods with his younger brother.<sup>4</sup>

Muir was an avid reader and even spent some time tinkering with his own inventions. One of his contraptions was an "early-rising bed" that would tip a sleeper out of bed before sunrise.<sup>5</sup> In 1860, Muir enrolled in the University of Wisconsin to study biology, botany, and geology.



Though Muir did alright in his schooling, he always saw himself as a student of the “University of the Wilderness” and decided to leave the University of Wisconsin in 1863.

Muir set off on a walking tour of Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Canada, taking random jobs to support himself. His life changed while working at a carriage parts shop in Indianapolis. Muir suffered an eye injury in 1867 that left him blind for one month. When he could see again, Muir set his sights on nature and the wanderlust spark inside of him turned into a burning flame.<sup>6</sup> [Editor’s note: Throughout his lifetime, Muir would visit every continent except for Antarctica.<sup>7</sup>]

Setting off from Indianapolis, Muir walked 1,000 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, then sailed to Cuba and on to Panama, and then headed up the West Coast to San Francisco where he discovered his forever home: California.<sup>8</sup>

On March 28, 1868, when Muir arrived in the bustling city of San Francisco, he recalled asking a carpenter on the street the fastest way out of the chaos. The carpenter asked, “Where do you want to go?” Muir replied, “Anywhere that is wild.”<sup>9</sup>

Muir walked east, through the San Joaquin Valley, and came upon Yosemite in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains – which captivated him. He later wrote, “Then it seemed to me the Sierra should be called no[t] the Nevada, or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light...the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain chains I have ever seen.”<sup>10</sup>

[Editor’s note: By the time Muir arrived in Yosemite in 1868 – which is a part of the Sierra Nevada Mountains – there were several dozen year-round residents living there and tourists would come to visit. In 1864, Lincoln signed a law that granted the state of California Mariposa Grove (a grove of hundreds of ancient giant sequoias in southern Yosemite) and approximately seven square miles of the valley “for public use, resort and recreation.” According to Smithsonian Magazine, this was “some of the first land in history set aside for its natural beauty.”<sup>11</sup>]

Muir remained in Yosemite for around 10 days and went back to the coast to find a job that would allow him to return. In June of 1869, he got a job as a shepherd to 2,000 sheep that he was tasked to bring to the Tuolumne Meadows in the High Sierras. Though Muir grew a disdain for the “hoofed locusts” that tore up grass and wildflowers, he was able to explore the beautiful mountain wilderness – he even climbed the 10,911-foot granite spire of Cathedral Peak. All he had on his person was a notebook tied to his rope belt and some hard bread stuffed in his coat pockets.<sup>12</sup>

In November 1869, Muir built himself a cabin by Yosemite Creek, built and ran a sawmill for a hotel owner, took guests on hikes, and cut down timber for the hotel to use for new walls. His one-room pine and cedar cabin was akin to a greenhouse – the Yosemite Creek ran underneath the floorboards while plants grew up through them, an “ornamental arch” of two ferns framed Muir’s writing desk, and he slept on cedar branches covered in sheepskin blankets.

[Editor's note: He later had to construct a new study that he called a "hang-nest" because it was in the sawmill and could only be reached by ladder.] He found peace in Yosemite. Muir wrote to his friend, "I am feasting in the Lord's mountain house."<sup>13</sup>

Not only did Muir enjoy the scenery, but he learned from his surroundings. He spent time gathering plant specimens, filling journals with his findings, and studying in detail the geology, plants, and animals he encountered. Muir also found adventure in Yosemite; he would get soaked by freezing waterfalls while camping on high rock ledges, he would use a rope to plunge into glaciers, and he "rode" an avalanche down a canyon. (In 1871, he published his first article after developing a theory that Yosemite was created from glacial activity, instead of a prehistoric disaster of some sort.) Muir learned by seeing, doing, and experiencing. He had gained quite a reputation as "the wild man of the woods" who was also a self-taught genius.<sup>14</sup>

What Muir learned and saw would stay with him for the rest of his life. After ending his residence in Yosemite in 1873, and though he did take time to get married, manage the family fruit ranch, and travel around the world, he spent his later years writing and advocating for the protection of the beauty he saw.<sup>15</sup>

But he would return to his beloved Yosemite. When sheep were damaging the land of Tuolumne Meadows (where Muir had previously worked), he published a series of articles in Century magazine exposing the damage. Working alongside the magazine's editor (Robert Underwood Johnson, whom Muir took camping to see what was happening firsthand) the two proposed a plan that would create a 1,200 square-mile Yosemite National Park. In 1890, an act of Congress established Yosemite National Park, and the bill was signed into law.<sup>16</sup>

For context: As America continued to grow, urbanize, and industrialize in the mid to late 19th century, natural resources were neglected, used wastefully, and exploited with limited protections. From the fish in the rivers to the trees in the forest, there are many natural resources that we are blessed to have in America and that make our country beautiful. But it's a balancing act because these resources aren't unlimited! We need to be careful with how we use the resources God has given us and do so in a way that makes sure future generations can enjoy them, too.

Throughout his life, Muir wrote more than 300 articles and 10 major books. Drawing upon his travels and experiences, Muir brought to life the peace and joy that can be found in nature and inspired audiences from presidents to congressmen to adventure-loving Americans.

"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," he wrote in "Our National Parks" in 1901.<sup>17</sup>

He also wrote in "Our National Parks," "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."<sup>18</sup>

This book caught the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, whose advisors told him that America's wilderness was too large to be ruined.<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt similarly wrote: "We have become great because of the lavish use of our resources. But the time has come to inquire seriously what will happen when our forests are gone, when the coal, the iron, the oil, and the gas are exhausted, when the soils have still further impoverished and washed into the streams, polluting the rivers, denuding the fields and obstructing navigation."<sup>20</sup>

Roosevelt, understanding how overuse could ransack the American wilderness, wrote a letter to Muir on March 14, 1903, and asked him to go camping in Yosemite. Roosevelt wrote, "I do not want anyone with me but you, and I want to drop politics absolutely for four days and just be out in the open with you."<sup>21</sup>

Recognizing the influence Roosevelt could have in office, Muir agreed to take the opportunity to guide the president and "to do some forest good in talking freely around the campfire."<sup>22</sup>

The National Park Service described the historic 1903 camping trip, in which the president sent all of his men to stay in town: "Roosevelt and Muir camped the first night, May 15, at the Mariposa Grove under the Grizzly Giant, with the President bedding down in a pile of about 40 wool blankets, and the second night was spent in the vicinity of Sentinel Dome during a snowstorm that left five inches of new snow on top of the existing five feet of snow. The third night of camping was at the edge of Bridalveil Meadow in Yosemite Valley."<sup>23</sup>

Muir shared stories with President Roosevelt about California's natural history and geology, showed him the giant sequoias and ponderosa pine, introduced him to the forest animals, and took him on a horseback ride.<sup>24</sup> While sitting around the campfire, Muir talked to Roosevelt about forest preservation. He also talked to Roosevelt about including Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove (controlled by the state of California) in Yosemite National Park. This conversation eventually resulted in Roosevelt signing the Yosemite Reversion Bill in 1906, which put the valley and grove under federal protection.

As Roosevelt said, "There can be nothing in the world more beautiful than the Yosemite, the groves of the giant sequoias...our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their Children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."<sup>25</sup>

Roosevelt went back to Washington with a determination to conserve the American wilderness so that our nation's resources could be used sustainably and enjoyed for generations.

As president, Theodore Roosevelt created the United States Forest Service and established five national parks, 18 national monuments, 55 national bird sanctuaries and wildlife refuges, and 150 national forests.<sup>26</sup> Approximately 230 million acres of public land were protected during Roosevelt's presidency.<sup>27</sup>

The next time you visit one of these places, be sure to thank Muir and Roosevelt, whose dedication to conservation has kept America beautiful and bountiful.

## Footnotes

1. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/about/default.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/about/default.aspx)
2. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/mans\\_place\\_in\\_the\\_universe.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/mans_place_in_the_universe.aspx)
3. <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
4. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx)
5. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/john-muir-yosemite-10737/>
6. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx)
7. <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
8. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx)
9. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/john-muir-yosemite-10737/>
10. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx)
11. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/john-muir-yosemite-10737/>
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx)
16. <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/historyculture/muir.htm>
17. [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/favorite\\_quotations.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/favorite_quotations.aspx)
18. Ibid
19. [https://blogs.loc.gov/inside\\_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/](https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/)
20. <https://www.nps.gov/thro/learn/historyculture/theodore-roosevelt-and-conservation.htm>
21. [https://blogs.loc.gov/inside\\_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/](https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/)
22. <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
23. Ibid
24. [https://blogs.loc.gov/inside\\_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/](https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2016/08/roosevelt-muir-and-the-camping-trip/)
25. <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
26. <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
27. <https://www.nps.gov/thro/learn/historyculture/theodore-roosevelt-and-conservation.htm>

## Additional Resources

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- <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/john-muir-yosemite-10737/>
- Ibid.
- <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/historyculture/muir.htm>
- [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/favorite\\_quotations.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/favorite_quotations.aspx)
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