



4-12-2019

Muir collection an education in understanding, preserving nature

Michael J. Wurtz

University of the Pacific, mwurtz@pacific.edu

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Recommended Citation

Wurtz, M. J. (2019). Muir collection an education in understanding, preserving nature. *The Record*, , 20.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/libraries-articles/116>

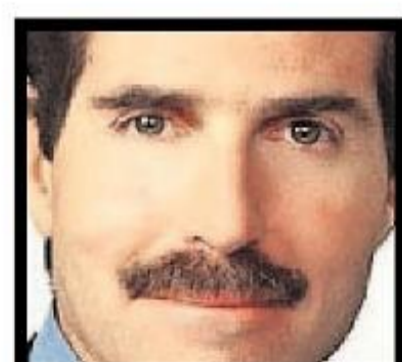
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OPINION

The Record

Founded in 1895 by Irving Martin | recordnet.com/opinion
Deitra R. Kenoly, President and Publisher
Donald W. Blount, Editor

Zuckerberg cronyism



John Stossel

Please, regulate me!
That was Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's message to Congress recently.

"Lawmakers often tell me we have too much power over speech, and frankly I agree," he wrote in an op-ed. "(We shouldn't make so many important decisions ... on our own."

It sounds so self-sacrificing. But give me a break. Big companies use regulation to their advantage.

His smaller competitors can't afford the squads of "compliance officers" that Facebook employs.

"You, as a company, welcome regulation?" Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., asked Zuckerberg during a congressional hearing.

"If it's the right regulation, then yes," the CEO replied.

"Would you work with us in terms of what regulations you think are necessary in your industry?"

"Absolutely," Zuckerberg replied.

Zuckerberg's no dope. He sees which way the wind is blowing. He issued his plea to be regulated after receiving months of criticism from politicians.

If he cooperates early and enthusiastically, Facebook is likely to get to work with the regulators to shape the rules.

This is sad for two reasons.

One, the First Amendment says Congress "shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech." I'd think Zuckerberg would know that, but no, he called for government to "require companies to build systems for keeping harmful content to a bare minimum."

Currently, his own website is a wonderful forum for all kinds of useful speech. There's hateful speech, too, but it's the private company's job to decide whether to police that, not government's.

The second reason Facebook working with regulators is sad is that if anyone should fight for permissionless, unregulated innovation, it should be people like Mark Zuckerberg.

It's no accident that the amazing wealth creation that brought us Facebook, Google, Instagram, Microsoft, Amazon, etc., happened in the two big metropolitan areas farthest

from Washington, D.C.

As Yaron Brook, chairman of the Ayn Rand Institute, says: "Microsoft in the early 1990s was the largest company in the world, incredibly successful. They spent exactly zero dollars on lobbying, on cronyism, on lawyers. They had no presence in Washington, D.C. — not a single lawyer, not a single building."

Instead of investing in lawyers and lobbyists, Microsoft spent money on technology.

But then the sleepy codgers in Washington, D.C., noticed Microsoft's success.

"They were literally brought in front of Congress," Brook recounts, "yelled at by a Republican, Orrin Hatch from Utah. He said, 'You guys need to get involved here in Washington, D.C. You need to build a building here, hire lawyers here.' ... The unspoken text: 'You need to bribe me.'"

The company didn't immediately obey. "Microsoft said, you know what? You leave us alone," Brook says. "We're busy. We're running the biggest company in the world. There's a lot to do!"

But that wasn't the end of it. "Six months later, knock on the door at Microsoft: 'We're from the Justice Department and we're here to prosecute you because you're offering ... customers a product for free,'" Brook paraphrases. "Internet Explorer. At a time when (customers) were paying money for Netscape, they offered it for free."

The government called that a violation of antitrust law. Free services might make Microsoft too popular. "For 10 years they had to fight that lawsuit," Brook says. "They lost. They got regulated. They got controlled. Guess how much Microsoft spends today in Washington, D.C.? Tens of millions of dollars."

A company that should focus on pleasing customers had to start thinking more about pleasing government. The lesson is that if you don't want politicians destroying your business, you must go to Washington to give them money. Kiss their rings.

"A lot of the lobbying and so-called cronyism is self-defense," Brook explains.

"If we really want to end cronyism, reduce the power of politicians over our lives. Separate economics from state."

Contact columnist and television commentator John Stossel through creators.com.

GUEST VIEW



Mike Wurtz, archivist at University of the Pacific, shows where John Muir's personal papers are kept. [CALIXTRO ROMIAS/RECORD FILE 2014]

Muir collection an education in understanding, preserving nature

By Mike Wurtz
Special to The Record

Something exciting is happening at University of the Pacific on Saturday.

Members of the public from Stockton and surrounding communities are invited to come and celebrate with us along with U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton; Sierra Club President Loren Blackford; descendants of John Muir's family; and "John Muir" himself portrayed by Lee Stetson. We're celebrating the Muir-Hanna family's gift of Muir-authored documents to Pacific. While the university has been fortunate to house the collection for 49 years, Saturday's event will recognize Pacific as the permanent home collection.

Curating this special collection places Stockton in the middle of the Muir archipelago — Muir Woods in Marin County, the John Muir home in Martinez and, of course, Yosemite National Park. Researchers and enthusiasts who want to study Muir will regard our hometown as a global center to fully understand the works and the man.

The Muir collection is important to our community because it helps us to understand the importance and value of preserving nature's best in the words of the most influential conservationist of our time. Muir's work — which has inspired generations of conservationists, environmentalists, policymakers and nature lovers — is more important today as the debate over climate change continues and as threats to public lands appear at every turn.

Members of the public can learn about the relevancy of his principles in today's modern world by immersing themselves in the digitized material available online for free (go.pacific.edu/archives). The collection includes 7,000 correspondences, 100 journals



One of John Muir's journals, center, lays atop a letter from the famed naturalist. [RECORD FILE 2006]

John Muir Celebration

When: 1-4:30 p.m. Saturday, beginning with a screening of a Muir documentary at the Janet Leigh Theatre on the Pacific campus.

Full schedule: www.pacific.edu.

and notebooks, 400 drawings, thousands of photographs, hundreds of book manuscripts and articles, and a 1,000-volume personal library. In the past year alone, Muir-related items have been viewed online more than 22,000 times by people worldwide. We are working on developing a Muir museum to provide visitors with an interactive experience.

For students, we integrate Muir into their college experience. From incorporating his masterful observational skills on geology field trips to a class on the American Conservation Movement to making his legacy part of our sustainability program, our students learn how vital it is to nurture and protect our environment.

Muir's work provides us with an up-close look of Stockton and the Central Valley as they once were so that we can study the impact of our footprint and take action toward preservation and sustainability. In fact, when Muir first crossed the

Central Valley in 1868 headed for Yosemite Valley, he called it the "floweriest piece of world I ever walked." He declared in his book, "My First Summer in the Sierra," that our valley climate has only two seasons — spring and summer. "The spring begins with the first rainstorm, which usually falls in November. In a few months, the wonderful flowery vegetation is in full bloom, and by the end of May, it is dead and dry and crisp, as if every plant had been roasted in an oven." It's unlikely that Muir would recognize the "floweriest piece of the world" today. He was reflecting on a time when the population in California was about 560,000. Now, with more than 39 million people in the state, the issues of pollution, congestion and waste continue to grow.

Even with all the environmental challenges we face today, we must never give up hope. We can emulate the spirit of John Muir and through the wonderful gift from his living descendants, we can all work together to preserve nature for future generations to love and cherish as he did. If we do not, John Muir's words may be all we have left of nature.

Mike Wurtz is an assistant professor at University of the Pacific and head of Holt-Atherton Special Collections and Archives.

A snapshot of science's power to amaze



Eugene Robinson

Forget everything else for a moment and behold infinity.

On Wednesday, scientists unveiled a fuzzy image that should blow every mind on the planet: the first-ever picture of a black hole, which is a region of space so dense that nothing can escape its gravitational pull, not even light. Black holes were predicted by Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity, and their existence has been inferred from decades' worth of indirect observation. But we've never actually seen one until now, and the experience is humbling.

To see such an object is to

gaze into the ultimate abyss. Dumbstruck awe is the only reasonable response.

The black hole in question, known as M87, lies at the heart of a galaxy far, far away — 55 million light-years distant, to be a bit more precise.

To see M87, they needed a telescope as big as the earth itself. To simulate such a thing, they trained existing radio telescopes at eight widely separated sites around the globe on the target simultaneously, gathering mountains of data — so much that the files were too large to be sent through the internet and had to be shipped around on high-capacity hard drives. Winter observations from a telescope in Antarctica were delayed until the weather abated and the drives containing the data could be flown out.

All of that information was combined and analyzed, a process that took many months. The

image that emerged was revealed at coordinated news conferences, including one at the National Press Club led by Shep Doleman of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. Doleman served as director of the Event Horizon Telescope project, named after the spherical boundary that surrounds a black hole and marks the point of no return for anything unfortunate enough to venture closer.

Another key member of the team was computer scientist Katherine Bouman, 29, soon to be an assistant professor at California Institute of Technology, who developed an algorithm that made it possible to combine the massive amounts of data produced by the participating telescopes. Those of us who believe in the power of diversity predicted that science would greatly benefit by opening its doors to women. We were right.

The greatest contribution, of course, came from Einstein. A century ago, he described gravity not as a force of attraction between masses (Isaac Newton's view) but as a warping of space time. His equations made predictions that were counterintuitive and even preposterous — that the path of light from a distant source would be curved by passing near a massive object, for example, or that time would pass more slowly near a strong gravitational field. On all counts, however, he turned out to be right. Your mobile phone's GPS would send you careening into brick walls if compensation were not made for the time distortion that Einstein described.

But even Einstein was disturbed when Karl Schwarzschild, another German physicist, used the equations of general relativity to work out that if matter became too dense it would collapse into

a black hole. The idea seemed absurd. But Schwarzschild's math turned out to be right.

How is it even possible to take a picture of a black hole against the inky blackness of space? How do you capture an image of nothing? It turns out that some black holes, including the massive M87, are surrounded by infalling material that circles rapidly like water going down a drain. All of that material reaches such high speeds that it forms a hot, glowing disc — a blazing doughnut around the voracious hole.

Which is exactly what M87 looks like. Just wow.

Humans are capable of epic screw-ups that endanger our very existence. But sometimes, somehow, we still get it right.

Contact Washington Post Writers Group columnist Eugene Robinson at eugen robinson@washpost.com.