

JOHN MUIR AND THE COMMUNITY OF NATURE



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This article is structured as an intellectual biography which emphasizes the philosophical development of its subject. The focus is on John Muir's relationship with his lodestone, Yosemite Valley, between the years 1868 to 1914. Yosemite acted as the symbolic force in Muir's life and thought, and his relationship with the Valley mirrored his changing attitude toward the central question of an appropriate relationship between man and nature. Muir's thoughts, actions and writings are linked to his relationship with Yosemite and, as a result, Yosemite becomes a symbol for his self-development.¹

My focus has been on a love relationship between a person and place. The course of that relationship provides the structural continuity necessary to demonstrate Muir's intellectual evolution.

The chronology of Muir's relationship with Yosemite can be characterized in four stages. Muir perceived Yosemite first as a place, then a process, a park and a preserve. In matching Muir's experience with his perceptions the "man's fate unfolds itself stage by stage, like a bud that harbors within it a blossom."²

These four stages were the seasons of John Muir's relationship with Yosemite. They reveal that his love of nature evolved from the spring of youthful romantic fancy to a mature and ripened ecological, moral and social consciousness. In the end, Muir advocated a major shift in human consciousness toward nature, one which mirrored his own evolution from traditional Christian belief to faith in a community of nature.

The writings of John Muir unveil his different sides. His abundant periodical literature portrays him as a literary man, a scientist, a glacial expert, and a political advocate of parks and wilderness preservation. His letters reveal his business and personal sides. Those to family, friends, especially Mrs. Carr, and associates reflect the indispensable, inner man. Finally, Muir's journals contain his most valuable and comprehensive statements about nature as a life force.

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The upper end of Yosemite Valley from Rocky Point. Photograph taken by Joseph LeConte, 1896.

The development of this article has depended largely on a selection of Muir's published writings related to Yosemite. The publication dates of these choices may be deceptive. They were selected because the subjects and time periods follow chronologically with the developmental thesis. *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* was published in 1916 but it is the first primary text evaluated because it covers important events in Muir's life during 1868. Likewise, *My First Summer in the Sierra* concentrates on Muir's activities in 1869 but it was published in 1911. *Studies in the Sierra* documents Muir's glacial studies in Yosemite Valley from 1870-1874. It was first published in serial form in 1875 and 1876 in the *Overland Monthly*. Muir's articles on Yosemite National Park were published by the *Century* in 1891, but his book *Our National Parks* was not published until 1901. Finally, Muir's articles on Hetch Hetchy Valley were published at the time of the controversy, from 1901 until 1914.

Three primary goals are central to the structure, and to the writing as well. The first involved reconstructing Muir's relationship with Yosemite Valley and the controversy surrounding it. Muir was a man committed to his time and he responded carefully to the issues and problems of his day, as seen in an analysis of his thought.

The second was to evaluate the development of Muir's philosophy of nature through its various stages. The cumulative effect of Muir's scientific and political work help to explain his personal journey from a solitary and fervent nature lover to a national park spokesman and preservationist. Although Muir may not have been thoroughly comfortable in his role as a public figure, he perceived it as necessary for the realization of certain goals. Muir's philosophical development indicates that his views changed and became clarified as he responded over time to the issues and problems surrounding Yosemite.

The third goal was to explain the fundamental concept of Muir's philosophy of nature, that is his concept of a community of nature representing the possibility of a reconciliation between man and nature. His position, however, challenged certain political and economic attitudes of Americans toward their land. The tension between Muir's view and these attitudes is discussed below.

The four stages of development in Muir's relationship with Yosemite reveal a patterned sequence of changes. In each, Muir redefined himself as he built upon and clarified different concepts in his philosophy of nature. He arrived at some insight, a special realization, characterizing his point of view and summarizing what the Yosemite region had taught him. All stages built upon Muir's fundamental concern for an appropriate relationship between man and nature. They reflect his changing attitude as modified by experience and increased knowledge. Finally, the stages are inextricably linked to his personal maturation, the influences of aging and new role definitions.

Muir's study of the Yosemite landscape was a search for self in nature. Through the journeying process, unlearning and relearning, through choosing nature as a teacher, Muir found direction, purpose and his life's work. Muir's changing relationship with Yosemite, over the course of the second half of his life, helped to crystallize his identity and guide his thought and actions.

Muir's first long period of exposure to the Sierra occurred in the summer of 1869 and marked the first stage of his development. Toward the end of his sheepherding expedition, he wrote to his brother David, "I have enjoyed a most divine piece of life among the snow peaks of the Sierra Nevada. Botany, Geology, and Sketching have been my principal objects."³ During that summer Muir was very indecisive about his future direction. He was caught between a desire to travel to South America, and the nagging feeling he should stay close to the mountains. He grew increasingly appreciative and curious, and the intimacy of his relationship with nature eased his internal struggle. As he gained more exposure to the rock sculptures of the Yosemite Valley, Muir's interest evolved into fascination and he made the decision to devote himself to a geologic study of the Valley. Muir's summer in the Sierra helped him to overcome an understandable fear of the mountains. The summer of 1869 marked the first stage of his philosophical development.

As the summer lingered, Muir extended his long walks, ascending unfamiliar mountain peaks. In this solitary activity of mountaineering Muir felt closer to God than in any other activity. He wrote: "In every exigency what he (the mountaineer) needs nature bestows. The loving sunshine, the cheer of flowers, irised glow of rock crystals and snow crystals, and the awful fateful power of the earth's sculpturing beauty forces, and the sense of universal eternal love — all these cheer him, warm him to do and dare all that is right to attempt."⁴ The mountains not only provided inspiration, they provided courage.

Muir's poetic nature penetrated deeply into the comforting warmth and mystery of the mountains, and he developed his concept of "mountainanity" through the influence of these early Sierra experiences. This concept, which he defined as the reciprocal action of men and mountains, was an early attempt by Muir to link the destinies of human and non-human nature. He explained the linkage: "We have been taught to believe that in looking into the faces of nature's landscapes we receive no impression but as we ourselves bestow upon them, 'looking into a mirror we see only what we take to it.' This is not true. In a mirror we may see not only ourselves but all within sight of us. They are real as we ourselves are, we enjoy them because they were made with reference to us, and they in some measure no doubt enjoy us because we were made for them."⁵

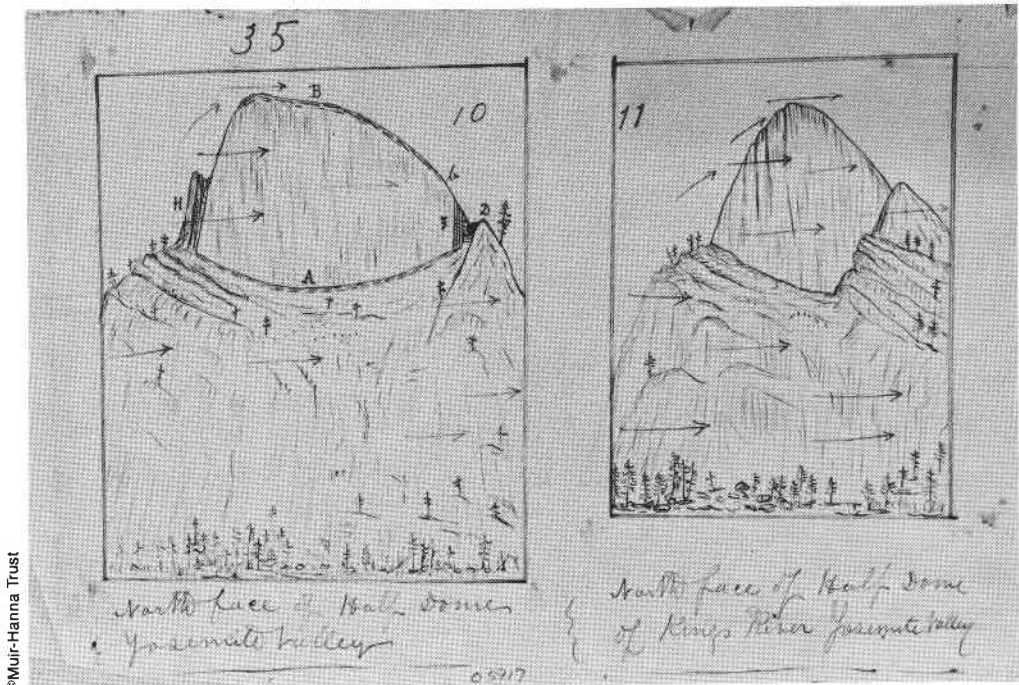
Although mountainanity can be interpreted as an ecological concept, Muir also expressed the idea as a love relationship. Muir's deep sentiment toward nature had romantic roots. Donald Worster in *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* makes the point that the romantic concept of community stressed love and sympathy, and emphasized them particularly in relationship to non-human nature. Worster explains: "Love is the recognition of interdependence and that 'perfect correspondence' between spirit and matter; sympathy is the capacity to feel intensely the bond of identity or kinship that unites all beings within a single organism. If he does not come to nature by these avenues, the naturalist cannot make any convincing claim to genuine truth, more than that he violates the moral union of soul and world."⁶ Muir's nature philosophy expressed love and sympathy toward all living things; this, in fact, is the seed of compassion underlying Muir's full view of nature as a community.

While Yosemite remained Muir's lodestone throughout his life, he actually only lived in the Valley for three years from 1870 to 1873. These years constitute the second stage of his philosophical development. Initially Muir worked as a guide and a sawyer in the Valley and took long rambles in his free time. However, as his interest in the geological formation of the Valley grew, he spent more and more time away from his duties. His pursuit of his studies created tension with his employer, James Hutchings. Furthermore, while guiding visitors around the Valley, Muir proposed his own theory of its glacial formation and in doing so contradicted the accepted opinion of California state geologist Josiah Whitney. Muir's ideas attracted scientific experts to the Valley. The controversy grew and Muir finally began to publish his views, winning recognition from the scientific community. In asserting the role glaciers played in forming the Valley, Muir said: "Avalanches sweep gaps in the forests making clean the page for other plants, other writings. In like manner glaciers descended the whole mountain range making a clean sheet for the new mountain sculpture."⁷

Muir gained economic freedom by publishing articles, and he was able to pursue his glacial work full time in the fall of 1871. His investigations uncovered the important relationship between sculpture and structure, and he explained how the domes, spires and cliffs of the Valley were sculpted. Muir commented on the nature of his scientific investigations by saying: "The problem proposed is to establish the harmony of apparent disorder."⁸

As his glacial studies absorbed him more, Muir began to wander further and further from the Valley on long excursions. As the scope of his investigations expanded he began to look at the whole design of the mountain landscape. He came to understand the landscape and its design as a comprehensible creation, as a process and a cycle of creation and destruction. This cycle could be understood through examining the process of landscape building. One passage, from his unpublished papers, argued that there was a perceptible order one could see, that chaos was only harmony not understood. "The notion seems to be all but universal that God has finished the world and harnessed it with laws and sent it rolling through space all perfect and complete and moreover that we can only know God by tradition as that he has not a single word more to say to us, not another story to tell. But neither our own nor any other world is yet completed. World building never was carried on more energetically than it is today. In the divine calendar this is still the morning of creation."⁹

Muir's Valley studies successfully merged his religious instincts with his scientific understanding of nature. Muir felt that although the methods of creation might at times be "unsearchable and infinite," still, upon the face of the landscape there were written,



Muir's drawings from a draft manuscript for his *Studies in the Sierra* series illustrates how the north face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley, and the north face of Half Dome, Kings River Yosemite Valley, were sculpted.

"passages that we can understand coming within the range of our own sympathies."¹⁰

Muir gained regional recognition as a writer with his Yosemite and Sierra essays, and thereafter he surfaced in the national arena with his articles on Yosemite National Park in 1890. In the third stage of his development, then, the endangered Yosemite became the basis for his national park argument. His viewpoint was grounded in personal experience and political idealism. His love for the Valley had remained constant and was rekindled by a protective instinct.

Muir's park thesis contained an ecological imperative: to protect the Yosemite region from the ravages of sheep and lumbering. He was adamant that Yosemite must be protected from the destruction inherent in such activities. He believed that there could be no compromise for the sake of the natural environment. But he also wanted to bring people closer to nature, to stress the healthful influence of nature on the souls and bodies of men and women. In a fragment offering his impressions of nature's spiritual influence, Muir said of mountain walking: "The expanse especially toward sunset fills the mind with a sense of the infinite and frees the soul from the sensuous impressions of space, allows it to expand with spiritual emotions of a higher order."¹¹

Muir interpreted communion with nature as a religious experience. In an unpublished excerpt, labeled "flashes of light," Muir spoke of the unconscious influence of nature upon man. "Many a time in the storms of business some small influence will stir the latent memories of our youth but we little suspect that the youth of the world is in us and that it only requires the same small influences of Nature to bring them out in plain, perceptible relief. Therefore when in the most solitary and secluded valleys when gazing

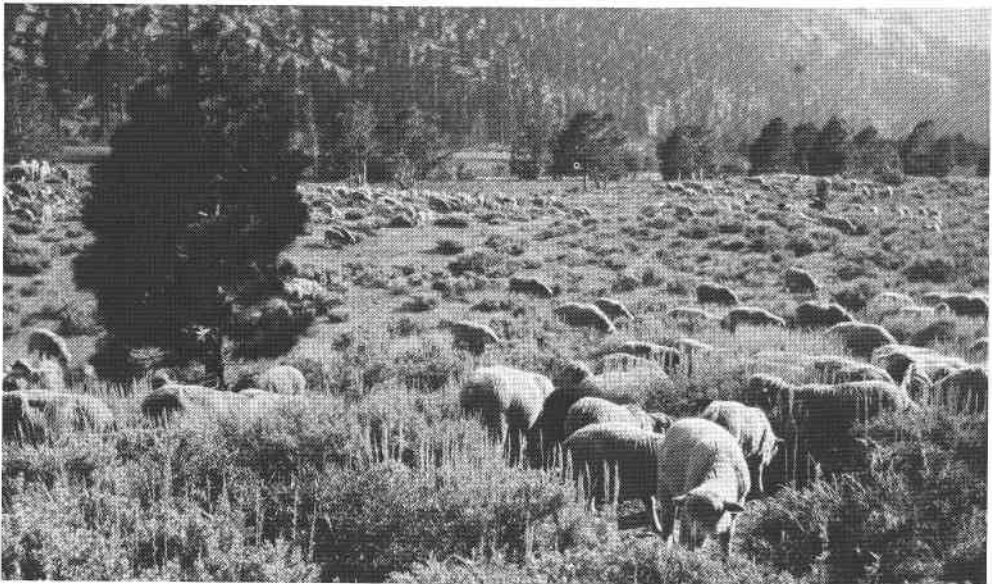
for the first time upon lakes and meadows never neared by human foot we recognized them as familiar and as answering to their images forming part of the woof and warp of our lives."¹²

In developing a written response to the influences of his wilderness experiences and in translating them to appeal to public consciousness, Muir often spoke of beauty, particularly untouched wilderness beauty. His concept transcended an aesthetic evaluation of wilderness. He perceived beauty as a transforming power, as a direct manifestation of God. "If from some lofty dome we can contemplate the grove of the forests the first impression is longing and melancholy, a mysterious sadness often produced by contact with the infinite."¹³

Wilderness beauty was Muir's medicinal cure for an overly civilized society. He appealed to man's need for beauty as well as bread. Muir advocated wilderness experience in an effort to dispel egoistic interests and to instill harmony. He perceived that, if given the chance, people would value and be enriched by the life force of nature.

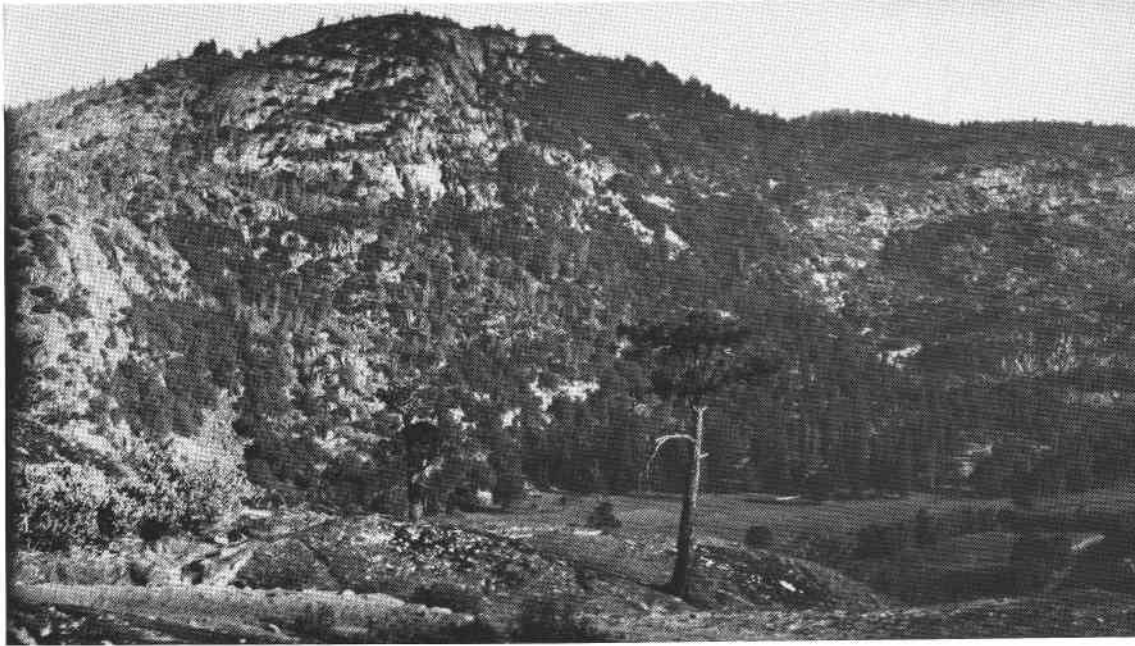
The last critical phase of Muir's philosophical development occurred in response to the Hetch Hetchy Valley controversy. The debate received national attention from 1901 until 1913. In the Hetch Hetchy controversy, Muir challenged government land use policy and the interpretation of the law which established Yosemite National Park. He adamantly opposed construction of the Hetch Hetchy Dam. No other issue made him as angry, or pushed him to such a radical position of opposition, or caused him such despair in defeat.

As a result of the Hetch Hetchy question, Muir, in a strong spirit of dissent, broke formally from the nation's adopted conservation ideology and chose a radical preservationist stance. Hetch Hetchy compelled Muir to fully clarify his perception of the appropriate relationship between man and nature. The human compromise he had offered



Edward T. & Marion R. Parsons Collection, Sierra Club

A central part of Muir's National Park argument was the protection of the Yosemite Valley from the ravages of sheep, called "mountain locusts" by Muir.



in his park thesis was withdrawn. Muir, with moral vision and ecological insight, held firmly to his commitment to protect the rights of the land as a biotic community from human misuse.

In his early Yosemite years, Muir had isolated himself from society, spending his time studying the mountains. Later, when he began writing, it was with the intention of suggesting a reordering of human values which would restore man to nature. The social dimension of Muir's philosophy addressed the relationship of the individual to the community. The moral foundation of this relationship involved renunciation of self-interest in favor of community interest. The spiritual character of Muir's position placed him in the revolutionary, and perhaps mythical, tradition of St. Francis of Assisi. Lynn White in his article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" proposes Francis as a patron saint for ecologists. White claims: "St. Francis proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it. He tried to substitute the idea of an equality of creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation."¹⁴

John Muir shared this utopian vision of an egalitarian community of nature. He saw the question of man's relationship with nature as fundamentally a religious question. He proposed a relationship based upon love, appreciation of beauty and the humility of man before the larger community of non-human nature. Muir expressed his disagreement with the social, political and religious values of his day very explicitly in his essay "Wild Wool":

No dogma taught by the present civilization seems to form so insuperable an obstacle in the way of right understanding to the relations which culture sustains to wildness as that which regards the world as made especially for the uses of man. Every plant and animal controverts it in the plainest terms. Yet it is taught from century to century as something ever new and precious. . . .¹⁵



Edward T. & Marion F. Parsons Collection, Sierra Club

Hetch Hetchy Valley from Sunrise Point, 1909.

Muir took upon himself the public role of challenging this conceit, a task perhaps arrogant in itself.

In the course of this life-long relationship, Muir could not sacrifice the integrity of Yosemite as a place, a process, a park or a preserve. Only through attempting to teach others a reverence and respect for all life could Muir hope to promote the cause of Yosemite on a larger scale. He argued that the integrity of the biotic community was neglected in conservation ideology. He supported the qualities in nature — the aesthetic and spiritual aspects — which did not have clear economic values. He highlighted the organic process of nature as being systematically independent of man.

What did Muir contribute in the long run? Muir explained his view of nature's hidden wholeness, its underlying order, history, evolution, cycles and patterns of change. He developed social and ethical views with a moral foundation which encouraged man to live in harmony with nature. Finally as a writer, speaker and organizer, Muir used the political arena of his day to protect and preserve wilderness and to establish national parks and forest reserves.

Muir advocated conservation as a general philosophy until the Hetch Hetchy issue, at which point he was forced to question whether men could be trusted in their contracts with nature. Muir had difficulty accepting the human need for control over nature even with presumed just cause. He finally could not accept the violation of Yosemite for commercial or industrial purposes. Muir felt people should commune, observe, study but not interfere in the process and peace of the American wilderness. Preservation, in Muir's view, was a national issue. His stance represented his deepest personal values. His name endures with his effort to defend wilderness from man.

John Muir's influence has extended beyond his lifetime in both legend and legacy. A redefinition of wild nature occurred in American thought in the transition from the

nineteenth century to the twentieth. Muir contributed groundbreaking efforts to increased public awareness and appreciation of wild beauty. His writings and political advocacy influenced decisions in environmental policymaking. In his life and work Muir attempted to bridge the romantic and scientific world views of two centuries.

Yosemite and the controversy surrounding it helped Muir to define himself in words and deeds, and he evolved a philosophy of nature which demonstrated that the inner and outer worlds of a person interpenetrate and influence each other. Yosemite symbolized the man and his views. His lifelong relationship with the Valley exemplified an active search for truth in nature.

Muir was not an imitator, but an inheritor and a contributor. It follows, then, that Muir has inheritors. Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder are, among others, likely candidates for that category. Perhaps one of the more challenging tasks set before future Muir scholars is an analysis and defense of Muir's influence upon twentieth century nature writers.

NOTES:

1. See Susan Flader's work on ecologist and conservationist, Aldo Leopold, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves and Forests* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. xviii, which has served as a model. In her preface she explains her method. "This study analyzes the development of Leopold's thought at a level where observation and experience, science and philosophy, policy and politics converge on a single problem running through time."
2. Jolande Jacobe, *The Way of Individuation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 6.
3. John Muir to David Muir, September 24, 1869, John Muir Papers, Letters Sent, Roll 9 (preliminary filming), University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA.
4. Unpublished essay, "Storms and Mountaineering," John Muir Papers, Series III.
5. Ibid.
6. Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 89.
7. Miscellaneous fragments, John Muir Papers, Series III.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. "Flashes of Light," undated note, John Muir Papers, Series III.
13. "Storms," John Muir Papers, Series III.
14. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 155, No. 3767 (March 1967): 1207.
15. John Muir, *Wilderness Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc. 1980), p. 234. The essay was originally published in *Overland Monthly* 14 (April 1875): 361-66.