

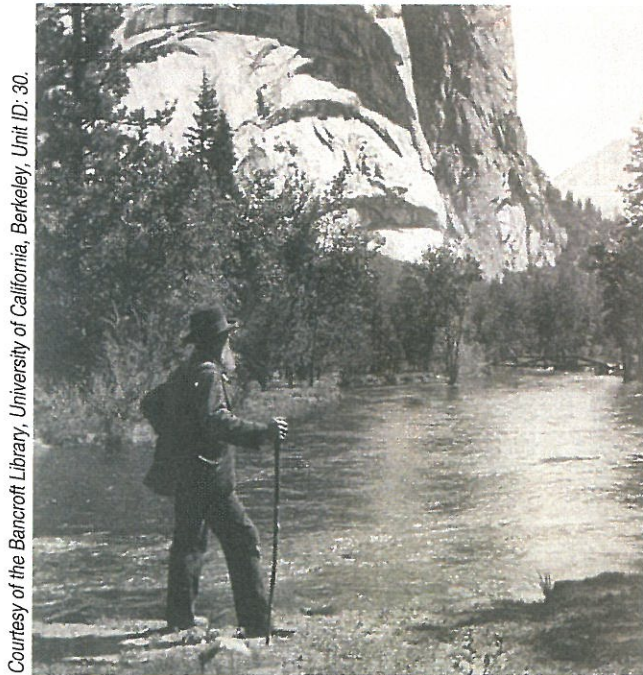
# Triumph For Man and Nature: The American Wilderness and John Muir

## Part 1

by Shane Mahoney

*As they tamed the wilderness, the new citizens of North America began to admire it. But it was John Muir who made sure some of it remained.*

*Editor's note: This is the 6th in a series of articles about The North American Wildlife Conservation Model, written for Bugle by scholar and lecturer Shane Mahoney. Titled Triumph For Man and Nature, the series is dedicated to helping hunters and anglers from throughout the United States and Canada appreciate their own history of achievement in wildlife conservation and encouraging greater commitment to the cause.*



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**John Muir, Yosemite, early 1900s.**

**M**an has forever struggled with a most precarious dilemma: the desire to exploit nature's riches and the haunting awareness that we alone are burdened with the responsibility for conserving them.

From our earliest creative expressions to present time, this burden has been carried through the great intellectual corridors of our history, through our religions and prophecies, and through every philosophical and artistic realm. Like some covenant or precious relic, we have carried it across time and continents.

In the New World, the struggle between the exploitation of nature and the need to conserve it emerged with unprecedented clarity and force. The allure of great wealth to those who could most rapidly and efficiently claim, extract and market America's fantastic abundance of natural resources ground against the desire to safeguard the scenic and wildlife wonders of a lush and expansive Eden.

But an inordinate desire for the garden's riches would play a heavy hand in the unfolding American experience. Fevered by a dizzying cocktail of pride, fear and greed, and coupled with a philosophy of unrestrained individualism and equal opportunity, many European settlers and their descendants desired a wilderness conquered, and launched an exploitive frenzy unequalled in human history. Forests fell, mountains yielded their inner cores, and wildlife

and wild people disappeared at a frenetic pace. Soil was sacrificed and eroded, rivers muddied and marshes and wetlands drained. From the time of the Puritans to the age of the voyageurs, mountain men and the American Civil War, the history of the United States and Canada was almost entirely a pageant of wealth creation and resource destruction. Regarded as nation-building "progress," this approach to nature was to become an enduring theme of North American society.

By 1868, when 30-year-old naturalist and adventurer John Muir first visited California's Yosemite Valley and the Sierra Nevada Range, entire townships in the East and Midwest had been stripped of the choicest pine and hardwoods, and the soil had been eroded to bare granite. The passenger pigeon was nearing extinction; elk and bison had been erased from their eastern ranges; and trainloads of bison hides and tongues rolled eastward from the

prairies where an unspeakable slaughter was underway. By the time Muir reached California, cattle and sheep had grazed the Yosemite Valley down to the dirt, displacing deer, elk and other wildlife.

Appalled by the wanton waste of resources and the disfigurement of irreplaceable natural areas by unbridled commercial exploitation, and sensing the destruction spreading westward, Muir felt compelled to rally the public to defend the continent's most spectacular wild country. By so doing, he helped preserve public wildlife and hunting experiences unheard of in Europe and fast disappearing from the New World as well.

Though he'd hunted as a younger man, Muir had given it up by the time he reached California. He had become personally uncomfortable with the taking of a life; but he still ate meat and regarded hunting as natural and necessary. He viewed humanity's predatory place as a grand, interconnected system, "Plants,



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animals and stars are all kept in place, bridled along appointed ways, with one another, and through the midst of one another—killing and being killed, eating and being eaten, in harmonious proportions and quantities,” he said. “Wild lambs eat as many wild flowers as they can find or desire, and men and wolves eat the lambs to just the same extent.”

In Muir’s worldview, “kept in place,” “bridled” and “harmonious proportions” were ideals—the way things were meant to be. But he had seen the concept of the careful husbandry of earth’s resources swept aside in the rush to conquer and exploit North America’s wild bounty. However, as far back as Muir’s birth in 1838, indeed from the earliest days of European occupation of North America, the conquest and heedless plundering of nature was not the only perspective to have sway with New World imaginations.

Despite their drive for conquest, the new

citizens of North America could not help feeling reverence for the beauty and abundance that surrounded them. By the time of Thomas Jefferson, political leadership began to translate these feelings as “American” and to identify the very wildness of the national landscape as a signature difference and value almost unique to the New World. Having unknown and unexplored frontiers was becoming a matter of significance—an appreciable quality of American life, important to our sense of independence, freedom and happiness.

While this perspective on nature contrasted with the more cultivated but less strenuous European circumstance, it would be strongly influenced by emerging European philosophies. The Old World Romantic Movement, articulated by the likes of visual artists Caspar David Friedrich and Paul Huet, and poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Lord Byron, celebrated wild landscapes and fostered

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John Muir, 1902.

an entirely new view of wilderness. These outpourings of the European elites, surrounded by their filthy cities and manicured estates, provided a substrate for the new appreciation North Americans were developing for the wilderness they once sought only to subdue.

An avid reader and well acquainted with the visual arts, John Muir absorbed those new views of wilderness, complementing his personal store of feelings, experiences and ideas. He was not alone. Many Americans had begun to appreciate the aesthetic and spiritual values of wilderness. They would agree with Lord Byron:

*[T]here is pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is rapture on the lonely shore.  
There is society where none intrudes. . .  
I love not man the less, but nature more.*

In both literature and the visual arts, mid-19th century American society also began to reflect this new view of nature. The journals of intrepid explorers—and even bone-wearied pioneers—often reflected rapture at the vistas beheld and the sheer abundance and vibrancy of their natural surroundings. The great landscape painters of the Hudson River School created masterpieces celebrating the raw beauty and power of rugged canyons and great rivers as metaphors for the vitality and immensity of the new nation.

Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau (“In wildness is the preservation of the world”) argued that attaining clarity of mind, moral perfection and a true understanding of God was possible only in wilderness—that by venturing into the wild expanse, man would initiate his greatest understanding of himself and



John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt on horseback, Yosemite, May 1903.

his place in the universe. There, amidst nature’s diversity and in regions where the footprint of civilization was indiscernible, every individual could discover and harness his or her true potential and greatest and best qualities. By extension, so too could any society that had the desire and determination to protect wilderness. This proposition was to prove of great and lasting consequence to the conservation debates that would unfold in the century ahead, affecting hunter and nonhunter alike.

In arguing for wilderness, neither Muir nor his predecessors were turning their backs on civilization or the material progress of the nation. In fact, the early manifestation of the wilderness movement—and this is what it was slowly becoming in mid-19th century America before the Civil War—sought to preserve the benefits of both civilization and wildness, reaping harvests from both the cultivated field and the untrammelled frontier. This amalgamation would be reflected in wildly popular fictional heroes such as James Fennimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking and Francis Parkman’s Natty Bumppo, who both drew together the ideals and advantages of both worlds. These characters were essentially educated primitives, capable of wandering with equal ease and competence in the world of nature and of civilized man. To some extent this ideal would be a reaffirmation of the pastoral, yeoman-farmer of Jefferson’s philosophy, but it also presaged the hunter-naturalist who was to emerge as the pre-eminent force in conserving wild North America.

Hunting and wilderness would be forever part of the emerging paradigm we now know as

the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Some of the earliest and greatest exponents of wilderness protection were not hunters, but their efforts certainly benefited the wild quarry that hunters and anglers pursued. And the landscapes they helped preserve are an irreplaceable part of our natural heritage, places where it is possible for all of us, hunter and nonhunter alike, to experience the undiminished purity, health and power of the natural world. Binding us further is the fact that beneath the preservation of both our hunting tradition and our wilderness landscapes lie two deep emotional streams: a romantic ideal and a sense of nationhood. Many achievements have been floated on those deep and enduring currents.

### *Saving Wilderness*

Like any consequential intellectual shift, recognizing the value of wilderness took time to develop and resulted from many influences. Certainly Henry David Thoreau brought the first cohesive philosophy to bear on the North American experience, and by 1858 had made a direct appeal to establish parks or primitive forests that would be set aside in perpetuity. He did so because he believed wilderness was important to civilization. For Thoreau, as for many wilderness advocates, wild places have no substitute and are irreplaceable in their capacity to effect a sense of peace and perspective.

But even before Thoreau, men with backgrounds as diverse as hunter and wildlife artist John James Audubon and historian Francis Parkman, Jr, had called for a halt to the destruction of wild places. The famous painter of American Indians, George Catlin, went further and suggested America preserve the wilderness landscapes in a "nation's park," something that would be of lasting interest to people everywhere. These appeals suggest wilderness was beginning to represent something of importance in North American society and preserving it was becoming a matter of national and international relevance.

The American genius and intellectual father of the conservation movement, George Perkins Marsh, reiterated this when he called for preserving primitive wildernesses as sanctuaries for wildlife and as reservoirs to protect the

integrity of watersheds, soil and other natural systems of utilitarian importance to man. Marsh's carefully articulated argument of vested self-interest was to become a cornerstone of the North American Conservation Model, and his notion of progress through restraint was a watershed in itself. Gradually wilderness was being appreciated, not just because it was becoming rare but because of the rare qualities it possessed.

By the 1860s the idea of government interceding to protect wilderness was already afoot, signifying how far the intellectual climate had shifted in North America. This was a long way from the notion that every man had the inalienable right to take as much as he wanted from the resources of the New World without pause or consideration for the sustainability of those resources and without interference by the state.

### *The Value of Wilderness*

The first clear indication that wilderness itself had become a resource was in 1864, when the federal government granted Yosemite Valley to California as a recreational and scenic park. Another was the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Midway between those two events, the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Yosemite Valley became the consuming passion of the man whose name has become synonymous with wilderness protection: John Muir. To instill the value of wilderness in a public only barely separated from the idea of wilderness as foe and an impediment to progress required something or someone truly extraordinary, and Muir was that someone.

Through his passion, talent, effort and determination, wilderness and wilderness protection would become an integral component of the New World approach to conservation. Today's hunters can thank John Muir for affordable public wilderness experiences unmatched anywhere on the planet.

*A riveting orator, passionate hunter and widely respected scholar, Newfoundland native Shane Mahoney has lectured extensively in North America and Europe on wildlife conservation, hunting and nature. In the next issue: A closer look at John Muir, and how his writings moved presidents to action.*