

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

Part 2

by Shane Mahoney

At 30 years of age, John Muir left Wisconsin for good and set out upon a thousand-mile ramble from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico. After contracting malaria he abandoned his intention to reach South America and follow the Amazon to its source, but eventually sailed to Cuba and Panama, crossed the Isthmus and then sailed up the Pacific coast to California. He arrived in San Francisco in March 1868. In that year, he walked across the Joaquin Valley and into the Sierra high country for the first time. He would spend his first summer as a shepherd at Tuolumne Meadows in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, or the Range of Light as he would call it. For the next 10 years he would, as few others ever have, devote himself entirely to the study of nature. For much of that time Muir would live in the wildest reaches of that glorious landscape, absolutely alone, observing flowers, escarpments and waterfalls, gathering insights that would make him famous as an author and bring him near mythical status as a defender of wild beauty.

In 1871 Muir published his first article in the *New York*

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President Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir spent four days camping together in the Yosemite Valley in 1903. One night on Glacier Point, Muir set fire to a great dead pine and they shared an impromptu jig around it. Roosevelt went on to sign the bill that made the valley a national park and created Grand Canyon National Monument, fulfilling another of Muir's dreams. For the rest of their lives, the two held tremendous respect and affection for one another.

Tribune. By now he had conceived his controversial theory of glacial erosion as the creative force behind Yosemite Valley and was already becoming known throughout the country as both a first rate naturalist and wilderness spokesman. He described in detail the mighty redwood trees of California and discovered unknown glaciers. He was the first to climb, alone and unaided, many of the great mountain escarpments of the Yosemite

region. Famous men came just to travel and speak with him, among them author Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous botanist Asa Gray, and U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. Many were inspired; none were unaffected. Muir's zeal and love of nature were infectious and his arguments for the importance of wild country compelling.

Eventually he would publish 300 articles and 10 major books. In these he would extol the virtues of wilderness and

seek to move people to engage in its protection. By the time he was 45 years old his articles were being reprinted in school textbooks.

In the midst of this, Muir still found time to travel, explore and raise a family. In 1879 he made his first trip to Alaska and discovered Glacier Bay. In 1880, at the age of 42, he married Louisa Wanda Strentzel and moved to Martinez, California. There they raised their two daughters, Wanda and Helen, and until 1891 Muir successfully managed a family ranch and fruit farm. Despite his domestic and business commitments he would travel to Alaska many times, as well as to Australia, South America, Africa, Europe, China, India, Siberia and Japan, constantly observing and gathering material for articles in support of wilderness protection. But Muir's heartfelt focus would always remain the Sierra Nevada, and explorations there would fuel his lifelong passion for engaging and preserving unspoiled regions.

To arouse people to action Muir not only described the scenic wonders he visited, he also described the habitat destruction and resource wastage so prevalent in late nineteenth century America, drawing special attention to the effects of overgrazing by sheep and cattle on the alpine meadows and forests of California and other western states. Muir had witnessed this destruction first hand and saw as well the dynamiting and uncontrolled logging and burning of trees, the erosion of hillsides and siltation of once crystal rivers. He became increasingly aware of the

privatization of natural resources and realized earlier than most that without a popular movement all natural resources from forests to wildlife could be ruined for the commercial benefit of a few.

Through a series of articles in *Century* magazine, he drew attention to the loss of wild country and the waste of natural resources and called for untouched natural areas to be set aside in perpetuity. In a strategic partnership with the magazine's associate editor, Robert Underwood Johnson, he would effectively influence the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. He would also become heavily engaged in the efforts to establish Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon national parks, catalyzing public sentiment through his articles and essays in magazines and newspapers. These efforts have led many to consider Muir the "Father of the National Park System."

The Conservation Divide

Although the establishment of Yosemite National Park was a great achievement, Muir realized that unless advocacy for wild lands became institutionalized in America no place would be safe from industrial development, not even legally protected landscapes. Indeed despite its new status, cattle and sheep still roamed the Yosemite Valley in great numbers and had displaced many of the original elk and deer. Muir approached Theodore Roosevelt and North America's preeminent hunters' organization, the Boone and Crockett Club, to help lead this charge. At the time, the Club was

preoccupied with similar problems in Yellowstone National Park and encouraged Muir and his colleagues to found their own organization and use it as a means to safeguard wild areas, not only in Yosemite, but wherever they were threatened. To establish such protection Muir, his close associate and publisher Robert Johnson and a group of others gathered in San Francisco on June 4, 1892, and formed the Sierra Club. Although neither intended nor appreciated at the time, this initiative was to have lasting and unforeseen influence on the future directions of conservation in general. Muir was made president of the new organization and held that post for 22 years.

Sierra Club rapidly became the preeminent organization for wilderness protection, first in the Pacific Coast region but eventually throughout the United States. Its first objective was to obtain appropriations to protect the scenic wonders of Yosemite itself, and in 1898 Congress made the first funds available. Cowboys were hired to drive the sheep and cattle from the valley, while fences were removed and homesteaders escorted out by the U.S. Cavalry. Finally, wild land was valued for its own intrinsic and ecological merit and legally recognized as part of the conservation framework, and government had assumed fiscal responsibility for its administration. This was a long way indeed from its early history, when the only good wilderness was the wilderness conquered.

Still, the struggle was far from over. Muir and the Sierra Club would fight many battles on behalf of the Sierra Nevada

and Yosemite, including their famous nationwide campaign to prevent damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, a high-walled, narrow catchment ideally suited as a reservoir basin for water hungry San Francisco. Declared as a wilderness preserve when Yosemite National Park was created in 1890, the spectacular glacial valley was finally withdrawn in 1913 and later flooded. Despite this defeat, the Sierra Club survived to become an established force in the conservation movement and has chapters today across the United States and a sister organization in Canada. But the loss of the Hetch Hetchy may have hastened a momentous transition in the nature

conservation story. The year after the decision to flood the valley, after visiting his daughter Wanda in a Los Angeles hospital, Muir developed pneumonia and died on Christmas Eve, at the age of 76. America had lost its greatest wilderness exponent and one of the most influential conservationists of all time. Not since has any single voice championed the cause of wild country with such clarion force and immutable passion.

In many ways John Muir was a reluctant advocate. By his own admission, he would have preferred to spend his time enjoying nature rather than campaigning for its protection. Like many in the emerging conservation movement he felt

compelled to speak, appalled by the wanton waste of resources and the destruction of irreplaceable natural areas. The scale of this assault was such that a clear philosophical divide separated the unbridled developers from those who wished to safeguard resources. The community opposed to unfettered exploitation was a complex one however; and eventually, as the conservation movement matured, it found its own ranks diversifying. By the last decade of the 19th century a dichotomy had emerged. The "wise use" movement sought rational development of resources, while the "preservationists" advocated full protection for natural landscapes.

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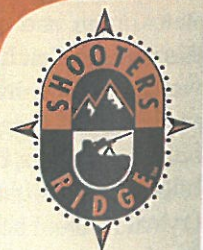
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In truth this schism was often more rhetorical than real. Real differences in position did exist, as, for example, over grazing domestic animals in national parks. But clearly both groups realized that full protection could occur only in some areas, and where resources were used they should be developed in a reasonable and renewable fashion.

Nevertheless, the notion of two conflicting identities in the conservation camp has persisted. Indeed, in some circumstances it has been selfishly encouraged and manipulated. Such conservation politics have contributed to many misunderstandings and worthless debates, as well as to

lost opportunities for our shared objectives. In particular they have led to a general impression that the real conservation divide is one between hunters and non-hunters, and that somehow John Muir's wilderness movement was an assault on our hunting and angling traditions. The facts reveal another story

John Muir didn't hunt or fish beyond boyhood. As a result he didn't spend much time confronting either. His real concern was for wild nature, and his great intellectual conflict was with forest and wildland destruction, issues that have been of concern to hunters since their first engagements with the conservation ideal. For Muir the most profound progeny of the

tangled conservation movement of the 1890s was not the hunter-conservationist movement, but President Benjamin Harrison's proclamation of 13 "forest reserves" which protected 13 million acres of watershed on the Pacific slope. While the specific function of these areas was not defined at the outset, Muir thought they might be, in portion at least, preserved as undeveloped forests. Where not protected, he reasoned, they must certainly be better treated by the federal government than by unhindered lumbermen who routinely wasted one third of every dynamited or sawn tree in the name of hasty profit.

Muir entered the forestry debate in earnest when in 1896 he

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was invited to travel as an ex-officio member with the Forestry Commission that had been formulated a year earlier by the National Academy of Sciences. The commission was charged with reviewing the state and potential of forests in the western United States and making recommendations to Congress for their use. It was in this arena, which did not in any meaningful way involve the issue of hunting, that Muir would at first attempt to embrace but eventually confront the "wise use" approach.

Muir grew up a farmer and ran a commercial fruit operation. He was not opposed to resource use and land development. A year before joining the Forestry Commission he was to contribute these words to a

symposium on forest management published in *Century* magazine: "It is impossible, in the nature of things, to stop at preservation. The forests must be, and will be, not only preserved, but used; and . . . like perennial fountains . . . be made to yield a sure harvest of timber, while at the same time all their far-reaching uses may be maintained unimpaired."

In modern terminology this sentiment would be described as multiple sustainable use, not protectionism. Yet uncompromising protectionism was, we are told, Muir's philosophy. Is it possible that even his "disciples" sometimes misrepresent Muir? Could it be that some antihunting

individuals deliberately encourage the conservation divide by suggesting that hunters as a group are opposed to wilderness? Or indeed that some hunters likewise encourage division by suggesting that advocates of wild nature are antihunting? Certainly it would be a mistake to assume that because Muir was deeply spiritual, he was also impractical. Indeed as an inventor, businessman and scientist, Muir had many practical ideas, and his notion of everything being "hitched to everything else in the universe" was perhaps as much the product of his mechanical inventiveness as his speculative nature.

John Muir was a very complex man. Like most

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individuals engaged in the conservation debate, he and the powerful organization he founded were sometimes conflicted. His views would be sharpened on the stone of alternative perspectives, and eventually he would see no way to build the inclusive approach to forestry he had hoped for, or at least considered acceptable. Once again this process of change would see European ideas influencing the style and progress of North American conservation.

It began as an easy friendship. During the Forestry Commission's travel through Montana in July 1896, John Muir met a young Yale forestry graduate named Gifford Pinchot. Having received further training in Europe, Pinchot returned to the United States determined to advance American forestry using a scientifically prescribed sustained yield approach. It is clear from later correspondence that both men found much to like and admire in one another, and certainly Muir saw sustained yield as an improvement over unregulated lumbering. Still, as Aldo Leopold would conclude half a century later, there was something soulless in the precision of Prussian forestry, and eventually Muir's ambivalence would lean first to doubt and then to opposition. His conservation view necessarily included concern for beauty and human enjoyment. Their absence, regardless of the commercial advantages, was not an annoyance to Muir but a fatal flaw. But most important of all, Muir's conservation ethic required a true sense of wildness, something he felt the

heavily managed sustained-yield forests could not provide.

Thus when the Forestry Commission made ready to present its final report in the fall of 1896 Muir pushed for protection of forests without, necessarily, any prescription for commercial exploitation. Pinchot's view, meanwhile, was that *all* forests should be open to wise use. When the entire proposal to establish more forest reserves came under attack from powerful industrial interests, spurred by President Cleveland's decision to set aside an additional 21 million acres, Muir and Pinchot were able to bury their differences, but only briefly. Sadly, whatever room existed for a lasting agreement between the two men was finally destroyed with the passage of the Forest Management Act on June 7, 1897. It explicitly stated that all reserves would be open not only to timber harvest, but also to mining and grazing.

When Pinchot reiterated his support for the grazing of sheep in the reserves, Muir was incensed. He felt Pinchot had deceived him when he had earlier agreed that sheep were terribly destructive to the natural ecology of the regions. While he might have compromised on the matter of regulated timber harvesting, Muir could not accept the presence of what he'd come to regard as "hoofed locusts." In the end, Muir would decide that wild country had to be protected in its own right and not as part of a coalition of broader interests. It was not hunting that finally led to a division in the conservation movement, but sheep. Perhaps

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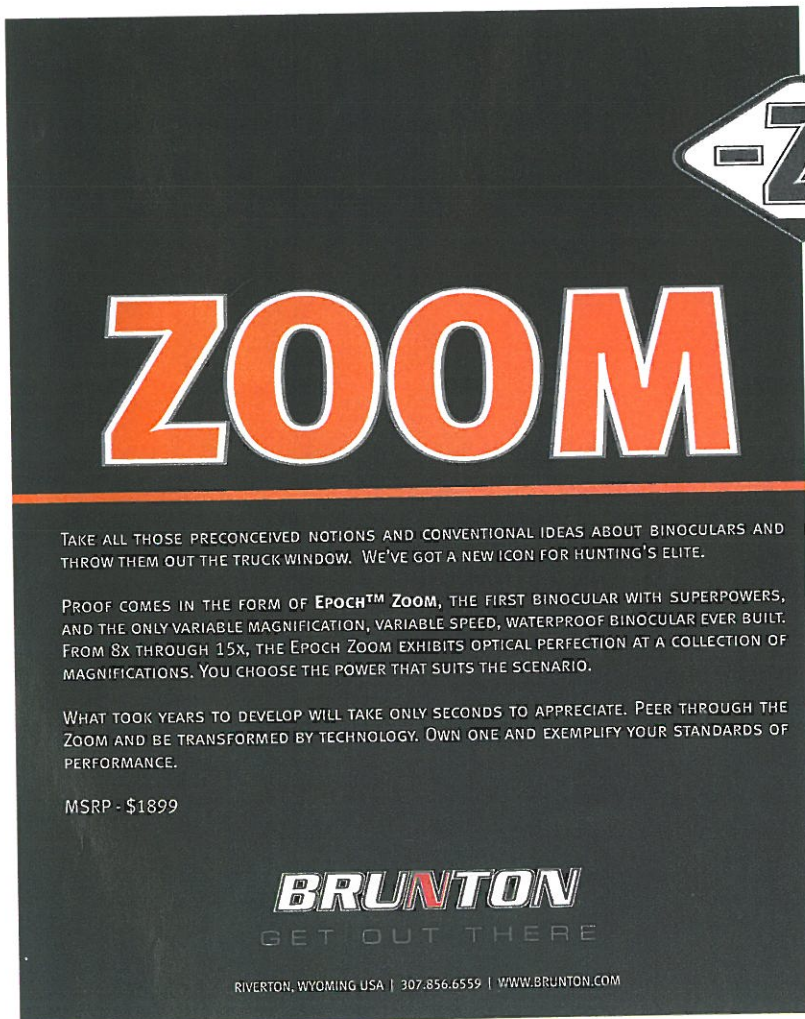
Muir and the North American Model

It is fascinating to think what might have happened had Muir and Pinchot been able to agree on a compromise for the forest reserves, if sheep had not gotten in the way. There is no doubt that the course of conservation history in North America would have been different. The "wise use" movement became the cornerstone of our overall approach to resource use and would lead to great successes. It was a wonderful advance

beyond the slaughter of resources being practiced. But as we know too well, it often failed to apply the concerns for ecological integrity and aesthetics that Muir (and much later Leopold, Murie and others) called for. The results have been disastrous for many species and for many irreplaceable landscapes. Such failures have necessitated their own massive and costly initiatives, of which the Endangered Species Act is a perfect example. Imagine if we had never needed it!

For wildlife and the hunter-conservationist approach, things have been measurably

different. Despite the often touted divide between hunters and non-hunting recreationists, it is categorically true that many hunters hold a deep reverence for truly wild places and view the beauty of their surroundings as a crucial element of their traditional experience. Hunters, both famous and unknown, have lobbied hard to keep wild country whole and healthy. Whether we find it comforting or not, many hunters are much closer to Muir's ideals than other resource users have ever been. We can say with certainty that beauty and wildness, the very things that mattered most



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to John Muir, have long been sacred to many hunters. Indeed, in their absence, what is the hunt?

John Muir did not invent conservation, but the part he played was unique, and his influence was profound. Few if any individuals shaped our impressions of wilderness more than Muir, and no one so daringly portrayed our spiritual yearnings for wildness and beauty as he did. During his lifetime he saw more truly wild country than most of us can imagine; yet he was driven to protect it for all time, and for generations he would never know. He saw in nature the handiwork of God—and a chance for the revitalization of modern man. He understood the primitive in all of us. In wild country he saw our only chance for true self-awareness and understanding. John Muir didn't carry a gun or bow, but he hunted wildness and beauty with intensity and talent and loved it with a desperate passion that every true hunter can recognize and admire. He loved the land.

He sought to leave a legacy of wild beauty and abundance, guided by a belief we are all just custodians of this place, not proprietors. How much poorer we would be if our great wilderness areas and national parks did not exist. How much poorer we would be if John Muir did not fight for them. His writings moved presidents to action and inspired society; and his heart moved his pen. His philosophy in this regard was exactly the same as Theodore Roosevelt's, George Bird Grinnell's and Aldo Leopold's.

He shared more in common with these great hunters than he did differences. But somehow it is the differences we seek to define. Why is this? Recognizing that real differences exist between people should in no way blind us to the great values we share. Most of us agree that some places must always remain untamed. We all acknowledge that keeping them so is an enormous challenge, and we need warriors to succeed. John Muir was such a man, and those who hold his views, both hunters and nonhunters, keep his dream alive.

The North American Conservation Model has achieved tremendous successes for wildlife and wild lands. Its contributors have been many and their lives varied. We have in recent years done much to recognize the hunter-naturalists who so powerfully influenced the rise of a conservation ethos in North American society, and who for so long have been its most stalwart witnesses. But we must recognize that some who never tasted the hunt also loved wild nature with abandon, and have worked tirelessly to protect the landscapes upon which elk and all other wildlife depend. We hunt the lands they saved. We share the beauty they kept whole. We owe them our respect and gratitude.

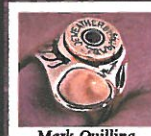
A riveting orator, passionate hunter and widely respected scholar, Newfoundland native Shane Mahoney has written extensively on wildlife conservation, hunting and nature. His next article for Bugle will profile Gifford Pinchot.

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