


John Muir

 Full Article

John Muir, (born April 21, 1838, Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland—died December 24, 1914, Los Angeles, California, U.S.), Scottish-born American naturalist, writer, and advocate of U.S. forest conservation, who was largely responsible for the establishment of Sequoia National Park and Yosemite National Park, which are located in California. Muir's article on Yosemite appeared in the 10th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (see the Britannica Classic: Yosemite).



John Muir
John Muir.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.



Yosemite National Park
Yosemite National Park, California.
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Early life and travels

Muir emigrated from Scotland with his family to a farm near Portage, Wisconsin, in 1849. In 1860 he traveled the short distance south to Madison, where he subsequently attended the University of Wisconsin until 1863. After leaving Madison, Muir worked on mechanical inventions, but in 1867, when an industrial accident nearly cost him an eye, he abandoned that career and devoted himself to nature. He walked from the Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico, keeping a journal, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (published posthumously in 1916), as he went. In 1868 he went to the Yosemite Valley in California. From there he took many trips into Nevada, Utah, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska, inspired by his interest in glaciers and forests. In a series of articles published in 1874–75 in the magazine *Overland Monthly*, Muir attributed the spectacular Yosemite formations to glacial erosion; he was the first to present this theory, which is now generally accepted.



Yosemite National Park

Yosemite National Park, east-central California, U.S.

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Muir, John; Muir Woods National Monument

Scottish-born American naturalist, writer, and advocate of U.S. forest conservation John Muir seated on a rock in Muir Woods National Monument, California, U.S. (c. May 29, 1912).

George Grantham Bain Collection/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (digital. id. gg Bain 06861)

Role in conservation and preservation

As early as 1876, Muir urged the federal government to adopt a forest conservation policy. He became a central figure in the debate over land use, advocating on behalf of land preservation primarily through articles published in popular periodicals, such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Century Magazine*, and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (now *Harper's Magazine*). Although initially finding common ground in the ideas of forest protection put forth by Gifford Pinchot, a pioneer of U.S. forestry and conservation, Muir's views ultimately diverged. Whereas Pinchot supported the sustainable use of resources within national forests, Muir believed that national parks and forests should be preserved in their entirety, meaning that their resources should be rendered off-limits to industrial interests. Although Sequoia and Yosemite national parks were established in 1890, representing a victory for environmental protection, the debate between Pinchot's utilitarian approach to forestry and Muir's preservationist approach was far from over.

On May 28, 1892, Muir founded the Sierra Club, an organization devoted to protecting the environment. He served as its first president, a position he held until his death in 1914. The *Sierra Club Bulletin*, a publication for the organization's members, provided a vital outlet for Muir, enabling him through his writing to raise awareness of environmental issues.

Early in 1897, U.S. President Grover Cleveland designated 13 national forests to be preserved from commercial exploitation. However, business interests induced Congress to postpone the effect of that measure. Muir's writings ultimately proved influential in swinging public opinion as well as congressional opinion in favour of national forest reservations. Muir



Muir, John; Glacier Point,
Yosemite Valley

U.S. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt and
naturalist John Muir at Glacier Point,
Yosemite Valley, California, U.S.
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influenced the large-scale conservation program that was initiated by President Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1903 accompanied Muir on a camping trip to the Yosemite region. In 1908 the government established Muir Woods National Monument in Marin county, California, and in 1964 it designated his home in Martinez, California, as a national historic site. Muir's work was also influential in the establishment of Mount Rainier National Park (1899) in Washington state and Grand Canyon National Park (1919) in Arizona.

Lasting contributions

Muir's enduring contributions to the conservation and preservation of America's wilderness have been far-reaching. His conviction that wilderness areas should be federally protected as national parks has given generations of U.S. citizens an opportunity to appreciate America's landscapes as they exist naturally, in the absence of human industrial influence. Muir's writings continue to serve as sources of inspiration for naturalists and conservationists in the United States and worldwide. *The Mountains of California* (1894), *Our National Parks* (1901), and *The Yosemite* (1912), as well as books published posthumously, including *Travels in Alaska* (1915), *A Thousand-Mile Walk* (1916), and *The Cruise of the Corwin: Journal of the Arctic Expedition of 1881 in Search of De Long and the Jeannette* (1917), remain important works in the body of literature on America's natural history.



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Monument

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This article was most recently revised and updated by Emily Rodriguez, Copy Editor.

conservation John Muir standing by a
tree in Muir Woods National
Monument, California, U.S. (c. 1902).
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