A scenic view of a waterfall cascading over a rocky cliff in a forested area, with a large granite rock formation in the background. The waterfall is the central focus, with white water splashing over dark grey rocks. The surrounding area is lush with green trees and vegetation. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

Preserving the Glory of Wilderness

**John Muir and the Creation of
Yosemite National Park**

Yosemite National Park, California

John Muir was lost. Though in the regions of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the wilds of Alaska the naturalist explorer was at home, on this particular May evening in 1889 he was now quite unable to find his way in San Francisco's Palace Hotel. Here, he was to meet for dinner the associate editor of *The Century Magazine*, Robert Underwood Johnson. Johnson wanted to recruit Muir to write about the Yosemite Valley and the region surrounding it. When Johnson finally heard Muir shouting his name down the hotel corridor, he ushered Muir into his hotel room. Johnson was not fooled by the backwoods appearance of Muir. Dressed



in a black slouch hat and rough blue suit, he gave the appearance of a farmer with his long beard and weather-beaten face, and indeed, Muir was a farmer. Johnson was well aware of Muir's writing on conservation and the outdoors. But for the last ten years he had forsaken his pen so that he could attend to his thriving ranch in Martinez where he lived with his wife and in-laws, and part of Johnson's task was to encourage Muir to return to his writing desk. The ranch,

where Muir grew Bartlett pears, cherries, apricots, and a variety of grapes, was just northeast of San Francisco. His wife, Louie Wanda Strentzel, encouraged his writing and his travels, but his in-laws did not. Influenced in part by their expectations and in part by a Scottish upbringing that was severe but practical, he had turned the ranch into a highly profitable enterprise even at a time when farmers were hurt by falling farm prices from improving production methods, a deflated currency, poor knowledge of east coast market prices, and railroads that took advantage of them.

A few days later, Johnson would visit Muir on the Martinez ranch, where he would meet Louie and discover that she, too, wanted Muir to write again. Perhaps, suggested Johnson, Muir could write about the trip he had taken to Yosemite with the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in May 1871. But at the time, Muir claimed not to see a story in his trip with the Concord philosopher. He told Louie afterward that when they had visited Yosemite, Emerson had mostly left him to carry the conversation. Emerson had arrived in San Francisco on vacation with friends when Muir, then in his early thirties and working as a sawyer, invited him on a tour of the high Sierras, which bordered the Yosemite Valley. Later, upon Emerson's return to

Giant Sequoia Tree, Yosemite National Park

"I never saw a discontented tree. They grip the ground... and though fast rooted they travel about as fast as we do."

—John Muir



Concord, he would send Muir two volumes of his collected essays that became a yardstick for Muir's ideas. The essays served less to form Muir's views than to contrast them, thereby helping him to affirm his own outlook on nature. When he read Emerson's words that nature "takes no thought for the morrow," he jotted in the margin, "are not buds and seeds thought for the morrow?" And where Emerson wrote, "The trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted to the ground," Muir just added, "No." And he would write in his journals, "I never saw a discontented tree. They grip the ground as if they liked it, and though fast rooted they travel about as fast as we do."



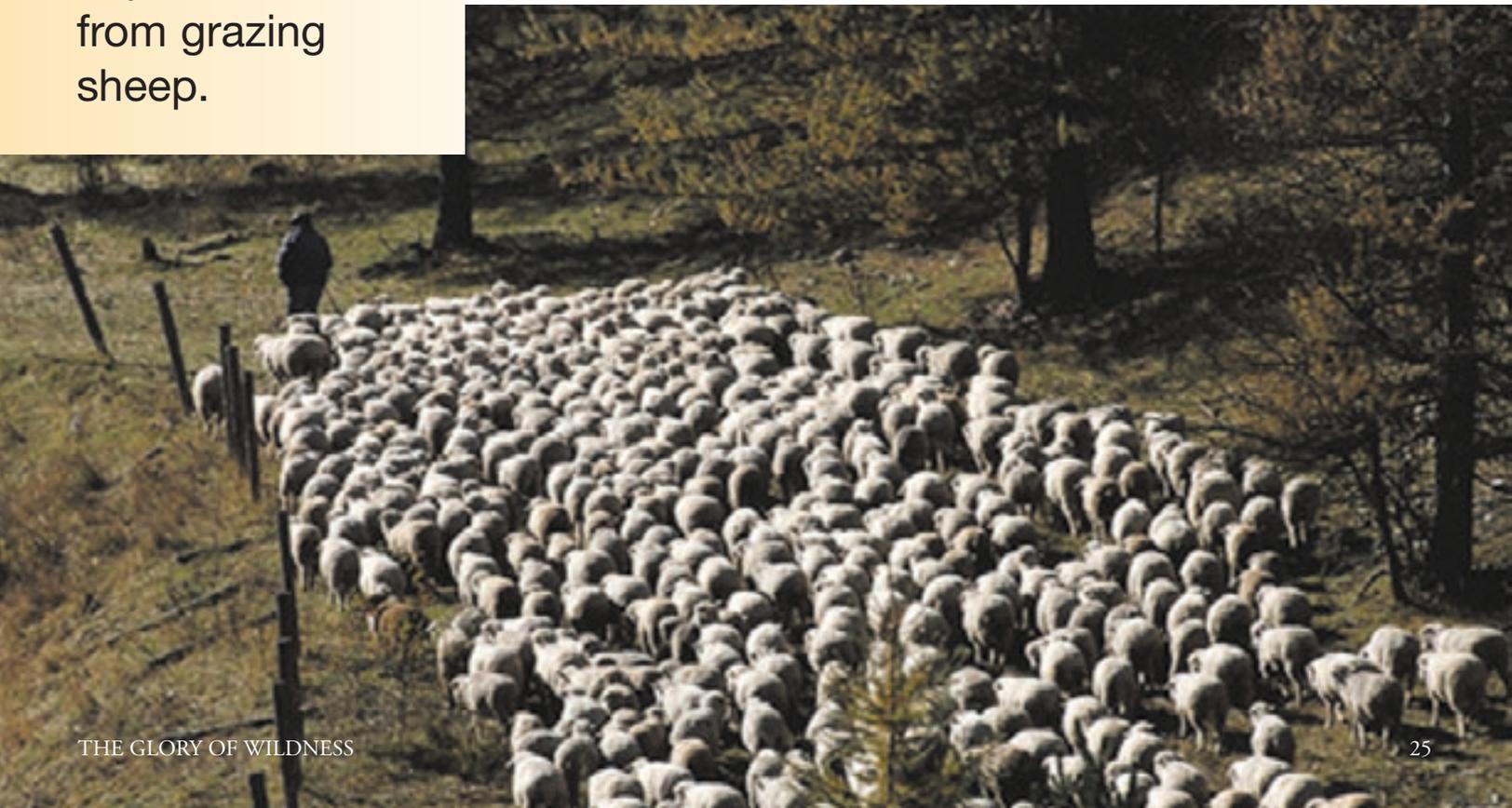
Flowers bloom at the foot of Yosemite Falls

...sources of the
streams ...
higher mountain
meadows, did
not fall within
the boundaries
of the parks.
As such... was
unprotected
from grazing
sheep.

Like Muir, Johnson had been strongly influenced by Emerson. He loved books, democracy, and believed deeply in the written word as a force for good. Johnson had come west primarily with the idea of finding material for articles on California's pioneer settlers. He did not like what he considered San Francisco's lowbrow culture, and said of the railroad, "The Southern Pacific has the state by the throat here, and expresses its contempt for the people along its lines in the frankest way." But he would eventually find a surprising ally in the railroad, and of his most important find he would write back east, "My great discovery here is John Muir."

The Century, with a circulation of two hundred thousand, supported tenement improvement, political reform, the ballot in Australia, and the gold standard. Now, as Muir and Johnson headed for Yosemite, its latest issue proclaimed a new cause: the protection of federally owned land and a commission appointed to architect a plan for national forests.

Johnson and Muir would reach Yosemite with Muir's friend "Pike," who would do the cooking, and three pack mules. Traveling to higher ground, they camped under the stars, where their acquaintance grew into a friendship. Yosemite had been turned into a state park under Lincoln by an act of Congress in 1864, but under appointed commissioners, it was poorly managed. Muir was highly critical of this. Johnson, in turn, complained that on their climb from the valley, he could find none of the flowers that Muir had described in his writings. Muir responded that the higher mountain meadows did not fall within the boundaries of the parks. As such, the land outside the boundaries was unprotected from grazing sheep. For that matter, he added, it was unlikely that the sheepherders (he had once been one) had any regard for the existing boundaries at all. The land had been further degraded by thoughtless pruning and clearing of trees, as well as by pigsties, hayfields, and corrals. Johnson put forth the idea of creating a national park surrounding and protecting the already existing state park. Muir had already tried





to push through legislation to widen the park's boundaries. So it was likely Muir's intent to turn *The Century* into a friend in the fight for preserving California's forests as it was Johnson's wish to recruit Muir as a writer. And though he knew how difficult such an endeavor would be, Muir, like Johnson, was not someone to give up easily.

Muir had emigrated from Scotland in 1849 just short of his eleventh birthday. Growing up on Hickory Hill, his family's farm in Wisconsin, Muir was put to work by his bullying father to dig a well. The farm was on a hill, and the water was a long way down. At ten feet, they struck sandstone, and after attempting to blast the rock with little success, his father and brother would lower him into a hole in a bucket, where he would work through the day with a hammer and stone chisels, getting only a break for lunch. One morning, eighty feet down, he was overcome by what he would describe as "deadly choke-damp—deadly carbonic acid gas that had settled at the bottom during the night." When his father could not hear the sound of hammer hitting chisel, he became alarmed and shouted down to see why he wasn't working. "Somehow I managed to get into the bucket," wrote Muir, "and that is all I remembered until I was dragged out, violently gasping for breath." He was given a day or two to recover, and then lowered back into the well. At ninety feet, he struck water.

In his youth, he became a voracious reader, rising at one in the morning and studying until dawn. He devised numerous inventions, whittled from pieces of hickory. He constructed clocks, a combined thermometer, hygrometer, barometer, and pyrometer, and constructed an early rising device—a gadget that would tip a bed forward, obliging someone to stand upright at an appointed hour. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison he took courses that appealed to him, especially chemistry and geology. He traveled extensively, going through Canada during the Civil War, hiked a thousand miles from the middle of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, and lived for a month as a beachcomber in Cuba. Wherever he was, he studied the plant life. He found work as both a lecturer and science teacher. In 1867, while working as a machinist, he suffered an injury that temporarily blinded him. But he recovered, as he would from a variety of ailments during his lifetime, sometimes when he was far from home.

Moonrise over Merced River



Lumber companies, and the greatest threat to the land—sheepmen—cleared pastures by burning and stripped the land of all foliage.

Muir laments...
"The glory of
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Its bloom is
shed..."

In 1869, working as a shepherd, his flock led him to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in search of new grazing lands. He began exploration of both the Sierra Nevadas and the Yosemite Valley that occupied him for much of the rest of his life.

In March of 1890, Congressman William Vandever introduced legislation for establishment of Yosemite as national parkland. Quietly—and surprisingly—it was backed by the Southern Pacific Railroad that Robert Johnson had so deeply scorned, and that likely viewed lumber as a transportable commodity. Muir would draw a map vastly increasing the size of the proposed park that would be sent to the Committee on Public Lands of the House of Representatives.

In his lifetime, Muir was a prolific writer, but the two articles he would write for *The Century* came painfully slowly. On January 13, 1890, he would write to Johnson, "To write to order and measure I am about the worst hand you could find."

The first one, "The Treasures of the Yosemite," finally appeared in August 1890. It describes singing larks, hills of flowers, raging rivers, waterfalls, and the sun-drenched landscape found in "the Yosemite Valley, heart of the Sierra Nevada." The region's glacier-formed canyons are described by Muir as an "immense hall or temple lighted from above. But no temple made with hands can compare with the Yosemite." Trees of the Yosemite include the majestic sequoia, "the noblest of a noble race," that "heav[e] their massive crowns into the sky from every ridge" and are protected in August 1890 as a park for public use only in the Yosemite's isolated Mariposa Grove. Lumber companies, and the greatest threat to the land—*sheepmen*—cleared pastures

by burning and stripped the land of all foliage in many places outside of Mariposa Grove. Muir laments what had happened to the Yosemite and states, "The glory of wildness has already departed from the great central plain. Its bloom is shed, and so in part is the bloom of the mountains. In Yosemite, even under the protection of the Government, all that is perishable is vanishing apace."

"Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park" appeared in the September issue, and includes the map he had drawn. He would weave the beauty of the park in with the necessity of preserving it, writing of the Hetch Hetchy Valley,

"Imagine yourself in Hetch Hetchy. It is a sunny day in June, the pines sway dreamily, and you are shoulder-deep in grass and flowers. Looking across the valley through beautiful open groves you see a bare granite wall 1800 feet high rising abruptly out of the green and yellow vegetation and glowing with sunshine, and in front of it the fall, waving like a downy scarf, silver bright, burning with white sun-fire in every fiber."

And then Muir jolts his reader back to the necessity of preserving this world:

"A bill has already been introduced in Congress by Mr. Vandever creating a national park about the reservation which the State now holds in trust for the people. ...the bill cannot too quickly become law. Unless reserved or protected the whole region will soon or late be devastated by lumbermen and sheepmen... the ground is already being gnawed and trampled into a desert condition..."

Johnson also recruited Fredrick Law Olmsted for the battle, and Olmsted wrote a letter carried by The New York *Evening-Post* and other papers. Olmsted, a landscape architect who had designed New York City's Central Park, had served as one of the original commissioners after Yosemite had been made a state park in 1864. At the time, Olmsted had stressed in a report to the Yosemite

One of the many lakes found throughout Yosemite National Park



Commission that it was the obligation of a democratic government to shelter and protect open spaces simply as a physical and psychological refuge for those who visited them.

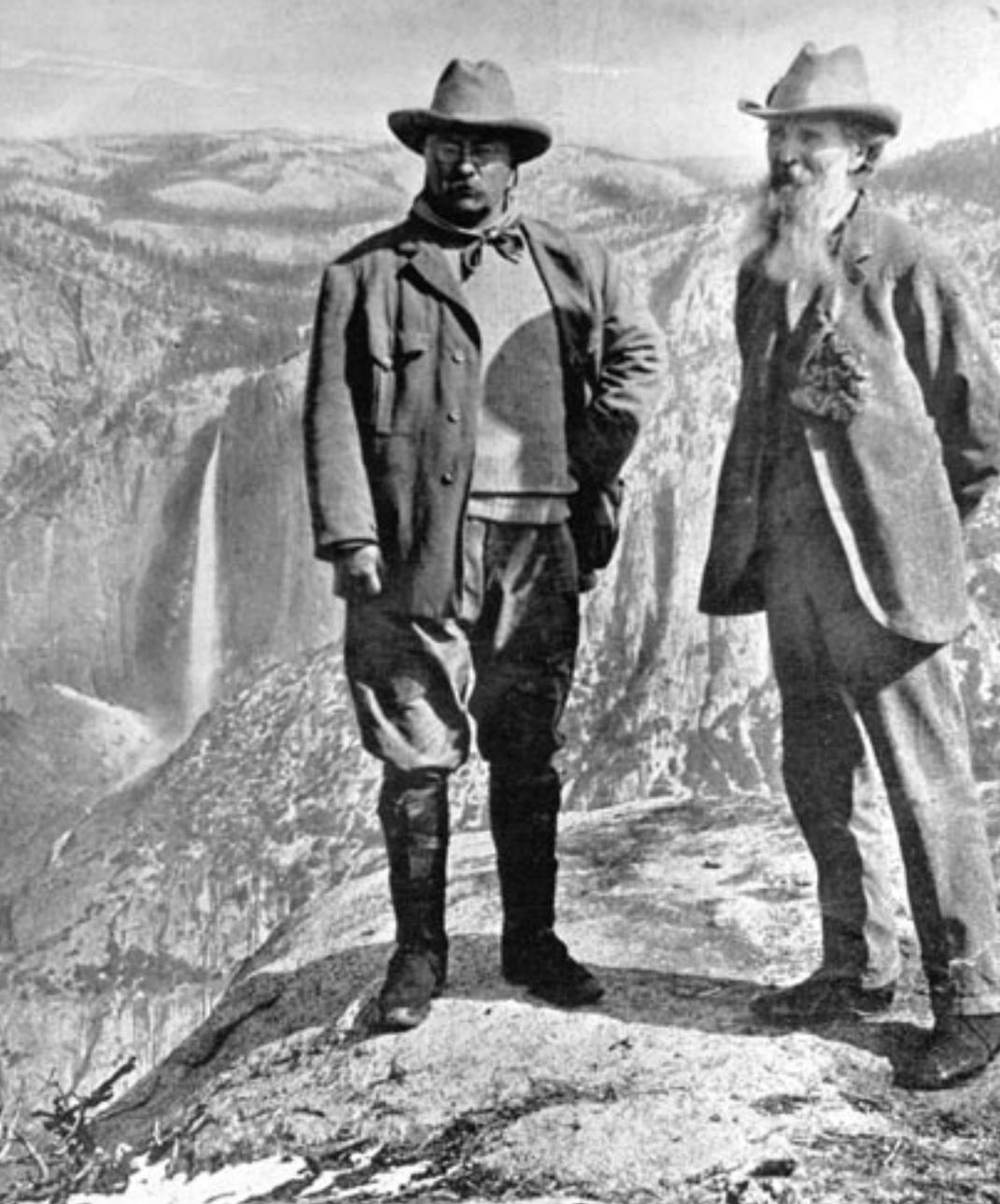
The final version of the bill passed both houses of Congress on the very last day in September. The day after, it was signed into law by President Harrison. But the fight was not over. It was a widely held view that the parks would be better served if they were one, and that the federal government could manage the Yosemite Valley better than the state. Johnson now began pressing Muir to begin pushing the California legislature to turn over the Yosemite Valley.

In the fall of 1889, Johnson had also come up with the notion of starting “an association for preserving California’s monuments and natural wonders.” Muir initially passed on the idea, saying he had “no genius for managing societies.” But a few years later, in May 1892, Muir introduced two University of Berkeley professors, Henry Senger and William D. Armes, suggesting the idea of starting an outdoors club. Invitations were sent out, a meeting was held, and an organization was created based on the idea of the Appalachian Mountain Club, which had been founded in 1876. The new group would be called the Sierra Club, and Muir would become its first president, a position he would hold until his death.

In the spring of 1903, John Muir learned that President Theodore Roosevelt wanted Muir to take him into the Yosemite region later that May when Roosevelt would be on a swing through the west. The President had written to him, “...I want to drop politics absolutely for four days and just be out in the open with you.” It was in Muir’s nature not to trust politicians, and he had already planned to travel through Europe and Asia with the naturalist Charles Sargent and his son. Sargent took a dim view of Muir’s proposed trip with the President, writing to Muir of Roosevelt’s “sloppy unintelligent” outlook of forests. He also criticized Roosevelt for being “altogether too much under the influence of that creature Pinchot.”

“That creature Pinchot” was Gifford Pinchot, a member of the President’s inner circle and head of the new Bureau of Forestry. Pinchot was a supporter of national forests, but only up to a point. He did not like being in the woods. Unlike Muir, he did not believe in forests just for their own sake and for the enjoyment of the public. Although Muir initially liked Pinchot, he knew that





**John Muir and
Theodore Roosevelt
at Glacier Point.**

Pinchot believed that forests needed to be managed for their economic interests. So, undoubtedly, Muir wanted to get his own word in with the President when he agreed to meet with him. Finding himself facing the President in San Francisco on May 14, Muir rather absent mindedly showed him the letter from Sargent as a way of showing him the sacrifices he had had made to meet with him. Clearly he had forgotten Sargent's critical words of the President, and when Roosevelt started reading them aloud with amusement, Muir tried to take back the letter—to the President's great amusement.

Before leaving San Francisco, Muir would say to reporters, "It is only a little trip. You can't see much of the Sierras in four days...After we get to the valley, the President and I will get lost." As far as everyone else mattered, they did. Roosevelt ignored the company of the Park's commissioners, who had constructed detailed plans for the President's visit. He chose, instead, to ride on horseback with Muir across snowy ground, with only a cook and two packers. Camping at Glacier Point, they rode the next day to the head of Nevada Falls, and then down into the valley. They would camp out and awaken under four inches of snow. They

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compared their knowledge of the outdoors: Roosevelt knew better the birds and animals, while Muir was more familiar with botany and geology. Roosevelt was clearly moved by his experience with Muir in the Sierra reserve. Only a day after he and Muir parted company, he requested Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock to redraw its boundary, pushing it north as far as Mount Shasta. “We are not building this country of ours for a day,” he said shortly after, “It is to last through the ages.” (The friendship lasted, as well. Muir would keep a picture of the President in his study. Roosevelt had found solace in the Dakota badlands after the loss of his first wife and his mother within a few hours of each other, and after Louie Muir died in 1905, Roosevelt wrote to Muir that he should find support by returning to the mountains and forests.)

In 1899, Muir would also befriend E. H. Harriman, a major financier who controlled the Southern Pacific Railroad. They had met when Harriman had taken an expedition of scientists to Alaska. It was a curious but genuine and useful friendship for Muir, and once again, the railroad would play a major role in pushing through legislation. William E. Colby, a young mining lawyer and Sierra Club member would work closely in drafting the law with William H. Mills, chief land agent for the Southern Pacific. Those members of the legislature controlled by the railroad were instructed to openly oppose the bill and to support it when the vote was finally taken. Muir and Colby would travel to the state capital in Sacramento on nine different occasions, with the governor’s secretary, also a Sierra Club member, introducing them to different legislators.

Colby also lobbied with the Southern Pacific’s chief council in California, William Herrin. Support for the bill gained nine extra votes, and on February 23, 1905, the California State Legislature passed a recession bill ceding the Yosemite Valley to the Federal government. Less than two weeks later, on March 3, President Roosevelt signed Senate Joint Resolution 115, detailing Federal acceptance of the Yosemite Valley as well as \$20 thousand yearly for its administration. In June 1906, it was finally annexed to the surrounding national parkland. But for Muir there would be a setback as well. In 1913, after a battle of many years, a bill backed by President Wilson was passed allowing the city of San Francisco to build a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, located in Yosemite National Park.

In the course of his work, Muir also offered the theory that Yosemite had been formed by the movement of glaciers. He published these findings in “Yosemite Glaciers” in 1871, and in 1875 would return to the subject of geology in “Living Glaciers of California.” In spite of the evidence in Muir’s favor, many were deeply skeptical about his ideas, but in time, they gained wide acceptance. To Muir, it was as if the land were living and had a past that needed to be understood in order to really know it.

Beginnings of the Conservation Movement

When the artist George Catlin traveled the Dakotas in 1832, he stated that national parks were needed to preserve “nature’s beauty” as Americans expanded westward. In 1859, when writer Henry David Thoreau observed the deforestation around Walden Pond in Massachusetts, he voiced a need for parks at a municipal level, saying, “I think that each town should have a park...a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation.” Interest in environmental issues grew throughout the 1860’s according to Joseph Sax in his article “America’s National Parks: Their Principles, Purposes and Prospects” because of the nation’s increasing population, and the belief that natural areas were being spoiled through haphazard development, as seen in Niagara Falls. It is in this setting that George Perkins Marsh, called “the fountainhead of the conservation movement,” published *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* in 1864. He asserted that humans have the responsibility to restore the land since they have abused it. In 1866 the word “ecology” was first used by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel.

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Ernst Haeckel

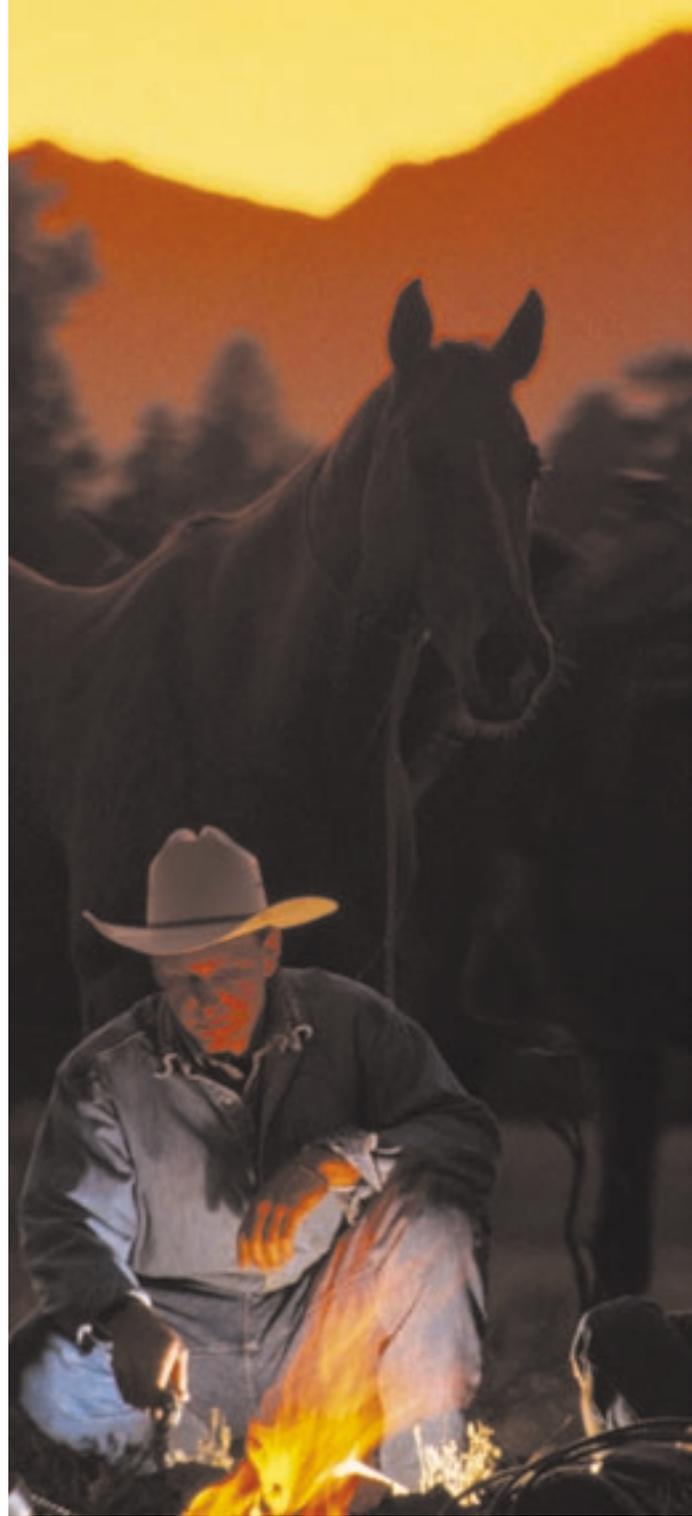
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/cnchron1.html>

Muir's father had tried to discourage him from writing, sending him a letter in 1877 saying that "the best and soonest way of getting quit of the writing and publishing of your book is to burn it and then it will do no more harm either to you or to others." So it was inevitable that he would draw support from Emerson, not just in his study of nature but of his writing about it. Eventually, he would also write the article about Emerson's trip to Yosemite with him that Robert Johnson had suggested. In "The Forests of Yosemite Park," he writes of Emerson's departure earlier in the day, declining to climb up into the mountains with him:

"...when he reached the top of the ridge, after all the rest of the party were over and out of sight, he turned his horse, took off his hat and waved me a last good-by. ...After sundown I built a great fire, and as usual had it all to myself. And though lonesome for the first time in these forests, I quickly took heart again,—the trees had not gone to Boston, nor the birds; and as I sat by the fire, Emerson was still with me in spirit, though I never again saw him in the flesh. He sent me books and wrote, cheering me on; advised me not to stay too long in solitude. Soon he hoped that my guardian angel would intimate that my probation was at a close. Then I was to roll up my herbariums, sketches, and poems (though I never knew I had any poems), and come to his house; and when I tired of him and his humble surroundings, he would show me to better people.

But there remained many a forest to wander through, many a mountain and glacier to cross, before I was to see his Wachusett and Monadnock, Boston and Concord. It was seventeen years after our parting on the Wawona ridge that I stood beside his grave under a pine tree on the hill above Sleepy Hollow. He had gone to higher Sierras, and as I fancied, was waving his hand in friendly recognition."

The year after finally losing the battle of Hetch Hetchy, and in failing health, Muir developed pneumonia and died on December 24th. He was buried in a family plot on the Martinez ranch from where he had set out years before with Robert Johnson to show him the Yosemite Valley that, over a hundred years later, others would still be discovering anew.



Sources

A highly enjoyable anthology of Muir's work, *John Muir: Nature Writings* is available from book vendors on GSA Schedule 76, Publication Media. Two other excellent books on Muir on this schedule include *John Muir: Rediscovering America* by Frederick Turner and *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* by Stephen Fox.

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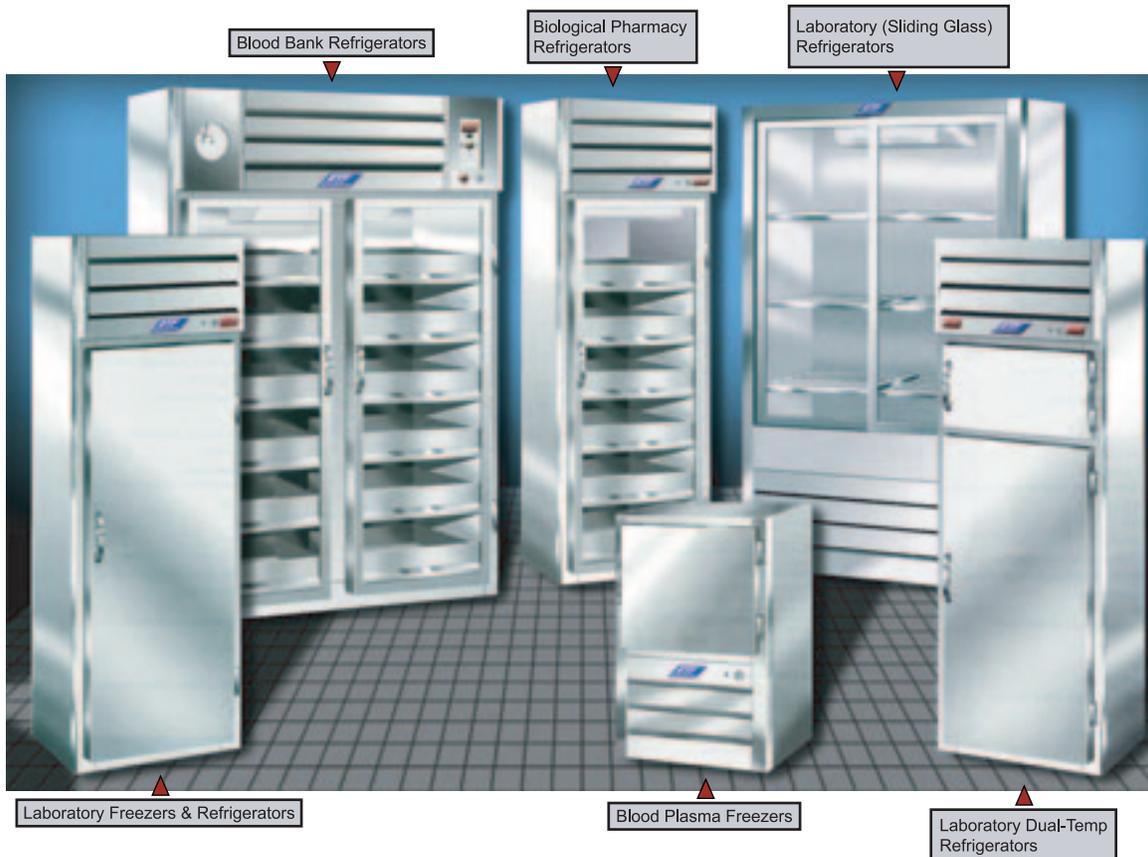
GSA joins the nation in mourning the loss of the seven extraordinary men and women in last month's tragic Shuttle accident. In the words of President George W. Bush,

"These men and women assumed great risk in the service to all humanity. In the skies today we saw destruction and tragedy. Yet farther than we can see there is comfort and hope... The cause in which they died will continue. Mankind is led into the darkness beyond our world by the inspiration of discovery and the longing to understand. Our journey into space will go on."

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