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Donald E. Worster
Kansas University

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On John Muir's Trail: Nature in an Age of Liberal Principles

Donald E. Worster

In the summer of 1877, John Muir set out from the dusty plains of Pasadena, California, searching for what he called a "little poem of wildness" high up in the San Gabriel Mountains. Although nearly forty years old, he was still unknown to the world. Decades later, Muir would become the most famous environmental citizen in the United States—the country's most ardent lover of wild places, the founding president of the Sierra Club, and the author of such nature classics as *My First Summer in the Sierra*, *The Mountains of California*, *Our National Parks*, and *Travels in Alaska*. But in 1877 he was only an obscure figure on the trail, a poor, ragged hiker in the backcountry.

As Muir followed a stream up Eaton Canyon, he came upon "a strange, dark man of doubtful parentage" who was camped in a clearing. "All my conjectures as to his nationality failed," Muir wrote, "and no wonder, since his father was Irish and his mother Spanish, a mixture not often met even in California." Night was approaching, and the stranger invited Muir to share a meal and bed down at his campfire. The two men fell into a conversation that lasted for hours.

That was vintage Muir. Throughout his life he liked to gab only a little less than he liked to hike. Wherever he went, he started a conversation and, typically, it went on and on, with Muir doing most of the talking. Those who knew him well thought he was the most engaging talker they ever knew. Certainly he was the most egalitarian, conversing with everyone he met, from white Anglo farmers, ministers, and miners to former African-American slaves, women of all ages, hordes of children, or a canoe full of Tlingits paddling along the Alaskan

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coast. Mostly they talked, and talked passionately, as Muir and his host did in Eaton Canyon, about nature.

The same passion for nature can still draw people together across social divides of class, ethnicity, or language, as it did Muir and his companions. Today, on any fall weekend Americans of diverse backgrounds may find themselves hiking up a western canyon, canoeing on a northern lake, sniffing the tang of piney woods, or looking for stars above the urban haze. Despite differences of wealth, education, or social standing, nature offers them a common thrill of adventure, a flash of wildness that binds them together in a shared embrace of the outdoors.

Getting back to that wild nature has become popular not only among Americans of different origins but also among people of many different nations. Look at any map and you will see some of the international consequences of that passion: the designation of Muir's Eaton Canyon as a county park and the San Gabriels as a national forest, or the preservation of Costa Rica's Barra del Colorado wildlife reserve, or Finland's Pyhä-Häkki National Park, and so on around the planet.

National parks and wildlife refuges are some of the most inspiring results of one of the greatest political movements in modern history, which, since it began in the nineteenth century, has tried to protect the natural world from destruction and to bring society into harmony with that world.

Today we call that movement "environmentalism" or "the Green Movement." Its goal, as one of its intellectual leaders, E. F. Schumacher, once put it, is to restore a sense of being *part* of nature rather than being "an outside force destined to dominate or conquer it." Nature in a Green society would hold for all citizens some moral and esthetic value. Peace, equality, and freedom are important themes of that movement too, but at its core, distinguishing it from other reform movements, is a commitment to ending the long-standing human drive to dominate and subdue the natural world.

To understand that movement, we need to understand John Muir; where he came from and where he was going. To understand him is to comprehend not only where that dream of a Green society originated but also to consider what kind of future we might aspire to achieve.

I want to argue, through Muir's example, that modern environmentalism began as an integral part of the democratic revolution, far back in a place and time when people were beginning to agitate for human rights, personal liberty, and social equality. From that beginning its

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path led on to revaluing nature, to protecting wildness, and to expanding the concept of human health to include the health of the whole planet.

Muir's story, in other words, helps us see that modern environmentalism began as part of the call for a more open, democratic social order. Like others who shared that ideal, Muir was a small "d" democrat *and* a conservationist. His project of saving the wilderness, far from being a crabby or elitist flailing against modernity, was profoundly rooted in the vision of a nonhierarchical and egalitarian society.

Go back to another moment in Muir's life before he became famous. In the early 1870s, while hiking above Yosemite Valley, he came upon the carcass of a dead bear and paused to mourn its death. Few, he wrote in his notebook, would share his grief over the loss of so magnificent a wild animal, and this despite so much moral progress the age seemed to be making. "We live in an age of liberal principles," he scribbled with a touch of sarcasm, an age in which "all the human race—black brown & yellow—are recognized as in some sense brethren capable of Christianity & even admissible to the one Anglo Saxon heaven above." But it was not a liberal age when it came to bears. Progressive principles did not yet reach so far.

What did Muir mean by "liberal principles"? Not "liberal" as the word has been demonized on talk radio, a synonym for evil or lewd behavior. Nor "liberal" as a political ideology that puts a high value on freedom from regulation or restraint. Nor liberalism confined to the market revolution or defined as libertarian capitalism. Muir, a successful fruit rancher in his later years, was no socialist or communist, but he rejected unrestrained capitalism as the "gobble-gobble school" of economics.

Rather, his notion of liberalism was closer to this definition from the Oxford English Dictionary: "Free from bigotry or unreasonable prejudice in favor of traditional opinions or established institutions; open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform." In particular, he had in mind an openness to new ideas in ethics, morality, and religion.

Muir had grown up in Calvinist Scotland during the 1830s and '40s, where he was taught the theology of universal human corruption and its corollary that salvation is offered only to God's chosen few. At the age of eleven, Muir and his family migrated to the United States where such grim, pessimistic thinking faded away and a more hopeful view of human potential flourished. By the time he was a young man he had

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adopted a more benevolent view of human nature, along with a more positive view of the natural world.

What he had in mind by “liberal principles” was the ideal of a more democratic society that included all people but went beyond the human species. Such a society would challenge traditional hierarchies that gave some individuals dominion over others who were categorized as inferior and forced into slavery, colonial dependency, or some other form of deference. We associate that liberalizing project with several reform movements that emerged during Muir’s youth in Scotland and America, reforms that he supported to the end of his days. He advocated the abolition of slavery and rejected the doctrine of white supremacy. All his life Muir struggled to be just and generous toward despised racial minorities. Whatever his lapses (and there were some), he quoted again and again that line from the great Scots poet of the common folk, Robert Burns: “It’s coming yet, for a’ that, that man to man, the warld o’er, shall brothers be for a’ that.”

Although he never joined suffrage marches, he supported the principle of equal standing and autonomy for women. Among his good friends was the Boston feminist Abba Woolson, whom he met in Yosemite Valley. “You told me once that I had convinced you of the right of woman suffrage,” Woolson wrote, “and I still claim you as a convert.” Indeed he was a convert to the new idea of gender equality. A rebel against his father’s heavy-handed patriarchy, he was no defender of male privilege.

Throughout his life Muir opposed, as did many other democratic liberals, the organized violence of imperialism, militarism, and war. His views were rooted in a Scotsman’s resentment of the power of the British Empire. He loathed violence so much that he dropped out of college during the Civil War and crossed the border into Canada to avoid being drafted into the Union Army and, in the late nineteenth century, he questioned America’s imperial expansion into the Pacific and Caribbean.

Such views led many of his fellow travelers into political activism, but in Muir’s mind a life devoted to politics always degenerated into a sordid seeking after power. We may criticize him for that attitude, for walking on and not doing as much as he could have done, say, for women’s rights. But what he had in mind was more than the realignment of power within society. He sought an expansion of liberal principles into realms of justice, ethics, and spirituality that the abolitionists, pacifists, and feminists of his day had not yet imagined.

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Muir wanted to extend liberal principles beyond the universal rights of human beings to include the rights of all creatures, plants and animals, to exist. Before he had reached the age of twenty, he was asking himself, "What creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos?...They are [all] earth-born companions and our fellow mortals."

Not only the higher animals but also insects, reptiles, and flowering plants were, in his mind, other kinds of "people," and even a "mineral arrangement of matter," he speculated, may be "endowed with sensations that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with."

Muir's embrace of democratic ideals led him to challenge the traditional Christian view that humankind is the pinnacle of creation. Eventually I believe it led him beyond Christianity to invent a new religion. Rejecting the infallible authority of the Bible or the Church, he set off on an independent path. He embraced the religion of nature, which taught a reverence for the beauty and integrity of wild places and wild things, imbued through and through with a divine spirit. His church became the outdoors and his New Testament became any knowledge of how the natural world works—knowledge of bears and forests, watersheds and glaciers. All those expressions of nature were holy in themselves and holy as a reflection of their creator.

In one of his California journals, Muir wrote: "No synonym for God is as perfect as Beauty...All is Beauty!" Beauty, Nature, God—they were one and the same to him. In the presence of nature he discovered a "good" far beyond what we commonly conceive as the "public good."

"Do not follow where the path may lead," admonished one of Muir's favorite teachers, the New England poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." That was exactly what Muir thought he was doing, going where there was no pathway and blazing a trail toward a greater concept of liberty and democracy, seeking a future that his contemporaries had not yet dared imagine.

Original he may have been, but Muir was in fact following along a trail that others had begun—a preceding generation of poets, philosophers, and artists who, like him, were trying to escape the traditional hierarchies and habits of thought, including not only the power of rich elites but also the power of the Church. The poet Robert Burns was Muir's most influential mentor, but there was also the northern Brit-

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ish poet William Wordsworth, who (like Burns) had been inspired by the French revolutionary cry of “*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.” Then there were those American transcendentalists, Emerson and his young disciple Henry David Thoreau. Others who influenced Muir came from the European continent. Alexander von Humboldt, for example, was an immensely influential nineteenth-century liberal. Also, there were a number of progressive-minded women he met along the way, less well published or famous than the men, but they too helped shape the way he thought about society and nature.

Another predecessor whose influence was indirectly important was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), the brilliant, controversial Swiss philosopher who was the first great advocate of liberal democratic ideals and who, like Muir, dared to extend them to nature. There is much in Rousseau’s writings on politics, education, and religion that is echoed in Muir. Both men were raised in the Calvinist faith, both abandoned that faith in their youth, both stood in opposition to the society around them, and both imagined an egalitarian future that went beyond solely political arrangements.

A powerful link between the two men was their shared passion for the natural world. In 1762, Rousseau was pursued by both the French and Swiss governments for being a dangerous heretic. Seeking refuge on a wild island near Bern, he immersed himself in nature, just as Muir would do. In his book *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau celebrates that otherness in a Muir-like language of reverence.

The earth...offers man a spectacle filled with life, interest, and charm—the only spectacle in the world of which his eyes and his heart never weary. The more sensitive a soul a contemplator has, the more he gives himself up to the ecstasies this harmony arouses in him. A sweet and deep reverie takes possession of his senses...and through a delightful intoxication he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one.¹

Rousseau, the prophet of a more democratic and open society, was also a harbinger of Muir’s religion of nature, the protection of wild places, and the Green society.

Going into nature, as Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Thoreau all did, became a way of freeing oneself from the hand of conformity and authority. Social inequality faded in wild places; economic rank ceased to matter. Nature offered a home to the political dissident, the rebel-

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lions child, the outlaw or runaway slave, the soldier who refused to fight, and, by the late nineteenth century, the woman who climbed mountains to reveal her strength and independence.

That fusion of freedom, democracy, and the religion of nature came to be feared by conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic. Take for instance the great French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, who in the decade of Muir's birth (the 1830s) published his two-volume work *Democracy in America*. A privileged member of the old regime, Tocqueville struggled to understand the "irresistible revolution" that was sweeping people like himself from power, breaking down entrenched institutions, and challenging the privileges of aristocratic birth.

In a grandly titled (but strangely ignored) chapter, "The Philosophical Consequences of Democracy," Tocqueville warned that a rising spirit of democracy tended to encourage strong feelings for nature. It tended to undermine the traditional anthropocentric doctrines of Christianity and put in their place a new religion that he called pantheism. "It cannot be denied," he noted, "that pantheism has made great progress in our time." Pantheism is, of course, only another name for the religion of nature. For a man raised in Roman Catholicism, the pantheistic tendency was one of the most dangerous threats posed by the new liberal thinking. Tocqueville solemnly urged, "All those who still appreciate the true nature of man's greatness should combine in the struggle against it."

Tocqueville was right about his age's tendencies: nature in the wake of the democratic revolution became a new source of spirituality. Woods, mountains, and prairies became places where anyone could find answers to life's ultimate questions without the intervention of authorities. That was one of the most profound consequences of the new political and social attitudes, a trend we often dismiss as "mere romanticism" without understanding how closely linked it was to democratic culture.

Muir's life, I have been arguing, suggests that the environmental movement is deeply rooted in that long-ago "age of liberal (or egalitarian) principles." Today such an origin may seem obvious when environmentalists demand attention to human health, such as improved water supplies or nutrition, and prevention of pollution or of its unequal impact on poor communities. It is also easy to discern those democratic roots when environmentalists talk about the ideal of "sustainability," which emphasizes the right of future human generations to natural resources that have not been depleted or degraded. But

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those liberal democratic roots are also strong, I suggest, whenever environmentalists try to save the natural beauty and diversity of the planet, when they fight to preserve endangered species, biodiversity, and the last wild places from oil drilling, road building, or agricultural development.

That liberal-progressive origin of nature preservation is not well understood by many modern-day social reformers. Saving nature's beauty and diversity, some have charged, has nothing to do with expanding democracy. Preservation, they say, is only for rich, elite people who want enjoy that beauty and exclude everyone else. This is a profound misunderstanding of the history of nature preservation and of its current activities. It distorts the motives of past and present preservationists.

Of course, women and men of great wealth and status have played an important role in preserving nature. But then they have played a similar role in the abolition of slavery, in securing women's suffrage, and generally in the advancement of egalitarian ideals. Let us be fair. Individuals from elite backgrounds may feel a genuine concern for their less fortunate fellow citizens or care about the welfare of future generations, just as they may be moved by a love of nature. Muir, whose early adulthood was spent in doing manual labor for little money, later became fairly affluent; but poor or rich, he was always adamant in his sense of stewardship toward the earth.

At the same time, we should be careful not to confuse every act to set aside land from economic development with efforts to preserve nature in and for itself. The initial purpose behind the preservation of African wildlife by Europeans, for example, was more to save the opportunity for elite hunters to shoot big game than it was to secure the right of elephants or leopards to exist. Setting up colonial hunting preserves was not what Muir had in mind, nor what nature preservationists on the whole have sought.

Nor should we overlook the fact that ordinary people, as well as elites, have been thrilled by the scent of a forest or the flash of a wild antelope across a savannah. The role of ordinary people in supporting nature protection has been more important than anti-preservationists realize, a role that becomes clearer when we examine where most nature protection has occurred in the modern world and who has supported it.

Generally such protection has gone farthest in those nations where democratic principles have been strong, where human rights have been

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cherished and defended, where freedom of speech and a tolerance of dissent from official dogma have all been allowed, and where ordinary people have a right to vote. Wherever such open societies exist, nature protection has spread rapidly, gathering support from all classes of people. On the other hand, it has generally lagged or failed where old aristocracies of wealth and power maintain their rule, or where technocrats, military juntas, and other forms of modern authoritarianism have gained control.

Historically, those nations that have been in the vanguard of environmentalism, and nature preservation particularly, include the United States and Canada in North America, the Scandinavian countries in Europe, New Zealand and Australia in the South Pacific, and Costa Rica in Central America—all nations that profess to honor liberal democratic principles and have tried to redistribute power and wealth to the greatest number of people. That is not to say that political or economic democracy has been fully achieved in those societies, nor to claim that personal freedoms in those nations are always safe, but only that democratic values have taken root there and have vigorously contested anti-democratic forces.

The United States was not only the first liberal democracy in the world, as Tocqueville acknowledged, but also the first nation to create a national park (Yellowstone in 1872, followed in 1890 by Yosemite), the first to set up a “wilderness preservation system” (in 1964), and the first to pass an endangered species act (in 1973). To be sure, the U.S. was simultaneously a society driven to turn every resource into a profit-making commodity, to seize control of the land from native peoples, and to win an empire over nature. But because there were strong democratic countercurrents within that society, a conservation movement could emerge and gain influence.

Most of our national parks and wilderness areas were once the home of native peoples, or at least they were the occasional hunting grounds or migratory routes of those people. The means by which those parks were acquired, through treaties that were not always well understood, are not the means that we would defend or use today. Indians were long excluded, as were blacks and non-European immigrants, from the parks as they were from the sphere of citizenship. But does that long and lamentable exclusion of some people from citizenship mean that those parks were not inspired by the democratic idea of preserving nature for future generations and ordinary American citizens? Over time, and through moral clarification of who should qualify as citizens

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and what such parks should mean, this country's indigenous peoples, as well as immigrants from all over the world, have gained increasing access to our preserved lands.

Today our parks are places where all citizens of this nation can go to meet each other and meet visitors from all over the world. The moral legitimacy of nature preservation is as strong, if not a good deal stronger, than the legitimacy of our universities and colleges (which also occupy land that once belonged to Native Americans), our public school system, our courts and legislative chambers. The nation's parks are now more open to the people than are our urban and suburban neighborhoods, our work places, or our corporations.

Soon after those landmark acts of nature conservation in the United States, the Scandinavian countries, as they also became more egalitarian, began to produce plenty of Green activists, too, who tried to protect their remaining wild lands. Thousands of miles away from them stands the little Central American nation of Costa Rica, which over the past few decades has protected 28 percent of its territory from development—11% in national parks, 4% in indigenous reserves, and 13% in various biological reserves, national forests, national monuments, and national wildlife refuges. Costa Rica is widely regarded as the most successful democratic society in Latin America, perhaps in all the Americas. Or look next door at Panama, a country now freed from military tyranny and moving toward more vigorous nature protection.

What joins all those countries in the Northern Hemisphere to far-away New Zealand and its preservation of four million acres of wild lands stretching from Mount Cook to Milford Sound? Or to Africa's Botswana, which has enjoyed four decades of independence from colonial rule, all of it under civilian leadership and progressive social policies? Compared to many of its neighbors, democracy is thriving in Botswana, and so is the vast Okavango wetlands preserve, home to over 450 bird and plant species, and the world's largest surviving elephant population that lives in the Chobe National Park.

One frequently heard argument is that nature-protecting societies are all affluent—their people's bellies are full—while poor nations prefer to eat their forests or wildlife rather than save them. At the extremes this seems to be true; desperately hungry men and women are not likely to think much about saving wilderness or endangered species (or for that matter about pollution or soil fertility or ecological sustainability). But an economic explanation is far too simple. Income alone does not work very well *within* societies in predicting which citi-

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zens want to preserve the natural world and which do not, and it does not work very well at the international level.

Nature-loving Norway is, of course, rich *and* Green. According to the World Fact Book of 2008, it stands fifth in the world in gross domestic product per capita income. But then there is nature-loving Finland, which ranks only twenty-seventh, while nature-loving New Zealand ranks way down at forty-fifth. Then there is nature-loving Botswana, ranking seventy-fourth, and Costa Rica, ranking eightieth. Large differences in wealth separate those countries, yet all are active in preserving their native ecosystems and seeking to harmonize society and nature.

A more reliable indicator of national Greenness than a nation's level of personal wealth is a nation's state of personal freedom, its commitment to social equality, and its recognition of human rights. The Greenest countries tend to be those with a more equitable distribution of economic opportunity, diminished militarism, high levels of literacy, greater racial and gender equality, free and open elections, and tolerance of diversity. The "Brownest" countries, on the other hand, tend to be opposite in every way: see, for instance, Myanmar, which may have the worst environmental record of any nation in the world today, or Haiti, Pakistan, or North Korea, or going further back in time, Stalin's Russia or Idi Amin's Uganda.

Societies that profess democratic values, I suggest, may also be filled with deceit, paradox, and contradiction. Their contradictions drive them toward this pole or that—between an emphasis on liberty *or* equality, between present *or* future generations' claims on the earth, between human rights *or* nature's right to exist. Precisely because of those contradictions, democratic society cannot claim to represent any final triumph or perfect achievement. Its spread does not represent what Francis Fukuyama has fatuously hailed as the "end of history."

Nor did John Muir represent some final achievement or some perfect model of environmental citizenship. Muir's greatest value for us today may lie in the fact that he wrestled with critical modern issues that continue to be among the most important we confront. His life raises such questions as these: How do we resolve the tension within liberal democracy between human and nonhuman needs? How do we create a level of economic security for all that is also ecologically sustainable? If we cannot wall ourselves off morally or materially from the natural world, what principles should guide our relationship with that world? Are we obliged to share a larger part of the planet with

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our fellow earthborn companions? On the other hand, can we expect a Green society to emerge that is not grounded in human freedom and equality?

John Muir blazed his own trail through those tangled thickets, and then he vanished, leaving it to us to figure out where to go next. And that's precisely where I hope that I have left you: wondering where we go next, wondering how we humans should meet our moral obligations to the earth.

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p. 92.