

# What Would John Muir Do? – December 15, 2013

by **David Green**

During his lifetime, 1838 – 1914, he published 12 books and more than 300 articles, and co-founded the Sierra Club. He became known as the “patron saint of the American wilderness,” and his work advocating for the protection of vast areas of western forests led directly to the establishment of our most beloved National Parks.

He would spend months exploring mountain ranges, completely isolated from any human contact, but he was something of a world-famous celebrity. His popular writing offered a new concept of our relationship – of our interconnectedness – with nature.

Instead of our seeing the natural world and its resources as commodities to be chopped down, mined, bought, sold, and used to make things, he opened the minds and hearts of millions to appreciating nature with a posture of humility and reverence and respect.

He taught that all life was sacred, believing that the natural world was a direct conduit to God.

He became the arch-enemy of some of the most powerful men in America: tycoons and robber barons who owned huge mining and logging operations, and who thirsted for even greater profit.

And he became the friend of a young visionary president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, whom he convinced on one trip into California’s Yosemite Valley that in order to save it from uncontrolled exploitation, the valley needed federal protection.

His name was John Muir. And to the best of my memory, I never learned about him in school.

It wasn’t until I was living in Northern California over 20 years ago that I began reading about his amazing life and work. It was after I first visited the National Forest that bears his name – the Muir Woods – just north of San Francisco.

It was astonishing to me that John Muir had either been a minor footnote in my grade-school history textbooks, or had been left out of them completely.

Maybe that’s because they were textbooks approved by the Texas State Board of Education. The same group that’s now considering teaching the biblical Book of Genesis as science. Don’t get me and James Doores started on that topic – we’ll never shut up.

I don’t think there was any dark conspiracy behind the omission of John Muir in my education. No, I suspect I didn’t learn about him for one primary reason.

Even though he was arguably the most influential naturalist and environmental activist spanning two centuries, and his legacy continues, what he accomplished does not fit so nicely with our dominant historical narrative.

The story of America, we're taught from early on, is all about progress, innovation, change, modernization, and the strength of industry. To a large degree it's about what we can derive from our natural resources; what those resources can do for us.

And it's true you and I would be living in a much different world if we didn't have abundant natural resources. A mineral like copper is something we take for granted. When's the last time copper has even crossed your mind?

But from mining operations stretching from Montana to Utah to Arizona, enough copper wire was produced to string telephone lines around the country, and laid across the ocean floor to other continents.

Copper makes it possible for us to have efficient air-conditioning and heating systems. Copper helps make my smart phone work so I can press a screen and see what tomorrow's weather will be. Which is information coming from a satellite in orbit that contains copper.

During World War II, copper and iron and other ores dug up from western states were the raw material for the "arsenal of democracy" – the weapons and ammunition that were used to subdue brutal totalitarian regimes that had slaughtered millions.

And it's not just copper. The homes we live in were framed with timber from forests in western states. The cars we drive and the planes we fly were made with metals mined in the west and are fueled by oil pumped from underground.

The natural gas that heats our homes and warms our water and drives the turbines that produces the electricity that makes this projector and sound system work; that doesn't come out of thin air. It's pulled out of the earth.

So, we happen to *like* all of the things that natural resources provide for us, and we depend on them.

They *make* things, and they make those things work. The monitor in a hospital room that tells us how a patient is doing is a complex machine with thousands of parts made up of natural resources.

It only makes sense, then, for us to view natural resources as a *necessary commodity*, and an essential part of the success story of human achievement. If it weren't for those resources – if we were to say we must *not* use the natural world – then we'd need to be content with living a rather rustic existence.

Even those of us who have great concern for the environment still appreciate the ability to pour ourselves a cup of hot coffee in the morning, after enjoying a comfortable night's sleep in a warm home and taking a nice hot shower, and checking on the news of the day online or on TV, and quite possibly hopping into our individual car to drive to work or to the store.

Where the shelves are full of items that were processed or manufactured with materials from the natural world, and transported to our local store by trains or trucks assembled with things and using fuel from the natural world.

I'm not trying to put a guilt trip on any of our delicate liberal hearts. It's just that I think we should be honest about the fact that we are all active and willing participants in a world where natural resources are consumed.

And those natural resources – most of which we take for granted – are the reason why you and I live at a level of comfort and ease that would have far surpassed anything the richest nobility could've imagined, just a handful of generations ago.

Before you think I've jumped ship to the dark side, I'm not saying things are not out of whack when it comes to how we think about and use our environment.

Things **are** out of balance. None of us need a lesson on global warming or the dangers of off-shore oil drilling. But we need to acknowledge our own complicity, and the extent to which we've bought in to the prevailing assumption that was reflected in my grade school history books.

The assumption that using natural resources is always our right. That the natural world exists for our benefit as something to be bought and sold. And that human progress depends on increasing our use of those resources.

Of course, there are a lot of folks today who believe that so firmly, any efforts to modify or reduce or even to try to find a balance between the use of natural resources and the conservation and preservation of natural resources is seen as a threat.

It's a threat to progress, a threat to economic and social stability, even a threat to the civil freedoms we enjoy.

For those who feel that way, and who might deny that how we use natural resources is responsible for things like global warming and other environmental disasters, the use of the environment – any way we wish – doesn't seem to fit into the category of a moral issue.

Morality has to do with your religious beliefs, asking perhaps, "What would Jesus Do?"

But fracking for natural gas or running a pipeline across an environmentally-sensitive area or pumping millions of gallons of water out of the ground to grow corn to feed livestock is a practical concern, not a religious or moral issue. Philosophically, for many, the natural world is a *thing*; an object. It falls into the category of an "other," morally neutral.

On the other hand, for those of us who do recognize that humans have and continue to misuse the environment; for those of us who do see our relationship with the natural world as interdependent, it is a moral, ethical issue.

Even if we're conflicted about it because we know full well that as much as it might trouble us, we still participate in a system that's so huge and all encompassing in our daily lives, that we are also dependent on using natural resources. Whether we like it or not.

The point of difference is, we would also like to find a balance. A way – or multiple ways – to reduce, reuse, recycle, restore, and work toward the day when our shared understanding of the environment is that it is *not* some "other" thing to be used up and discarded like a tube of toothpaste. But that every natural resource is part of us, and we are part of it.

So, the fundamental conflict, I think, is between two competing worldviews. A worldview where the use of natural resources falls outside the realm of moral issues, against a worldview where it absolutely is a moral issue of the highest order.

If I'm right about that, the question for us is, how do we help put a new pair of lenses in those glasses – that first worldview – so that more folks understand our coexistence with the environment does carry enormous moral – and spiritual – weight.

One place to start that discussion is with John Muir. Because if nothing else, he was a profoundly spiritual person. And the way in which he framed environmentalism as a moral, spiritual crusade forever changed the way Americans and people around the planet viewed the natural world.

Religious language saturates John Muir's writing. He described the Sierra Nevada mountain range as "God's mountain mansion." He wrote about small natural objects – stones – as talkative, sympathetic, and brotherly. (It is) No wonder," he said, "(that's true) when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother."

As a child his father had him read the Bible daily, so much so that by the time he was 11 years old he'd memorized 75% of the Old Testament and the entire New Testament. He was a true believer.

But he came to another way of believing that went beyond the Bible. An understanding of God through what he called the "Book of Nature." In the wilderness, he studied plants and animals in their natural setting that he said "came straight from the hand of God."

His family had emigrated from Scotland when he was ten years old, and settled in Wisconsin. In college in Madison, Wisconsin he studied botany and geology, and in 1863 went to Canada with his older brother to avoid the draft during the Civil War. You might want to leave out that part of his life story if you're trying to impress any conservatives.

After the war he returned to the US and worked some odd jobs, making wagon wheels among other things. But he became something of a professional wanderer, traveling by foot to Florida across any uncharted course so he could study the flora and fauna, then by ship to Cuba.

He eventually wound up in San Francisco and found work as a shepherd in Yosemite Valley. Which at the time was a state park, leased out to sheep and cattle ranchers. He built his own cabin there and spent much of his time reading the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson actually met Muir on a trip to Yosemite in 1871, and described him as the ideal prophet-naturalist he'd often written about.

For almost 20 years, John Muir explored the mountains, glaciers, and wilderness areas between California and Alaska. In 1889 he wrote an essay in a national publication, *Century Magazine*, denouncing the threat of livestock grazing – especially sheep – on the ecology of the Sierra high country. The next year, the US congress banned grazing in the Yellowstone and Yosemite.

Two years later Muir helped form the Sierra Club, which fought efforts to reduce the size of Yosemite – which at the time was still a state park – and put a stop to the practice of clear-cutting forests.

There were two competing philosophies in the naturalist movement of the time. John Muir was a strict *preservationist*, meaning he advocated leaving wilderness areas completely alone and pristine.

In contrast, others in the movement were *conservationists*, meaning they favored the management of natural resources, for instance being okay with commercial forestry as long as it was done in a sustainable way.

From the late 1890s until Muir's death in 1914, the preservationists and conservationists fought for public opinion on how to best handle environmental issues. While National parks were established, at the same time the policy of the US government – the Forest Service – for the most part, leaned toward conservation over preservation.

Although that policy fell short of John Muir's deepest hopes, his legacy was to have provided a new vision of our relationship with the natural world. A hundred years after his death, it's a vision we're still obviously trying to bring into focus.

It's a vision where we understand our natural world and every human life as interdependent; where natural resources are not thought of as some other thing, as an object, as a commodity, but part of who we are.

It would be a practical impossibility for us to stop using natural resources. As my grandmother used to say, that horse left the barn a long time ago...and we're riding it. But it would not be impossible at all to change the way we see our relationship with natural resources as an issue of moral and spiritual significance.

If you and I possess inherent worth and dignity, if we are spiritual beings, connected through space and time to one another, if our lives are sacred and we are bound together in love, then that should also be our relationship with the natural world. A deep spiritual connection.

That's what John Muir taught us, and that's what he would do today.

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