

Is conservationist Muir still important?

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 12:01.14

Word Count **688**



U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (left) and nature preservationist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, on Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park. In the background are upper and lower Yosemite Falls. Wikimedia Commons/Library of Congress

LOS ANGELES — John Muir is the godfather of environmentalism, the movement to protect nature. He's a larger-than-life figure who helped establish the national park system through his writings of solo hikes in California's wilderness.

As the first president of the Sierra Club, Muir shaped ideas about how wilderness should be thought of, protected and managed.

But now some critics argue that he's wrong. They claim that the world has changed so much in the 100 years since he died that Muir is no longer important.

Christensen is a historian with UCLA's Institute of Environment and Sustainability. He said Muir's ideas are "just not useful anymore."

"A Huge Passion For Nature"

Christensen and others see Muir's beliefs as outdated. The 21st century has new environmental challenges they say. Muir could not have imagined population growth, city sprawl, or climate change.

The debate boils down to Muir's primary idea: That wilderness should be left undisturbed, so people can occasionally experience pure nature. That idea helped shape a century of conservation. It made sure that there would be unspoiled wilderness for new generations.

"He had a huge passion for nature, such as we should all cherish in our hearts," said Mary Ellen Hannibal. She is an author and Muir fan. "He holds up an ideal of experiencing nature firsthand."

"Environmentalism, in some ways, has moved beyond John Muir," said Noah Greenwald, of the Center for Biological Diversity. But Greenwald said Muir was at the forefront of the notion of setting aside portions of nature.

To Christensen and others, however, Muir's notions give the wrong idea. Sending people to wilderness sites, such as Yosemite, sends the message that only awe-inspiring parks are worth saving and neglects smaller city spaces.

Critics also say Muir's vision of wilderness is rooted in luxury. It assumes that everyone will have the free time of the rich upper class to visit the wilderness.

Make More City Parks

Critics argue against his idea of backpacking, skiing or rock climbing through the Sierra Mountains. Instead, they say, Californians would benefit more from more city parks, and additional roads and trails in wild lands.

Nature exists in many forms, they say. Untouched wilderness is only one.

Some people blame Muir for starting a certain type of environmentalism that seemed to be for rich, white people.

The Sierra Club, which Muir helped found, is struggling to connect with California's non-white population, particularly Latinos. That's the case even though surveys show Latinos as among the most devoted environmentalists in the state.

Latinos are expected to become a majority in California by 2050. A strong and multiracial Sierra Club membership in California is important to the group. It can influence political decisions in California about conservation, and raise money to support environmental education.

Yet Christensen says the conservation movement reflects the ideas of John Muir, and its "influence on a certain demographic — older and white — and that's a problem."

A Stain On Muir's Past

D.J. Waldie, an author and expert on Southern California culture, agrees with him.

"We have to reimagine our relationships with nature to accommodate modern, increasingly diverse communities," Waldie said. They "see the world differently than white Anglo-Saxon Protestants like Muir did in the late 19th century."

"For many communities of color, nature of great significance isn't out there in distant charismatic Sierra peaks. It's in urban parks, in local mountains and along local rivers — and under their fingertips in the stuff they grow in their own backyards," he said.

One stain on Muir's past is hard to get past: His dislike for California's Native Americans, a group he claimed had no place in the Sierra wilderness.

Laura Pulido, a professor in USC's Department of American Studies and Ethnicity, said Muir's prejudice should be understood as being part of his time.

"It is essential that we try to understand John Muir in all his complexity," Pulido said. "He was a man of his times, who actively worked to disgrace California Indians by taking their lands."

She added, "But he also launched the environmental movement, which is no small thing."

In Hannibal's view, "What counts is the number of acres protected."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences MOST belongs in a summary of the article?
- (A) John Muir is the godfather of environmentalism, the movement to protect nature. He's a larger-than-life figure who helped establish the national park system through his writings of solo hikes in California's wilderness.
 - (B) "He had a huge passion for nature, such as we should all cherish in our hearts," said Mary Ellen Hannibal. She is an author and Muir fan. "He holds up an ideal of experiencing nature firsthand."
 - (C) Christensen and others see Muir's beliefs as outdated. The 21st century has new environmental challenges they say. Muir could not have imagined population growth, city sprawl, or climate change.
 - (D) Laura Pulido, a professor in USC's Department of American Studies and Ethnicity, said Muir's prejudice should be understood as being part of his time.

- 2 *Critics argue against his idea of backpacking, skiing or rock climbing through the Sierra Mountains. Instead, they say, Californians would benefit more from more city parks, and additional roads and trails in wild lands.*

Do these sentences help readers understand the MAIN idea of the article? Why or why not?

- (A) Yes, because they support the idea that Muir's environmentalism is for the rich, and people need more access to nature.
 - (B) Yes, because they support the idea that nature should be kept pure, and people need more access to nature.
 - (C) No, because they support the idea that nature should be kept pure, and people need more access to nature.
 - (D) No, because they support the idea that Muir's environmentalism is for the rich, and people need more access to nature.
- 3 According to the article, which of these is a reason Muir's environmentalism is for richer people?
- (A) It supports creating parks for people in cities.
 - (B) It did not imagine population growth or climate change.
 - (C) It sets aside portions of nature and keeps them wild.
 - (D) It assumes that people will have time to make trips to visit the wilderness.

- 4 Which answer choice BEST summarizes the information provided by D.J. Waldie in the article?
- (A) He criticizes Muir for his outdated opinions about pure wilderness.
 - (B) He explains that the world has changed and people view nature differently from Muir's time.
 - (C) He provides reasons for Muir's views on the protections of wilderness.
 - (D) He describes the problems communities of color have with Muir's ideas.