

## JOHN MUIR EARTH DAY ADDRESS

April 26, 2014 Martinez, California

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Happy Earth Week and welcome to this event. I am Bruce Hamilton, Deputy Executive Director of the Sierra Club. No, despite my white beard and Scottish heritage, I did not know John Muir personally. This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death and I dare say I am not that old.

But I can say that John Muir has shaped my life, and I hope that by coming to his homestead today and by learning a little bit more about this remarkable man he will shape your lives, too.

We seem surrounded by reminders of John Muir. We are here today at John Muir National Historic Site. His image graces the California quarter as a symbol of our state. Of course, we all know Muir Woods National Monument in Marin. When we go to Yosemite National Park he learn the story of when he first developed the theory of how glaciers formed Yosemite Valley and how he organized the campaign to expand and defend the park from loggers, miners, overgrazing and water developers. If you travel to Glacier Bay in Alaska you can stand in awe of Muir Glacier. In his native Scotland they have just dedicated a major hiking trail as the John Muir Way. Here in the Sierra Nevada, the John Muir Trail runs along the crest from Yosemite Valley to Mount Whitney. We have hospitals, schools, roads, and a brand of fine California wine named for him and bottled by his descendants. An astronomer in 2006 even named a minor planet after him (Planet Johnmuir is between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter).

John Muir is probably best known for founding the Sierra Club; writing over a dozen books on parks, wild places, and natural history; and his fight to save Yosemite. So, if you think you are incapable of founding a powerful

conservation organization, saving a national park, or writing a best-selling nature appreciation book, maybe you think you have nothing to learn from John Muir. But you would be wrong.

I believe the lessons John Muir has for present and future generations are not about inspiring others to match his major accomplishments. Instead, the lesson John Muir holds for us this Earth Week and every week is to enjoy, explore, and protect the Earth in our daily lives. And when you look into the life of John Muir it is hard to find anyone else in history who excelled more at enjoying, exploring and protecting this beautiful planet.

So here are the qualities of John Muir that I think we need to emulate and remember him for:

Muir had **contagious enthusiasm** for the natural world. He was personally excited by witnessing a fairy orchid or a water ouzel, but he then felt compelled to share that enthusiasm with everyone he met and all his readers. His magazine articles, books, public speeches, hikes, and meetings with influential decision-makers were magical and transformative. It is no wonder that when President Theodore Roosevelt decided to visit Yosemite he insisted that John Muir accompany him and be his guide. He was not a scold or a preachy doomsayer of an environmentalist, I imagine that he was fun to be around.

Muir was always **full of wonder**. He was trained as a scientist and he was a renowned inventor, but Muir was not made to be a cold lab-bound government scientist. In fact, after he nearly went blind from an industrial accident he decided to abandon toying with the inventions of man and instead chose to dedicate himself to studying and reveling in the wonders of nature. His laboratory became the world and he was full of endless questions about the wonders and glories of the natural world. He would see a glacier in Alaska and wonder how fast it was moving. He would see a tall pine tree whipping around in a strong wind and wonder what it would feel like to be in that tree top swaying in the gale force winds. He would see a waterfall and wonder what it would look like to see the moon from behind the falls at night. He would then follow his curiosity to its logical conclusion

and then recount his adventures and findings in a way that filled all he met and all who read him with that same sense of wonder and discovery.

Muir was **joyful**, not a sourpuss. You can't read Muir today without sensing his almost boundless energy and rapture: "Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality." He felt divine beauty everywhere: "God never made an ugly landscape. All that the sun shines on is beautiful, so long as it is wild." He overflowed with emotion: "Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue."

Despite the fact that he would occasionally hob-nob with Presidents, Governors, captains of industry, and the elite, he was also a **humble** man who saw himself as a tiny speck in the broader Universe and someone who was at ease hanging out with laborers, Native Americans in an Alaskan village, or the crew on a boat trip. When he set out on his famous 1,000 mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico he scrawled in the front of his journal, "John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe" as his address, demonstrating his humble sense of place. "The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge," he wrote. "From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals.... "

John Muir was a **story teller**, but one who would tell stories to teach a lesson or inspire the reader rather than to draw attention to himself or try to impress his audience. The wonderful part of Muir's writings that allows them to stand the test of time and still inspire readers 100 years after his death is that he knew how to draw people into the experience he was conveying and keep the reader engaged as the story unfolds. So you can read about him riding an avalanche, almost falling off a Sierra peak, crossing a glacier with his dog Stickeen, or witnessing the glories of a water ouzel and just get enthralled in the shared experience.

Muir was a **risk taker**. He was not one to think small and settle for easy victories because they would take less effort. All his life he had taken on big challenges and as a result he managed to achieve big victories. He was perfectly willing to take on the biggest and most powerful forces in the United States in the cause of protecting wildness and beauty. The loggers, dam builders, ranchers and miners had more money and influence at the outset of every conservation campaign, but that did not stop John Muir from taking them on and waging the good fight. Yosemite would just be a state park only protecting Yosemite Valley floor and the Mariposa Grove of sequoias, except John Muir had the courage and conviction and guts to fight for the bigger park that we know and love today. He was a visionary in the best sense of the word – he dreamed big dreams but not impractical dreams and then dedicated himself to making those dreams come true.

So put this all together, and what I am proposing is that to be a modern day John Muir you need to be **joyful, full of wonder, enthusiastic, humble, willing to take risks, and able to tell a good story**. Is that too much to ask of any of us?

So once we've marshaled these essential qualities of our character, what is it we can do with them to help protect the natural world? People of Faith regularly ask themselves: What would Jesus do? On this Earth Week I think we should all ask ourselves: **What would John Muir do?** That might not make such a bad bumper sticker.

I can tell you one thing John Muir did **not** do. John Muir didn't send \$35 off to the Sierra Club and urge its staff to go save Yosemite for him. He assembled his friends, family and colleagues and asked them to join with him to explore, enjoy and protect the Sierra Nevada by joining the Sierra Club. Together they would make a difference by taking personal responsibility for protecting the earth. So, first I would suggest that each of you make a pledge to take personal responsibility for protecting some part of the natural world that you care about the most. It may be in your neighborhood, on the coast, in the Sierra, or in Alaska. The important thing is that you are passionate about protecting that place and its beauty.

Right here in Martinez, the open ridge lands that John Muir used to own and walk along in the Alhambra Hills are threatened with a huge housing development. The developer proposes to build 100 residential homes in this

beautiful spot. It is so heartening to see that John Muir's great-great grandson, Robert Hanna, has joined with his community to establish the Alhambra Open Space Committee, which is petitioning the City of Martinez to reject the project and work to protect it in perpetuity as public open space. You can help save this area if that is your passion, join them.

Another great local group is Save Mount Diablo. This scrappy land conservation group has led the charge along with the Sierra Club in expanding protection to thousands of acres of open space surrounding Mount Diablo State Park so that mountain lions, kit foxes, peregrine falcons and other wild creatures can share the joys of open country with hikers, picnickers and bicyclists. Few urban areas have such a great open space legacy left intact and wild. They need your support.

Or elsewhere on these grounds, there is a table sponsored by Restore Hetch Hetchy. Those of you familiar with John Muir will recall that his biggest defeat, which came at the end of his life, was when the city of San Francisco was granted permission to dam Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park to provide water and power. Hetch Hetchy was a twin sister valley to Yosemite Valley as was every bit as beautiful as the valley we all know, but now the Hetch Hetchy valley floor is covered with a huge reservoir. Muir wrote "Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man." The valley's fate was sealed 100 years ago, but our generation has the opportunity to undo the damage and restore a second Yosemite Valley to the park. To find out more, go visit the Restore Hetch Hetchy Table and meet Natalie Rosecrans. She'll put you to work to make a difference.

If you're 7 to 12 years old and not quite ready for a conservation campaign on your own, check out the John Muir Mountain Day Camp, which runs in July and August at this historic site. It's sponsored by the John Muir Association and the National Park Service. Next thing you know you'll be wanting to hike the length of the John Muir Trail.

Some people think the Sierra Club has lost its roots, because we no longer focus exclusively on national parks and wilderness and now devote so much time and energy to combatting climate change. But I will tell you, that one of John Muir's greatest loves were glaciers, and the biggest threat to glaciers

is climate change. Muir Glacier, named for the explorer after his first visits (beginning in 1879) to what is now Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska, terminates 35 miles farther north than it did in Muir's time. Muir was the first to recognize that Yosemite was carved by glaciers, and he then went at discovered the Yosemite glaciers that had retreated to the highest peaks to prove his point. But now glaciers from California to Montana to Alaska are rapidly disappearing and most glaciers in the Lower 48 states may soon only be a memory.

Muir was a bird lover and a botanist, but he reserved his greatest ardor for the "blue ice rivers" that helped shape the entire planet. Awe was Muir's daily pursuit. With friends once on a hike in the High Sierras, he scoffed at their elaborate picnic as he nibbled on a piece of crust. "To dine with a glacier on a sunny day is a glorious thing and makes common feasts of meat and wine ridiculous," he wrote to his sister. "A glacier eats hills and drinks sunbeams."

Over time, the mighty glaciers have been forced to retreat. Muir may have been the first naturalist to attribute the phenomenon to global warming. While he was clearly a man ahead of his time and a visionary when it came to glaciers and climate change, even he could not foresee just how destructive the planet's exploiters could become. In *Steep Trails* he wrote: "Fortunately, Nature has a few big places beyond man's power to spoil -- the ocean, the two icy ends of the globe, and the Grand Canyon."

Today we see massive ice loss at both icy ends of the globe, the oceans being threatened by acidification from fossil fuel pollution and climate change, and the Grand Canyon at risk from drought, dams, and proposed uranium development. Luckily, we still have John Muir's Sierra Club around to take action on these global assaults to the wildest places on earth.

But the Sierra Club doesn't save the Earth without you. Since its founding by John Muir and his friends 122 years ago, the secret of our success has been the power of common citizens to rise up and take action to defend the Earth. So if you want to learn how to take action and take responsibility and have a lot of fun doing it, stop by the Sierra Club booth today. We offer outings to wild places to satisfy your "enjoy and explore" urges, and plenty of opportunities to take action to satisfy your "protect" obligations.

Our mission since John Muir set us on our path over a century ago to explore, enjoy and protect the planet. So please take John Muir's advice this Earth Week and "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." But when you climb that mountain, remember

that you need to return the favor and find some way to make sure that mountain is safe from harm. When Muir decided to start the Sierra Club he told his friend, "Let us do something to make the mountains glad."

Thank you, and Happy Earth Week.