CHAPTER 8

John Muir: Publicizer

You know that I have not lagged behind in the work of exploring our grand wildnesses, and in calling everybody to come and enjoy the thousand blessings they have to offer.

John Muir, 1895

Although the creation of Yellowstone National Park and the Adirondack Forest Preserve marked a weakening of traditional American assumptions about uninhabited land, in each case wilderness preservation was almost accidental and certainly not the result of a national movement. Wild country needed a champion, and in a self-styled “poetico-trampo-geologist-bot. and ornithnatural, etc!—!—!—!”1 named John Muir it found one. Starting in the 1870s, Muir made exploring wilderness and extolling its values a way of life. Many of his ideas merely echoed the thoughts of earlier deists and Romantics, especially Thoreau, but he articulated them with an intensity and enthusiasm that commanded widespread attention. Muir’s books were minor best-sellers, and the nation’s foremost periodicals competed for his essays. The best publicizer of the American wilderness Muir had no equal. At his death in 1914 he had earned a reputation as “the most magnificent enthusiast about nature in the United States, the most rapt of all prophets of our out-of-door gospel.”2

“When I was a boy in Scotland,” John Muir recalled, “I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I’ve been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures.”3 He did not do so, however, without overcoming several formidable obstacles. One was a father whose Calvinistic conception of Christianity brooked no religion of nature. Scripture, postulated Daniel Muir, was the only source of God’s truth, and young John was obliged to commit the entire New Testament and most of the Old to memory. The Muir children were also schooled in the ethics of hard work. Only slackers or sinners approached nature without axe or plough.4

In 1849, during John’s eleventh year, his family left Scotland for a homestead on the central Wisconsin frontier. Indians lingered in the region, and the conquest of the forest was an economic necessity. As the eldest son, John bore many of the burdens of pioneering. Back-breaking days of toil gave him ample reason to hate the wilderness, but Muir was not the typical frontiersman. The thrill of being in what he later called “that glorious Wisconsin wilderness” never abated. And instead of lauding civilization, Muir expressed displeasure at its cruel, repressive, and utilitarian tendencies. Wild nature, in contrast, appeared to have a liberating influence conducive to human happiness.

Inevitably, John Muir left his father’s Wisconsin farm. His skill as an inventor provided a passport south to Madison. At the State Agricultural Fair of 1860, Muir’s mechanical devices won acclaim as the work of a genius. Job opportunities opened at once, but Muir took more interest in the world of ideas he glimpsed at the University of Wisconsin. Here he found scientists and theologians who supported his revulsion from his father’s attitudes toward nature and religion. In Professor Ezra Slocum Carr’s geology class Muir learned to look at the land with a new awareness of order and pattern. Botanical studies provided similar lessons and helped him understand the argument that natural science com-

completed rather than conflicted with worship. Eagerly Muir turned to the writing of Asa Gray for amplifications of this doctrine of design. Under the guidance of Mrs. Jeanne C. Carr and Dr. James Davie Butler, a professor of classics, he also discovered Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and a lesser-known Transcendental minister, Walter Rollins Brooks. Transcendentalism removed the last of Muir’s doubts concerning the conflict of religion and the study of the natural world. Early in 1866 he wrote triumphantly to Mrs. Carr that the Bible and “Nature” were “two books [which] harmonize beautifully.” Indeed, he continued, “I will confess that I take more intense delight from reading the power and goodness of God from ‘the things which are made’ than from the Bible.”

Muir’s two and a half years in Madison were insufficient for a degree, but he left with the thought that “I was only leaving one University for another, the Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness.” Yet it required a near-disaster to convince him that his true calling lay in the woods and mountains rather than the machine shop where his talents as an inventor might well have earned him a fortune. The pivotal event occurred in March 1867, while Muir was working in an Indianapolis carriage factory. Late one evening a sharp file slipped in Muir’s usually sure hands and pierced the cornea of his right eye. As he stood silently by a window, the aqueous humor fell out into his cupped hand. Within hours his other eye had also become blind from sympathetic nervous shock. Reduced to an invalid’s bed in a darkened room, Muir contemplated a life without sight. After a month, however, he recovered his vision, and vowed to waste no more time getting to the wilderness. “God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons,” he concluded.

As his first project Muir elected to wander “just anywhere in the wilderness southward” and ended by hiking a thousand miles from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico. The journal of his trip contains the seeds of most of his basic ideas. Wild nature was replete with “Divine beauty” and “harmony.” Especially to “lovers of the wild,” its “spiritual power” emanated from the landscape. If civilized man would only seek the wilderness, he could purg[e] himself of the “sediments of society” and become a “new creature.” Muir’s own appetite for wilderness knew no bounds. Only a serious bout with malaria persuaded him to give up plans to track the Amazon to its source. Instead, he sailed for the colder climate of northern California. Arriving in San Francisco in March 1868, Muir allegedly inquired of the first passer-by the way out of town. Asked to specify his destination, he simply replied “any place that is wild.” The trail led across the Bay, into the San Joaquin Valley, and, finally, into the Sierra. There it ended amidst mountains capable of satisfying Muir’s enthusiasm, developing his wilderness philosophy, and inspiring his most powerful writing.

For John Muir Transcendentalism was always the essential philosophy for interpreting the value of wilderness. Mrs. Carr’s personal friendship with Emerson and admiration for Thoreau encouraged Muir to steep himself in their works during his first long winters in Yosemite Valley. When the high-country trails opened again, a tattered volume of Emerson’s essays, heavily glossed in Muir’s hand, went along in his pack. Understandably, most of Muir’s ideas were variations on the Transcendentalists’ staple theme: natural objects were “the terrestrial manifestations of God.” At one point he described nature as a “window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.” Leaves, rocks, and bodies of water became “sparks of the Divine Soul.”

It followed that wild nature provided the best “conductor of divinity” because it was least associated with man’s artificial constructs. Making the point another way, Muir remarked that while God’s glory was written over all His works, in the wilderness the letters were capitalized. In this frame of mind, primitive forests became “temples,” while trees were “psalm-singing.” Of the Sierra

10. This first volume of the 1870 edition of The Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson now resides in the rare books collection of the Yale University Library. I consulted a microfilm reproduction in the University of Wisconsin Library, Madison.
wilderness as a whole Muir exulted: “everything in it seems equally divine—one smooth, pure, wild glow of Heaven's love.”

Wilderness glowed, to be sure, only for those who approached it on a higher, spiritual plane. Intuition was essential. Describing the process of insight, Muir drew his rhetoric directly from Emerson's *Nature*: “you bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature.” In this condition he believed life's inner harmonies, fundamental truths of existence, stood out in bold relief. “The clearest way into the Universe,” Muir wrote, “is through a forest wilderness.”

In May of 1871 Muir learned from Mrs. Carr that Emerson himself would shortly arrive in Yosemite. Greatly excited, he anticipated meeting the man best equipped to interpret the wilderness. A letter from Mrs. Carr prepared Emerson to find in the mountains someone who excelled in putting Transcendentalism into practice. Muir lived up to his advance billing, and Emerson was drawn to him immediately. Muir hoped he could persuade his mentor to join him “in a month’s worship with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite,” but the elderly sage's traveling companions demurred on his behalf and found lodging in a hotel. Lamenting Emerson’s “sadly cultivated” friends, Muir declared the incident a “sad commentary on culture and the glorious wilderness.”

In spite of this disappointment Muir continued to regard Transcendentalism as glorious and to correspond with Emerson. But in regard to wilderness the men differed fundamentally. On February 5, 1872, Emerson urged Muir “to bring to an early close your absolute contracts with any yet unvisited glaciers or volcanoes” and come to Massachusetts as his permanent guest. The solitude of the wilderness, he warned, “is a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife.” Muir, however, did not share such reservations, and positively refused the invitation. Indeed his unadulterated joy in wild country frequently conveyed the impression that man might dispense with civilization entirely and, roaming the mountains in close contact with God, be none the worse for the loss. Muir’s enthusiasm for wilderness was seldom qualified. Compared to Thoreau, who cringed at an excess of wildness and idealized the half-cultivated, Muir was wild indeed. “I am often asked,” he wrote in his Alaskan journal in the 1890s, “if I am not lonesome on my solitary excursions. It seems so self-evident that one cannot be lonesome where everything is wild and beautiful and busy and steeped with God that the question is hard to answer—seems silly.” Elsewhere he derisively remarked that “some have strange, morbid fears as soon as they find themselves with Nature, even in the kindest and wildest of her solitudes, like very sick children afraid of their mother.” Much as he admired Thoreau's philosophy, Muir could not suppress a chuckle at a man who could “see forests in orchards and patches of huckleberry brush” or whose outpost at Walden was a “mere saunter” from Concord.

Yet Muir’s intellectual debt to Thoreau and to primitivism appeared throughout his writing. In 1874, at the beginning of his literary career, he noted a great difference between domestic sheep and those living wild in the mountains. The former, he contended, were timid, dirty, and “only half alive” while the sheep of the Sierra were bold, elegant, and glowing with life. Muir returned to the theme the following year, this time choosing a comparison of wild and domestic wool as his metaphorical vehicle. As an answer to those who felt nothing wild could equal the civilized product, Muir presented evidence that the fleece of mountain sheep was superior in quality to that of commercial flocks. “Well done for wildness,” he exclaimed, “wild wool is finer than tame!” From this point Muir jumped to his conclusion: “all wildness is finer than tameness.” After a reference to wild and cultivated apples, which Thoreau had used as his metaphor in a similar discussion, Muir declared that “a little pure wildness is the one great present want, both of men and sheep.”

Muir’s ideas developed as a result of observing the stifling effect
on man's spirit of "the galling harness of civilization." "Civilized man chokes his soul," he noted in 1871, "as the heathen Chinese their feet." Muir believed that centuries of existence as primitive beings had implanted in modern men yearnings for adventure, freedom, and contact with nature that city life could not satisfy. Recognizing in himself "a constant tendency to return to primitive wildness," Muir generalized for his race: "going to the woods is going home; for I suppose we came from the woods originally." Consequently, "there is a love of wild Nature in everybody, an ancient mother-love showing itself whether recognized or no, and however covered by cares and duties." Deny this love, and the thwarted longings produced tension and despair; indulge it periodically in the wilderness, and mental and physical reinvigoration resulted.

Wild country, according to Muir, had a mystical ability to inspire and refresh. "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings," he advised. "Nature's peace will flow into you as the sunshine into the trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." Wilderness was medicinal to lives "bound by clocks, almanacs . . . and dust and din" and limited to places where "Nature is covered and her voice smothered." Furthermore, following Thoreau, Muir argued that great poetry and philosophy depended on contact with mountains and forests. For these reasons he concluded, in a near-plagiarism of Thoreau: "in God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh, unblighted, unredeemed wilderness."22

Muir also valued wilderness as an environment in which the totality of creation existed in undisturbed harmony. Civilization, he felt, had distorted man's sense of his relationship to other living things. Modern man asks " 'what are rattlesnakes good for?'" with the implication that for their existence to be justified they had to benefit human beings. For Muir, snakes were "good for themselves, and we need not begrudge them their share of life." Elsewhere he declared that "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." In the wilderness this truth was readily apparent, and men could feel themselves "part of wild Nature, kin to everything." From such knowledge came respect for "the rights of all the rest of creation."23 In these ideas—his most original—Muir anticipated the insights of the ecologists, especially Aldo Leopold.

John Muir took as his life's mission the education of his countrymen in the advantages of wild country. Indeed, he conceived himself similar to John the Baptist in attempting to immerse "in the beauty of God's mountains" the "sinners" imprisoned in civilization. "I care to live," he wrote in 1874, "only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness." His many later writings had a unifying message: buried in the cities, Americans defrauded themselves of the joy that could be theirs if they would but turn to "the freedom and glory of God's wilderness."24

The prime of John Muir's life coincided with the advent of national concern over conservation. At first, and superficially, the problem seemed simple: "exploitors" of natural resources had to be checked by those determined to "protect" them. Initially, anxiety over the rapid depletion of raw materials, particularly forests, was broad enough to embrace many points of view. A common enemy united the early conservationists. But they soon realized that as wide differences existed within their own house as between it and the exploiters. Men who thought they were colleagues found themselves opponents. The schism ran between those who defined conservation as the wise use or planned development of resources and those who have been termed preservationists, with their rejection of utilitarianism and advocacy of nature unaltered by man. Juxtaposing the needs of civilization with the spiritual and aesthetic value of wilderness, the conservation issue extended the old dialogue between pioneers and Romantics.

At the outset John Muir and his followers tried to keep a foot in both camps, recognizing the claims of both wilderness and civilization to the American landscape. In theory this was possible. But

the pressure of making decisions about specific tracts of undeveloped land forced ambivalence into dogmatism. After a period of vacillation and confusion, Muir ended, inevitably, by opting for the preservationist interpretation of conservation, while others followed Gifford Pinchot and the professional foresters into the "wise use" school. The resulting conflict in the American conservation movement, still prevalent today, had profound implications for wilderness.

The Muir farm in Wisconsin included a forty-acre bog adjoining Fountain Lake. As a young man John Muir coveted it for the touch of "pure wilderness" it lent to the landscape. In the mid-1860s, about the time he left home, it occurred to him that unless the swamp was protected it would soon become a well-trampled stockyard. Muir repeatedly offered to purchase the land from his brother-in-law with the idea of keeping it wild, but was rebuffed as a foolish sentimentalist. Yet his interest in preserving parts of the American wilderness continued to grow.

During his first years in California, Muir noticed with regret how sheep (he called them "hoofed locusts") were moving into the high Sierra wilderness. "As sheep advance," he declared, "flowers, vegetation, grass, soil, plenty, and poetry vanish." At the same time Muir also encountered Henry George's ideas about the evils of private ownership of land. Equipped with a passion for wilderness and the concept of public ownership, Muir began to write and lecture in favor of preservation through state action. Muir heartily agreed and eventually committed himself to write two articles for *Century* as part of the plan to publicize Yosemite and the park idea.

Muir's articles, complete with elaborate illustrations, appeared in the fall of 1890. He believed they would have over a million readers, but a more realistic figure was probably closer to the 200,000 copies of each issue *Century* actually circulated. At any rate, this was far more publicity than preservation had ever received before. The greater part of the two essays was descriptive, and in contrast to the original proponents of Yellowstone National Park and the Adirondack reservation, Muir made it clear that wilderness was the object to be protected. He declared the Sierra around Yosemite Valley to be "a noble mark for the...lover of wilderness pure and simple." Drawing on the ideas of George Perkins Marsh (Chapter 6), Muir emphasized the importance of safeguarding the Sierra's soil and forests as watershed cover. But his final sentence left no doubt that his primary concern was to prevent "the destruction of the fineness of wilderness."

While Muir was preparing his articles, Robert Underwood Johnson, the associate editor of the nation's leading literary monthly, *Century*, arrived in San Francisco looking for copy. He contacted Muir, already well known as a writer, and the two planned a trip into the wilderness above Yosemite Valley. One evening around the campfire Johnson asked what had become of the luxuriant meadows and wildflowers he supposed existed in the mountains. Muir sadly replied that overgrazing had destroyed them throughout the Sierra, prompting his companion to remark: "obviously the thing to do is to make Yosemite National Park around the Valley on the plan of Yellowstone." Muir heartily agreed and eventually committed himself to write two articles for *Century* as part of the plan to publicize Yosemite and the park idea.

In June of 1889 Robert Underwood Johnson, the associate editor...
Johnson lobbied for a Yosemite park before the House of Representatives Committee on Public Lands. He also editorialized in Century for the preservation of "the beauty of nature in its wildest aspects."33 One of Johnson's first tasks was to convince the legislators that Muir's proposal for a 1500-square-mile park was preferable to Representative William Vandever's idea of a reserve approximately one-fifth that size. In all probability Johnson received assistance from the powerful Southern Pacific Railroad, which had its eye on the profitable tourist trade Yosemite would generate.34 On September 30, 1890, a park bill following John Muir's specifications passed both houses of Congress with little discussion. The following day Benjamin Harrison's signature gave the nation its first preserve consciously designed to protect wilderness.

The Yosemite Act marked a great triumph, but Muir knew from experience that without close watching, even legally protected wilderness was not safe from the utilitarian instinct. Consequently he welcomed Johnson's 1891 idea for "a Yosemite and Yellowstone defense association."35 At the same time a group of professors at the University of California in Berkeley and at Stanford were discussing plans for an alpine club. Muir saw the connection at once and took the lead in planning an organization which would "be able to do something for wildness and make the mountains glad."36 On June 4, 1892, in the offices of San Francisco lawyer Warren Olney, twenty-seven men formed the Sierra Club and dedicated it to "exploring, enjoying and rendering accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast." They also proposed "to enlist the support of the people and the government in preserving the forests and other features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains."37 Muir was the unanimous choice for president (an office he held for twenty-two years until his death) and the Sierra Club grew rapidly as a mecca for those interested in wilderness and its preservation.

Although Yosemite National Park and the Sierra Club commanded most of Muir's attention in the early 1890s, he also followed with interest the beginnings of federal forest protection. On March 3, 1891, an amendment to an act revising the general land laws passed Congress almost unnoticed. Under its terms the President was empowered to create "forest reserves" (later renamed "National Forests") by withdrawing land from the public domain, and Benjamin Harrison promptly proclaimed fifteen reserves totaling more than 13,000,000 acres.38 Since the Forest Reserve Act did not specify the function of the reserved areas, John Muir had reason to believe it was intended to preserve undeveloped forests. To him the act seemed indistinguishable from legislation establishing national parks. Indeed, a renewed plea from Muir for a park around Kings Canyon stimulated Secretary of the Interior John W. Noble's determination to push the reserve bill through Congress. After listening to Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson, Noble decided that if the legislators refused to establish a park around Kings Canyon, the region might be protected as a forest reserva-

35. George Bird Grinnell to Johnson, Jan. 19, 1891, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 4. Grinnell was responding to Johnson's idea for an association.
tion. Shortly thereafter he and Assistant Land Commissioner Edward A. Bowers drafted the seminal act in National Forest history.  

The new forest reserves received only paper protection. In practice, exploitation was not even checked. Also disconcerting to conservationists was the lack of any clear definition of the purpose of the reserves. Muir was content simply to protect the forests in their undeveloped condition. But Bowers, Bernhard E. Fernow of the federal Division of Forestry, and a young Yale graduate named Gifford Pinchot had other ideas. Pinchot ultimately became the leading spokesman for the foresters' position. He had received graduate training in Europe where timberland was managed as a crop for maximum sustained yield. On returning late in 1890, Pinchot attempted to arouse interest in applying these forestry principles to America's timberland. He pointed out that while the lumberman was concerned with squeezing the last penny from the woods without regard to consequences, the forester managed them scientifically so as to obtain a steady and continuing supply of valuable products. In theory this was a compelling argument—the nation could have its forests and use them too. At first even John Muir agreed. Forestry seemed so much of an improvement on unregulated lumbering practices that he did not immediately see its incompatibility with wilderness preservation. Moreover, Muir recognized the material needs of a growing nation. In 1895 he contributed along with Pinchot, Fernow, and others to a symposium on forest management conducted by Century. "It is impossible, in the nature of things, to stop at preservation," Muir declared. "The forests must be, and will be, not only preserved, but used; and ... like perennial fountains ... be made to yield a sure harvest of timber, while at the same time all their far-reaching [aesthetic and spiritual] uses may be maintained unimpaired."  

This assumption, however, proved short-lived. In 1896 a chain of events began that awakened Muir's antipathy to forestry and permanently split the ranks of American conservationists. Early in the year the agitation of Robert Underwood Johnson, Harvard botanist Charles Sprague Sargent, and the American Forestry Association succeeded in convincing Secretary of the Interior Hoke Smith of the advisability of formulating explicit policy for the management of the reserves. Smith, in turn, asked the National Academy of Science to appoint an advisory commission. Along with Sargent, who headed the group, its membership consisted of William Brewer and Alexander Agassiz of Yale and Harvard respectively, General H. L. Abbott, an engineer, Arnold Hague of the United States Geological Survey, and Gifford Pinchot. A $25,000 appropriation from Congress in June, 1896 enabled the Forestry Commission to tour the Western woodlands that summer.

When Pinchot joined the Commission in Montana in July, he discovered, to his "great delight," that John Muir had agreed to assist in the survey in an ex-officio capacity. Describing Muir as "in his late fifties, tall, thin, cordial, and a most fascinating talker," he "took to him at once." "It amazed me to learn," Pinchot, an ardent fisherman, added, "that he never carried even a fishhook with him on his solitary explorations. He said fishing wasted too much time." There was a hint of different temperaments here, but initially Muir and Pinchot became close friends. They found much in common, since, by his own admission, Pinchot "loved the woods and everything about them." He had, in fact, selected forestry as a career because it involved contact with the outdoors, and during the summer of 1896 he cherished those times that he and Muir left the others to talk around campfires alone in the forest. Yet their common interests had definite limits. For all his love of the woods, Pinchot's ultimate loyalty was to civilization and forestry; Muir's to wilderness and preservation.

These differences emerged in the fall of 1896 as the Forestry Commission prepared to make its final report. The commissioners could not agree about the purpose of their work. Muir and Sargent

39. Wolfe, Muir, p. 252. Suggestive of the sort of argument Muir was making for Kings Canyon in the early 1890s is his "A Rival of the Yosemite: The Cañon of the South Fork of King's River, California, Century, 43 (1891), 77-79.


41. Pinchot, "Forester and Lumberman in the North Woods" (c. 1894), Gifford Pinchot Papers, Library of Congress, Box 62.


assumed their task was to determine which areas of undeveloped forest needed preservation. They hoped the government could be persuaded to reserve more forests without provision for commercial use, in the manner of the 1891 Forest Reserve Act. Pinchot and Hague, on the other hand, felt the whole object of the Commission was to “get ready for practical forestry” and favored opening all the reserves to carefully managed economic development. They accused the preservationists of wanting to lock up valuable natural resources.

The Sargent-Muir faction won a temporary victory on February 22, 1897, when President Grover Cleveland, in the closing days of his administration, established over 21,000,000 acres of forest reserves with no mention of utilitarian objectives. A recommendation from Sargent, made without the consent of his fellow commissioners, had precipitated the unexpected action. At once the foresters, seconded by lumber, grazing, and mining interests, howled in protest. Within a week bills appeared in both Houses to repeal Cleveland’s order. When President William McKinley and the new Congress took office in March, the whole reserve idea seemed in jeopardy. Walter Hines Page, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, asked Sargent to recommend someone to write in the forests’ behalf. “There is but one man in the United States who can do it justice,” he replied, “and his name is John Muir!”

The article Muir wrote for Page in the late spring of 1897 did indeed strike furiously at the opponents of the reserves. At the same time it revealed Muir’s continuing ambivalence on the forestry-or-preservation issue. He began with a diatribe against the pioneer who found the American forest “rejoicing in wildness” and, regarding “God’s trees as only a large kind of pernicious weeds,” waged “interminable forest wars.” But Muir tried hard not to block progress. “Wild trees,” he admitted, “had to make way for orchards and cornfields.” A similar inconsistency marked his discussion of conservation. At one point he treated the campaign to save the forests as pure preservation: “clearing has surely gone far enough; soon ... not a grove will be left to rest in or pray in.” Yet he also advocated the foresters’ concept of sustained yield, explicitly lauding Pinchot for his ideas about “wise management.” Taking the experience of European countries as a model for

44. Ibid., p. 94.
45. As quoted in Wolfe, Muir, p. 273.
ing of the grazing of sheep in the forest reserves. For Muir this compromise with the "hoofed locusts" was intolerable. Confronting Pinchot in a hotel lobby, he demanded an explanation. When Pinchot admitted he had been correctly quoted, Muir shot back: "then... I don't want anything more to do with you. When we were in the Cascades last summer, you yourself stated that the sheep did a great deal of harm."49 This personal break symbolized the conflict of values that was destroying the cohesiveness of the conservation movement.

Muir's new attitude was apparent in January 1898 in his second Atlantic Monthly essay. In sharp contrast to the article of the previous August, the new one made no mention of forestry and wise use. Instead it raised a paean to wilderness. Muir described the reserves as "virgin forests" and elaborated on the "thousands of God's wild blessings" they contained. Withdrawing all support from the Pinchot school, he labored to make his readers understand the importance of wilderness and the necessity of its preservation.50

While John Muir did not discourage the creation of forest reserves after the critical summer of 1897, he realized that under the foresters' control they held little promise for the preservation of wilderness. Consequently, he took every opportunity to promote and defend the national parks. With this purpose in mind he postponed a 1903 world tour with Charles Sargent for the chance to "do some forest good in freely talking around the campfire" with Theodore Roosevelt. The President had personally requested Muir's companionship in the Yosemite region, and returned from the trip, which included sleeping out during a four-inch snowfall, shouting ecstatically about "the grandest day of my life!"51 This was in spite of Muir's disarming frankness about the

51. As quoted in Wolfe, Muir, p. 298.

President's affection for hunting: "Mr. Roosevelt," he asked at one point, "when are you going to get beyond the boyishness of killing things... are you not getting far enough along to leave that off?" Taken aback, the President replied, "Muir, I guess you are right."52 One of the results of the excursion into the Sierra was Roosevelt's receptivity to Muir's proposal that California recede Yosemite Valley to the federal government for inclusion in the adjacent national park.53 Congress acted to this effect in 1906, and two years later Muir's many efforts on behalf of the Grand Canyon met with success when Roosevelt designated this region a national monument.54 Muir poured his last energies into resisting plans to dam Yosemite National Park's wild Hetch Hetchy Valley (Chapter 10).

After 1905, crusading for wilderness also entailed countering the influence that Gifford Pinchot exerted as Chief Forester in the United States Forest Service and custodian of the reserves. A highly effective publicizer in his own right, Pinchot, and his colleagues like W. J. McGee and Frederick H. Newell, soon succeeded in appropriating the term "conservation" for the wise-use viewpoint.55 The frustrated advocates of wilderness preservation had no choice but to call Pinchot a "de-conservationist."56 The dramatic Governors' Conference on the Conservation of Natural Resources held at the White House in 1908 championed utilitarianism and wise resource development. As the primary organizer of the conference, Pinchot carefully kept Muir, Johnson, and most other preservationists off the invitation list.57 But Pinchot could not suppress the groundswell of popular enthusiasm for wilderness that by the early

52. Johnson, Remembered Yesterdays, p. 988.
54. Muir had called for national park status for the "canyon wilderness" in 1898; see "Wild Parks," 27. He also wrote "Grand Canyon of the Colorado," Century, 65 (1908), 109-60. See, National Park Policy, pp. 290 ff. provides the political history.
57. For an indication of the bitterness this caused in the preservationist camp see Johnson, Remembered Yesterdays, pp. 900-907, and an open letter: Johnson to "Dear Sir," June 5, 1911, Johnson Papers, Berkeley Box 1.
twentieth century had attained the dimensions of a national cult. As Muir put it: "thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." Muir could take some pride in this phenomenon, because his life work had been devoted to bringing it about. But there were deeper reasons, rooted in the mood of the early twentieth century, for the unprecedented popularity of wilderness and, indeed, for the American public’s favorable reception of Muir himself.


CHAPTER 9

The Wilderness Cult

Whenever the light of civilization falls upon you with a blighting power... go to the wilderness... Dull business routine, the fierce passions of the market place, the perils of envious cities become but a memory. The wilderness will take hold of you. It will give you good red blood; it will turn you from a weakling into a man... You will soon behold all with a peaceful soul.

George S. Evans, 1904

On the morning of August 10, 1913, the Boston Post headlined its lead story: NAKED HE PLUNGES INTO MAIN WOODS TO LIVE ALONE TWO MONTHS. The following article told how six days previously a husky, part-time illustrator in his mid-forties named Joseph Knowles had disrobed in a cold drizzle at the edge of a lake in northeastern Maine, smoked a final cigarette, shaken hands around a group of sportsmen and reporters, and trudged off into the wilderness. There was even a photograph of an unclothed Knowles, discreetly shielded by underbrush, waving farewell to civilization. The Post explained that Joe Knowles had gone into the woods to be a primitive man for sixty days. He took no equipment of any kind and promised to remain completely isolated, living off the land “as Adam lived.”

For the next two months Knowles was the talk of Boston. He provided information about his experiment with periodic dispatches written with charcoal on birchbark. These reports, printed in the Post, revealed to an astonished and delighted public that Knowles was succeeding in his planned reversion to the primitive. Using heat from the friction of two sticks, he obtained fire. Clothing came from woven strips of bark. Knowles’ first few meals consisted of berries, but he soon varied his diet with trout, partridge, and even venison. On August 24 a front-page banner in the Post announced that Knowles had lured a bear into a pit, killed it with a club, and fashioned a coat from its skin. By this time newspapers throughout the East and as far away as Kansas City were featuring the story.

When on October 4, 1913, a disheveled but healthy Knowles finally emerged from the Maine woods extolling the values of a primitive way of life, he was swept up in a wave of public enthusiasm. His triumphant return to Boston included stops at Augusta, Lewiston, and Portland, with speeches before throngs of eight to ten thousand people. The cheers persisted in spite of the fine of $205 which an unyielding Maine Fish and Game Commission imposed on Knowles for killing a bear out of season! But Maine’s welcome paled next to that of Boston. The city had not had a hero like “the modern primitive man” in a generation. On October 9 a huge crowd jammed North Station to meet Knowles’ train and shouted itself hoarse when he appeared. Thousands more lined the streets through which his motorcade passed. Still clad in the bear skin, Knowles went to Boston Common where an estimated twenty thousand persons waited. His speech was disappointingly brief, but the gathering thrilled to the way he leaped onto the podium with “the quick, graceful movements of a tiger.”

In the next few days news of Knowles even upstaged an exciting World Series. At Harvard physicians reported on the excellence of his physical condition, and there were numerous banquets and interviews, including one with the governor of Massachusetts. Publishers besieged Knowles for the rights to a book version of his experience, which, as Alone in the Wilderness, sold 300,000 copies, and he toured the vaudeville circuit with top billing. The Post published full-page color reproductions of his paintings of wild animals, pointing out that they were suitable for framing and “just the thing to hang in your den.” Even when the Post’s rival newspaper presented substantial evidence that Knowles was a fraud whose saga had actually taken place in a secret, snug cabin, a vociferous denial arose in reply: quite a few Americans in 1913 apparently wanted to believe in the authenticity of the “Nature Man.” In fact, the Joe Knowles fad was just a single and rather grotesque manifestation of popular interest in wilderness. It added to the evidence suggesting that by the early twentieth century appreciation of wilderness had spread from a relatively small group of Romantic and patriotic literati to become a national cult.

By the 1890s sufficient change had occurred in American life and thought to make possible a widespread reaction against the previous condemnation of wilderness. Civilization had largely subdued the continent. Labor-saving agricultural machinery and a burgeoning industry, coupled with a surge in population, turned the American focus from country to city. The census of 1890 only gave statistical confirmation to what most Americans knew first hand: the frontier was moribund, wilderness no longer dominant. From the perspective of city streets and comfortable homes, wild country inspired quite different attitudes than it had when observed from a frontiersman’s clearing. No longer did the forest and Indian have to be battled in hand-to-hand combat. The average citizen could approach wilderness with the viewpoint of the vacationer rather than the conquerer. Specifically, the qualities of solitude and hardship that had intimidated many pioneers were likely to be magnetically attractive to their city-dwelling grandchildren.

Indicative of the change was the way in which many of the repugnant connotations of wilderness were transferred to the new urban environment. At the end of the nineteenth century, cities were regarded with a hostility once reserved for wild forests. In 1898 Robert A. Woods entitled a collection of exposures of Boston’s slum conditions The City Wilderness. A few years later, Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle employed a similar metaphor in describing the horrors of the Chicago stockyards. Too much civilization, not too little, seemed at the root of the nation’s difficulties. The bugaboos of the time—“Wall Street,” “trusts,” “invisible government”—were phenomena of the urban, industrialized East. In regard to primitive man, American opinion was also tending to reverse the flow of two and a half centuries. Increasing numbers

2. Ibid., Oct. 10, 1913.
6. After his venture in Maine, Knowles tried to repeat his stunt in California and, with a “primitive” female companion, in New York, but without success. Nor did his plan materialize for a wilderness colony where Americans could live close to nature. Ultimately, Knowles retired to an isolated shack on the coast of Washington; he died

related intellectual change in temper or mood. The general optimism and hope of the antebellum years partially yielded toward the end of the century to more sober assessments, doubts, and uncertainties. Many considered the defects of their society evidence that an earlier age's bland confidence in progress was unfounded. Reasons for pessimism appeared on every hand. A flood of immigrants seemed to many to be diluting the American strain and weakening American traditions. Business values and urban living were felt to be undermining character, taste, and morality. The vast size and highly organized nature of the economy and government posed seeming obstacles to the effectiveness of the individual. Instead of the millennium, American civilization appeared to have brought confusion, corruption, and a debilitating overabundance. There existed, to be sure, a countercurrent in American thought of pride and hope, but the belief persisted that the United States, if not the entire Western world, had seen its greatest moments and was in an incipient state of decline.

7. Helen H. Jackson, A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes (New York, 1881). In the succeeding decades the crimes of the white man against the Indian received extensive treatment in books and popular periodicals, while organizations like the National Indian Association and the Indian Defense Association were established to translate sentiment into action. Pearce, Savages of America, stops short of this period, but William T. Hagan, American Indians (Chicago, 1961), pp. 129 ff. is a useful discussion.


Henry F. May's The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917 (New York, 1959) dates the breakdown in optimism and the belief in progress somewhat later.

The Wilderness Cult

As a result of this sense of discontent with civilization, which was no less uncomfortable because of its vagueness, fin-de-siècle America was ripe for the widespread appeal of the uncivilized. The cult had several facets. In the first place, there was a growing tendency to associate wilderness with America's frontier and pioneer past that was believed responsible for many unique and desirable national characteristics. Wilderness also acquired importance as a source of virility, toughness, and savagery—qualities that defined fitness in Darwinian terms. Finally, an increasing number of Americans invested wild places with aesthetic and ethical values, emphasizing the opportunity they afforded for contemplation and worship.

With a considerable sense of shock, Americans of the late nineteenth century realized that many of the forces which had shaped their national character were disappearing. Primary among these were the frontier and the frontier way of life. Long a hero of his culture, the pioneer acquired added luster at a time when the pace and complexity of American life seemed on the verge of overwhelming the independent individual. It was tempting to venerate his existence as one in which men confronted tangible obstacles and, so the myth usually ran, overcame them on the strength of ability alone. Before the 1890s it was generally assumed that because the frontiersman was good, the wilderness, as his primary adversary, was bad—the villain of the national drama. But the growing perception that the frontier era was over prompted a re-evaluation of the role of primitive conditions. Many Americans came to understand that wilderness was essential to pioneering; without wild country the concepts of frontier and pioneer were meaningless. The villain, it appeared, was as vital to the play as the hero, and, in view of the admirable qualities that contact with wilderness were thought to have produced, perhaps not so villainous as had been supposed. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, esteem for the frontiersman extended to include his environment. Pioneering, in short, came to be regarded as important not only for spearheading the advance of civilization but also for bringing Americans into contact with the primitive.

The connection between living in the wilderness and the development of desirable American traits received dramatic statement after 1893 in the historical essays of Frederick Jackson Turner. His nominal subject, of course, was the "frontier," but he made clear...
that the wildness of the country was its most basic ingredient and the essential formative influence on the national character. "The frontier," he declared, "is ... determined by the reactions between wilderness and the edge of expanding settlement." Consequently, when Turner came to summarize the central theme of his collected essays, it was to "the transforming influence of the American wilderness" that he turned. The idea had been present in his first major address, when he spoke of the way "the wilderness masters the colonist." Gradually, to be sure, the pioneer "transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. . . . The fact is, that here is a new product that is American."¹⁰ The bulk of Turner's subsequent effort was devoted to assessing the effect on American ideals and institutions of contact with a primitive environment.

Turner's most widely discussed article appeared in the Atlantic Monthly for September, 1896. It argued that the frontier not only made the American different from the European but better. "Out of his wilderness experience," Turner wrote, "out of the freedom of his opportunities, he fashioned a formula for social regeneration—the freedom of the individual to seek his own." Turner believed, in short, that democracy was a forest product. Living in the wilderness, "the return to primitive conditions," fostered individualism, independence, and confidence in the common man that encouraged self-government. While Turner occasionally admitted that frontier democracy had its liabilities, his attempts at impartiality only thinly masked a conviction that government by the people was far superior to Old World despotism. Indeed by virtue of being wild, the New World was a clean slate to which idealists could bring their dreams for a better life. Triumphanty, Turner concluded: "the very fact of the wilderness appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man's struggle for a higher type of civilizaiton only thinly masked a conviction that government by the people was a forest product. Living in the wilderness, "the return to primitive conditions," fostered individualism, independence, and confidence in the common man that encouraged self-government. While Turner occasionally admitted that frontier democracy had its liabilities, his attempts at impartiality only thinly masked a conviction that government by the people was far superior to Old World despotism. Indeed by virtue of being wild, the New World was a clean slate to which idealists could bring their dreams for a better life. Triumphanty, Turner concluded: "the very fact of the wilderness appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man's struggle for a higher type of society."¹¹ Associated in this way with democracy and messianic idealism, wild country acquired new value. Turner recast its role from that of an enemy which civilized with democracy and messianic idealism, wild country acquired new

In 1903 Turner noted that the 1890s marked a watershed in American history: it was the first decade without a frontier. "The . . . rough conquest of the wilderness is accomplished," he pointed out, "and . . . the great supply of free lands which year after year has served to reinforce the democratic influences in the United States is exhausted." Inevitably, he wondered if American ideals "have acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their origin?"¹²

Turner never explicitly answered this question in his published work,¹³ but his tone suggested pessimism and contributed to a general sense of nostalgic regret over the disappearance of wilderness conditions. Articles in the nation's leading periodicals voiced concern over the "drift to the cities" and the consequent loss of pioneer qualities. Authors celebrating the "pathfinders" wondered how post-frontier Americans could comprehend their achievement.¹⁴ In 1902 Frank Norris took time from his novels to contribute "The Frontier Gone At Last" to World's Work. "Suddenly," it begins, "we have found that there is no longer any Frontier." The remainder of the article speculates on the meaning of this fact. Norris felt that since "there is no longer a wilderness to conquer," the "overplus" of American energy might drive the country to attempt the conquest of the world.¹⁵

The ending of the frontier prompted many Americans to seek ways of retaining the influence of wilderness in modern civilization. The Boy Scout movement was one answer. Although the English hero of the Boer War, Sir Robert S. S. Baden-Powell, was its official founder in 1907, his efforts were anticipated in this country. In 1902 the popular nature writer Ernest Thompson Seton revealed in a series of articles in the Ladies Home Journal his ideas for an organization of boys called Woodcraft Indians. And Seton's meeting with Baden-Powell two years later was important in arousing the Englishman's interest in scouting. Baden-Powell also had the example of organizations such as the Sons of Daniel

12. Ibid., pp. 244-45, 260-61.
13. However, as a student of Turner's at Harvard during the First World War, Merle Curti remembers the concern he expressed in conversation about the future of the American character now that an urban-industrial civilization had replaced frontier conditions: interview with Merle Curti, Jan. 9, 1963.
Boone and the Boy Pioneers which Daniel C. Beard launched in 1905. But soon after the Boy Scout concept came to America, it absorbed these forerunners, and both Seton and Beard transferred their allegiances.  

Seton set forth the methods and goals of the Boy Scouts of America in 1910 in a way that revealed the new importance Americans were accorded wilderness. A century ago, the Scouts' first Handbook begins, every American boy lived close to nature. But since then the country had undergone an “unfortunate change” marked by industrialization and the “growth of immense cities.” According to Seton, the result was “degeneracy” and people who were “strained and broken by the grind of the over-busy world.” As a remedy for this condition, the Handbook proposes that the boys of America lead the nation back to an emphasis of “Outdoor Life.” This would include the realization that long and happy lives were most common among “those ... who live nearest to the ground, that is, who live the simple life of primitive times.” Seton then went on to give instruction in woodlore and campcraft, in the hope that boys would spend at least a month of every year away from civilization, keeping in contact with frontier skills and values.

The Boy Scouts’ striking success (it quickly became the largest youth organization in the country) is a significant commentary on American thinking in the early twentieth century. In thirty years the Handbook sold an alleged seven million copies in the United States, second only to the New Testament. Americans of this generation also responded to the ideas of another important wilderness writer, Joseph Knowles.

Another response to the vanishing frontier was the rise of popular interest in preserving portions of the American wilderness. While wild country still existed to the West, the preservation concept had found favor with only a few farsighted individuals. Yellowstone National Park (1872) and the Adirondack Forest Preserve (1885) were not established to protect wilderness. After 1890, however, the disappearance of the frontier environment became more obvious. The resulting sense of nostalgia prompted, for one thing, belated recognition of the wilderness values of the first national and state reservations in Wyoming and northern New York (Chapter 7). The 1890s were also the years in which John Muir found numerous countrymen ready to join the preservationist wing of the conservation movement. Americans of this generation also responded to the ideas of another important wilderness publicizer: Theodore Roosevelt.

On February 10, 1894, Roosevelt wrote to Frederick Jackson Turner thanking him for a copy of his 1893 address on the significance of the American frontier. “I think you have struck some first class ideas,” Roosevelt asserted, “and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought which has been floating around rather loosely.” Indeed, Roosevelt himself anticipated many of Turner’s ideas, and even his rhetoric, in his 1889 The Winning of the West. “Under the hard conditions of life in the wilderness,” Roosevelt wrote, those who migrated to the New World “lost all remembrance of Europe” and became new men “in dress, in customs, and in mode of life.” He too realized that by the 1890s “the frontier had come to an end; it had vanished.” This alarmed Roosevelt chiefly because of its anticipated effect on national virility and greatness.

The study of American history and personal experience combined to convince Roosevelt that living in wilderness promoted "that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone." Conversely, he felt, the modern American was in real danger of becoming an "overcivilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues." To counter this trend toward "fribbiness" and "slothful ease" Roosevelt in 1899 called upon his countrymen to lead a "life of strenuous endeavor." This included keeping in contact with wilderness: pioneering was an important antidote to dull mediocrity. "As our civilization grows older and more complex," Roosevelt explained, "we need a greater and not a less development of the fundamental frontier virtues." 23

Roosevelt led the way personally. Immediately after graduating from Harvard, he spent considerable time in the 1880s on his ranch in the Dakota Territories, exulting in the frontiersman's life. He even had himself photographed posing proudly in a buckskin suit. 24 Later, when official duties demanded attention, he still found time for hunting and camping trips in wild country. Once, in a preface to a collection of hunting stories, Roosevelt attempted to articulate his feelings. "There are no words," he began, "that can tell of the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm. There is delight in the hardy life of the open, in long rides rifle in hand, in the thrill of the fight with dangerous game." In addition he confessed a strong aesthetic attraction to "the silent places . . . the wide waste places of the earth, unworn of man, and changed only by the slow change of the ages through time everlasting." 25

Understandably, Roosevelt was delighted that his country had taken the lead in establishing wilderness preserves and urged "every believer in manliness . . . every lover of nature, every man who appreciates the majesty and beauty of the wilderness and of wild life" to give them full support. In 1903, as President, he toured Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks and came away delighted that these "bits of the old wilderness scenery and the old wilderness life are to be kept unspoiled for the benefit of our children's children." In Roosevelt's opinion, America needed these remnants of the pioneer environment, because "no nation facing the unhealthy softening and relaxation of fibre that tends to accompany civilization can afford to neglect anything that will develop hardihood, resolution, and the scorn of discomfort and danger." 26

The wilderness preserves would serve this purpose by providing a perpetual frontier and keeping Americans in contact with primitive conditions. The rapid growth of the preservation movement, which reached a climax after 1910 in the Hetch Hetchy controversy (Chapter 10), suggests that a sizeable number of Americans joined with their President in detecting a national malaise and shared his faith in a wilderness cure.

"The friendly and flowing savage, who is he? Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?" So asked Walt Whitman in a poem given final form in 1881. His question was not idle for the growing portion of his generation that entertained doubts about the happiness and vigor of modern man. Evidence of American decadence spurred primitivism. Wilderness and savages seemed to have advantages over civilized nature and man. Whitman himself sought wildness in 1876 when, broken in health and depressed from the experience of civil war, he retreated to Timber Creek, New Jersey. Along its "primitive windings" he found relief from "the whole cast-iron civilized life" and the chance to return to "the naked source-life of us all—to the breast of the great silent savage all-acceptive Mother." 27 Gradually Whitman recovered his physical strength and creative powers. Combined with his constant literary apotheosis of the unrepessed and wild, the Timber Creek interlude made Whitman's initial question seem rhetorical.

Whitman was a precursor of the American celebration of savagery. In full stride by the second decade of the twentieth century, it contributed to the rising popularity of wilderness. While related to the attraction of the frontier and pioneer, this aspect of the cult had more to do with racism, Darwinism, and a tradition of idealiz-

24. Herman Hagedorn, Roosevelt in the Bad Lands (Boston, 1921). Photographs appear as a frontispiece and on p. 236.
ing the noble savage in his wilderness setting that ran back several thousand years (see Chapter 3). Ancient cultures, when inclined to self-criticism, began the practice of regarding those less civilized than themselves as superior. The spectacle of barbaric hordes sweeping down on a moribund and effete Roman Empire permanently impressed Western thought with the idea that virile manliness and wildness were closely linked. Early American experimenters with primitivistic themes, notably Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, provided the immediate literary background for the growth of interest in savagery. But it owed much more to a general feeling that the American male was suffering from over-civilization.

Theodore Roosevelt again took the lead in applauding savage virtues. Without advocating a return to cave-dwelling on a permanent basis, he still hoped that the opportunity for modern Americans to experience wilderness and lead for a time the savage way of life would not be totally eliminated. In 1888, with a view to implementing his ideas, Roosevelt organized the Boone and Crockett Club. Its stated purpose was the encouragement of big-game hunting, but the character of the hunter was the real object of concern. To qualify for membership it was necessary to have collected three trophy heads, and along with Roosevelt (who had eight) the founding nucleus included Elihu Root, Madison Grant, and Henry Cabot Lodge. Of course Americans had always shot game, but this group of wealthy hunters coupled their sport with an unprecedented primitivistic philosophy. As Roosevelt and co-author George Bird Grinnell expressed it in a Boone and Crockett publication of 1893, “hunting big game in the wilderness is . . . a sport for a vigorous and masterful people.” To succeed in a primitive environment, they continued, the hunter “must be sound of body and firm of mind, and must possess energy, resolution, manliness, self-reliance, and a capacity for self-help.” The statement ended with the thought that these were characteristics “without which no race can do its life work well; and . . . the very qualities which it is the purpose of this Club . . . to develop and foster.”

Testimony from individual sportsmen supported this point of view. William Kent, a California congressman and conservationist (see Chapter 10), regretted that “since the days of the cave men our race has gone . . . degenerate.” As a corrective measure, he rejoiced in the savagery of hunting. After a kill, Kent declared, “you are a barbarian, and you’re glad of it. It’s good to be a barbarian . . . and you know that if you are a barbarian, you are at any rate a man.” In conclusion Kent called on his contemporaries to “go out into the wilderness and learn the endurance of nature which endures.” Hunting, once strictly a utilitarian activity, had been given a new rationale.

The surge of interest among Americans in primitive environments for purposes of recreation indicated that the ideology of the Boone and Crockett Club and William Kent was not esoteric. Wilderness camping and mountain climbing became an important part of the widespread “outdoor movement.” These pursuits had a special appeal to city people, who found in them temporary relief from artificiality and confinement. As one enthusiast put it in 1904, “whenever the light of civilization falls upon you with a blighting power . . . go to the wilderness.” There, he continued, it was possible “to return to the primitive, the elemental” and escape “the perils of envious cities.” Temporarily one partook of “the ruggedness of the mountains, the sturdiness of the oaks, the relentless savagery of the wind.” The end result was to “give you good red blood; [to] turn you from a weakling into a man.” A tribute to Joe Knowles at a banquet in his honor took up the same theme: “there is too much refinement. It leads to degeneration. My friend Knowles has taught us how to live on nothing. It is better than living on too much. We should all get down to nature.”

34. James B. Connolly as quoted in the Boston Post, Oct. 12, 1913.
Americans with similar sentiments formed the core of the numerous outdoor clubs that appeared in the late nineteenth century. The Appalachian Mountain Club (1876) in the East, and the Sierra Club (1892) in the West organized wilderness enthusiasts and became stalwarts in the campaign for its preservation. The Mazamas of Portland, Oregon began in 1894 with a meeting of 155 hardy climbers on top of Mount Hood. Three years later the Campfire Club of America was founded. For the members of these and other groups, part of the value of a wilderness trip was masochistic in that it provided a chance to play the savage, accept punishment, struggle, and, hopefully, triumph over the forces of raw nature. “The man in the woods,” declared Stewart Edward White in 1903, “matches himself against the forces of nature.” Confronting wilderness “is a test, a measuring of strength, a proving of his essential pluck and resourcefulness and manhood, an assurance of man’s highest potency, the ability to endure and to take care of himself.” Meeting such a challenge assuaged fears that Americans were not what they used to be.

Carried to the extent of Joe Knowles’ alleged exploit, the successful struggle against the primitive had a tonic effect on national pride and confidence. Knowles himself was aware of this implication and declared that his purpose in spending two months in the wilderness without equipment was “to demonstrate the self-sustaining power of modern man; to prove that man, though handicapped with the habits of civilization, is the physical equal of his early ancestors, and has not altogether lost . . . [their] resourcefulness.” Reacting to the reported success of the experiment, many felt Knowles’ greatest significance was to put the human element back into the spotlight; to show that even without machines man still deserved his place atop the Darwinian tree of life. As one journal commented editorially, what Knowles accomplished in Maine “is a good deal more comforting to our proper human pride than the erection of a Woolworth building.”

Realizing the growing attractiveness of the wild for recreation, advertisers took account in their publicity of the thirst for the primitive. In 1911, for example, the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad Company, anxious to have vacationers ride its cars into Maine, began issuing a yearly publication, In the Maine Woods. A typical passage began with the observation that “there’s a good deal of the primitive in most of us” and concluded that consequently “we feel the magic beckoning of old Mother Nature to rise up from the thralldom of business . . . and to betake ourselves to the woods.” Maine, of course, was the suggested destination as a region “still rich in primeval charms.” For those who could not travel this far, landscape architects such as Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot proposed that in addition to city parks patches of “wild forest” be preserved close to metropolitan areas. In them, Eliot contended in 1891, men could find relief from the “poisonous struggling . . . of city life” and the resulting feeling of exhaustion and depression. Olmsted felt the current surge of interest in natural landscapes was the result of many Americans’ perceiving that “we grow more and more artificial day by day.” A “self-preserving instinct of civilization,” he thought, led it to parks and preserves as a means of resisting “vital exhaustion,” “nervous irritation,” and “constitutional depression.”

The reading as well as the recreational tastes of many Americans of the early twentieth century were inclined toward the wild and savage. “Natural history” became a major literary genre. John Burroughs was only the best known of several score writers who kept

35. See Chapter 8, and Allen H. Bent, “The Mountaineering Clubs of America,” Appalachia, 14 (1910), 5–18. For the Appalachian Mountain Club, in particular, the records at the Clubs’ Headquarters, Boston, are most useful.


the public's appetite satiated with a deluge of articles and books ranging from robins to grizzlies. Among works of fiction, one of the best sellers of the early twentieth century was Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. Published in 1903, it told the story of a huge dog, Buck, who was stolen from his master's ranch in California and sold into the Klondike to haul sleds. Exposed to primitive conditions, Buck gradually threw off his domesticated habits and became "the dominant primordial beast." At the close of the novel he had reverted all the way to the wolf, and London pictured him "running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world." London left no doubt that it was also the song of a more vital, stronger and generally superior world, and his readers had little difficulty seeing the moral for their own lives in Buck's reversion to the primitive. Significantly, London's *White Fang* (1906), in which a wolf became a family dog, never enjoyed the popularity of *The Call of the Wild*.

Savagery, of course, received its most triumphant literary expression at this time in Edgar Rice Burroughs' stories about an English infant reared in the jungle by apes. Burroughs began experimenting with the theme in 1912, and two years later published one of America's most widely read books, *Tarzan of the Apes*. Like Buck, Tarzan benefited from his contact with the wilderness to the extent of becoming a superman.

The third major component of the wilderness cult lacked the hairy-chestedness of the previous ideas and instead accorded wild country value as a source of beauty and spiritual truth. This outlook, of course, depended on an intellectual revolution occurring over the previous several centuries, and echoed the familiar Romantic rhetoric (see Chapter 3). But several circumstances of late-nineteenth century America combined to give it new urgency and unprecedented public appeal. As the antipode of civilization, of cities, and of machines, wilderness could be associated with the virtues these entities lacked. In the primitive, specifically, many Americans detected the qualities of innocence, purity, cleanliness, and morality which seemed on the verge of succumbing to utilitarianism and the surge of progress. And at a time when the force of religion seemed vitiated by the new scientism on the one hand and social conflict on the other, wilderness acquired special significance as a resuscitator of faith. Joe Knowles, for one, knew the value of his trip was partly spiritual. "My God is in the wilderness," he wrote, "the great open book of nature is my religion. My church is the church of the forest." Wild scenery enthralled Americans of this mind. They provided the market for elaborate albums such as James W. Buel's 1893 prodigy, *America's Wonders: Pictorial and Descriptive History of Our Country's Scenic Marvels as Delineated by Pen and Camera*, and for their vacations thronged the White and Adirondack Mountains, and later the Rockies and Sierra. These people also looked favorably on wilderness preservation: protection of wild country seemed part of the defense of the finer things of life. Frederick Law Olmsted expressed the idea when he defended "the contemplation of beauty in natural scenery" for its effect in countering "excessive materialism, . . . loss of faith and lowness of spirit." In the United States Senate, George G. Vest of Missouri made a similar analysis. Speaking in defense of Yellowstone National Park, he declared that "the great curse of this age and of the American people is its materialistic tendency. Money, money, l'argent, l'argent is the cry everywhere, until our people are held up. . . . The world as noted for nothing except the acquisition of money at the expense of all esthetic taste and of all love of nature." In 1890, Olmsted generalized that any time a wilderness preserve was endangered the public


should respond as they would "to any crisis threatening a national
treasure of art."50

It was precisely this sentiment that John Muir and Robert
Underwood Johnson endeavored to arouse in the following decades.
Muir continually lamented "these mad, God-forgetting progressive
days,"51 and his rhetoric, steeped in Transcendentalism, created a
style for appreciating wilderness. Echoing their president, Sierra
Club members like Marion Randall returned from mountain trips
with the feeling that "for a little while you have dwelt close to the
heart of things . . . [and] drawn near Him." She declared herself
ready at once "to turn to the hills again, whence comes, not only
your help, but your strength, your inspiration, and some of the
brightest hours you have ever lived." In 1894, the Sierra Club Bal-
letin carried a reproof of anyone "blessed" with a view of wilder-
ness "yet who feels no exaltation of soul, no supreme delight in
the conscious exercise or stirring of that something within us we
call the aesthetic." Muir himself went still further in labeling as
"selfish seekers of immediate Mammon" those who could bring
only utilitarian criteria to wild places.52

As a self-styled upholder of his country's "standards"53 and one of
the pillars of its "genteel tradition,"54 Robert Underwood Johnson
represented the social type that furnished a large proportion of
wilderness enthusiasts. The bookish, dapper Johnson had little de-
sire for actual contact with the primitive and, by his own admis-
sion, was an inept outdoorsman. His interest, rather, lay in the
idea of wilderness as something pure, beautiful, and delicate, embattled
against what he conceived to be ruthless exploitation. Indeed, he
referred to his many efforts before Congress on behalf of preserva-

50. Olmsted, "Governmental Preservation of Natural Scenery," Sierra Club Bal-
letin, 29 (1944), 62.

51. Muir to George Plimpton, Dec. 9, 1918, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 7.

(1905), 228-28; P. B. Van Trump, "Mt. Tahoma," Sierra Club Bulletin, 1 (1894),
115; Muir to Robert Underwood Johnson, March 14, 1894, Johnson Papers, Berkeley,
Box 7.

53. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, Hetch
Hetchy Reservoir Site, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess. (Sept. 24, 1913), p. 46.

54. George Santayana, The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy (Berkeley,
Cal., 1911); John Tomsich, "The Genteel Tradition in America, 1850-1910" (unpub-
lished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963); Richard Cary, The Genteel
Circle: Bayard Taylor and his New York Friends, Cornell Studies in American His-

55. Johnson, Remembered Yesterdays, pp. 239 ff. The Robert Underwood Johnson
Papers at the New York Public Library substantiate his wideranging interest in art,
culture, creativity, and refinement.

56. Johnson, "John Muir as I Knew Him," (typescript c. 1915) John Muir Papers,
American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York.

57. Hayes, Conservation, pp. 141 ff.; Charles D. Smith, "The Movement for Eastern
National Forests, 1890-1911" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University,

58. Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House . . . May 23-15,
1908, ed. Newton C. Blanchard et al., U.S. House of Representatives Doc. 1429, 60th
Cong., 2d Sess., pp. 140, 156, 419.
a wilderness cult. Both men made wildness their dominant concern, yet the extent to which they were successful and influential figures in their lifetimes differed markedly. In 1853 Thoreau was obliged to find storage space for the seven hundred unsold volumes of a thousand-copy printing of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Just over forty years later, Muir happily wrote Johnson that bookstores could not supply the demand for his initial book-length work, *The Mountains of California*. The authors’ comments were symbolic. While he lived, Thoreau’s supporters consisted of a handful of personal friends. His writings went unsold and his lectures were sparsely attended. The general public regarded the Walden Pond episode as incomprehensible at best. Muir, on the contrary, was highly successful and nationally acclaimed in spite of the fact that most of his thoughts were simply restatements of the Transcendentalists’ case for wilderness. The context rather than the content of the respective philosophies determined their popularity. Like Joe Knowles, it was Muir’s good fortune to live at a time when he could reap the honors that belatedly came to Thoreau’s ideas.

The American cult of the wilderness that lifted Muir, and for that matter, Thoreau, into prominence was not, to be sure, overwhelming, nor was the popularity of primitivism the only manifestation of discontent and frustration at the end of the nineteenth century. In a complex age, it was but a single current of thought. Even in the minds of those who championed wilderness, pride in the accomplishments of American civilization and a belief in the virtues of further development of natural resources persisted. Yet by the twentieth century’s second decade something of a divide had been passed. Sufficient misgivings about the effects of civilization had arisen to encourage a favorable opinion of wilderness that contrasted sharply with earlier American attitudes.

60. Muir to Johnson, Jan. 10, 1895, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 7.

Hetch Hetchy

As to my attitude regarding the proposed use of Hetch Hetchy by the city of San Francisco . . . I am fully persuaded that . . . the injury . . . by substituting a lake for the present swampy floor of the valley . . . is altogether unimportant compared with the benefits to be derived from its use as a reservoir.

Gifford Pinchot, 1913

These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the Mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar.

John Muir, 1912

Situated on a dry, sandy peninsula, the city of San Francisco faced a chronic fresh-water shortage. In the Sierra, about one hundred and fifty miles distant, the erosive action of glaciers and the Tuolumne River scooped the spectacular, high-walled Hetch Hetchy Valley. As early as 1882, city engineers pointed out the possibility of damming its narrow, lower end to make a reservoir. They also recognized the opportunity of using the fall of the impounded water for the generation of hydroelectric power. In 1890, however, the act creating Yosemite National Park designated Hetch Hetchy and its environs a wilderness preserve. Undaunted, San Francisco’s mayor James D. Phelan applied for the valley as a reservoir site shortly after the turn of the century. Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock’s refusal to violate the sanctity of a national park was only a temporary setback, because on April 18, 1906, an earthquake and fire devastated San Francisco and added urgency and public sympathy to the search for an adequate water supply. The city immediately reapplied for Hetch Hetchy, and on May 11, 1908, Secretary James R. Garfield approved the new application. “Domestic use,” he wrote, “is the highest use to which water and available storage basins . . . can be put.”


The best political histories of the Hetch Hetchy controversy are Jones, *John Muir*
John Muir, Robert Underwood Johnson, and those whom they had won to the cause of wilderness preservation disagreed. Secretary Garfield’s approval stimulated them to launch a national protest campaign. Given the flourishing cult of wilderness on the one hand and the strength of traditional assumptions about the desirability of putting undeveloped natural resources to use on the other, the battle over Hetch Hetchy was bound to be bitter. Before Congress and President Woodrow Wilson made a final decision in 1913, the valley became a cause célèbre. The principle of preserving wilderness was put to the test. For the first time in the American experience the competing claims of wilderness and civilization to a specific area received a thorough hearing before a national audience.

When the preservationists first learned of San Francisco’s plans for Hetch Hetchy, Theodore Roosevelt occupied the White House, and the choice of reservoir or wilderness placed him in an awkward position. There were few Americans so committed to a belief in the value of wild country (see Chapter 9). Yet Roosevelt appreciated the importance of water, lumber, and similar commodities to national welfare and as President felt responsible for providing them. The result of this ambivalence was inconsistency in Roosevelt’s early policy statements. In 1901 he declared in his first annual message that “the fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use. Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend on them.” But later in the message, he revealed his hope that some of the forest reserves could be made “preserves for the wild forest creatures.” The same uncertainty appeared two years later in an address on the goal of forestry: “primarily the object is not to preserve forests because they are beautiful—though that is good in itself—not to preserve them because they are refuges for the wild creatures of the wilderness—though that too is good in itself—but the primary object of forest policy . . . is the making of prosperous homes, is part of the traditional policy of homemaking in our country.”

In this seesaw manner Roosevelt hoped to hold the two wings of the conservation movement together on a united front. The task was formidable: Muir already had found his position incompatible with Gifford Pinchot’s. But after 1905 Pinchot was Chief Forester and the principal spokesman of the utilitarian conception of conservation. Moreover, he enjoyed a close friendship with Roosevelt. According to Johnson, the President went so far as to declare that “in all forestry matters I have put my conscience in the keeping of Gifford Pinchot.” And Pinchot favored converting Hetch Hetchy into a reservoir. Yet Roosevelt had camped in Yosemite with Muir and appreciated the growing political strength of the preservationist position. Early in September 1907, he received a letter from Muir that brought the issue to a head. Reminding the President of their 1903 trip into the Sierra wilderness, Muir expressed his desire that the region “be saved from all sorts of commercialism and marks of man’s works.” While acknowledging the need for an adequate municipal water supply, he maintained that it could be secured outside “our wild mountain parks.” Concluding the letter, Muir expressed his belief that over ninety per cent of the American people would oppose San Francisco’s plans if they were apprised of their consequences.

Roosevelt’s initial reaction, made even before Muir’s communication, was to seek advice from engineers about alternative reservoir sites. The report, however, was that Hetch Hetchy offered the only practical solution to San Francisco’s problem.

Roosevelt made up his mind. While assuring Muir that he would do everything possible to protect the national parks, the President reminded him that if these reservations "interfere with the permanent material development of the State instead of helping . . . the result will be bad." Roosevelt ended with an expression of doubt that the great majority would take the side of wilderness in a showdown with the material needs of an expanding civilization. Pinchot seconded the judgment in favor of San Francisco. Writing to the President in October 1907 that "I fully sympathize with the desire of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Muir to protect the Yosemite National Park, but I believe that the highest possible use which could be made of it would be to supply pure water to a great center of population." Still Roosevelt was not comfortable in his decision against wilderness, and confessed to Johnson that Hetch Hetchy was "one of those cases where I was extremely doubtful." In spite of his doubts Roosevelt had made a choice, and in the spring of 1908 the Garfield permit opened the way for the development of the valley. Muir was discouraged but not defeated. He believed it still was possible to arouse a national protest and demonstrate to federal authorities that Roosevelt was mistaken in his judgment about the lack of public sentiment for keeping Hetch Hetchy wild. But Muir fully realized that "public opinion is not yet awakened." The first task of the preservationists was to capitalize on the wilderness cult and replace ignorance with anger. Telling arguments against the reservoir were needed. As the basis for their protest, the friends of wilderness turned to the old Romantic case against "Mammon." They made Hetch Hetchy into a symbol of ethical and aesthetic qualities, while disparaging San Francisco's proposal as tragically typical of American indifference toward them. This line of defense took advantage of national sensitivity to charges of being a culture devoted entirely to the frantic pursuit of the main chance. It criticized the commercialism and sordidness of American civilization, while defending wilderness.

John Muir opened the argument for the Valley on aesthetic grounds with an article in Outlook. After describing its beauties, he declared that its maintainence as a wilderness was essential, "for everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike." Others took up the same theme in the national press. Writing in Century, which he now edited, Robert Underwood Johnson charged that only those who had not advanced beyond the "pseudo-practical stage" could favor San Francisco. The presence of these individuals in the nation, he added, "is one of the retarding influences of American civilization and brings us back to the materialistic declaration that 'Good is only good to eat.'" As a self-appointed spokesman for culture and refinement, Johnson took it upon himself to defend intangibles. In a brief submitted at the first Congressional hearing on the Hetch Hetchy question in December, 1908, he made his protest "in the name of all lovers of beauty . . . against the materialistic idea that there must be something wrong about a man who finds one of the highest uses of nature in the fact that it is made to be looked at."

As president of the American Civic Association, J. Horace McFarland took every opportunity to preach the desirability, indeed the necessity, of maintaining some element of beauty in man's environment. He believed the aesthetic should have a place in the conservation movement, and in 1909 expressed his displeasure at its concentration on utilitarian aims. In the same year he told Pinchot that "the conservation movement is now weak, because it has failed to join hands with the preservation of scenery." For McFarland, Hetch Hetchy was a test case, and he spoke and wrote widely in its defense. If even national parks were to be given over to utilitarian purposes, there was no guarantee that ultimately all the beauty of unspoiled nature would be destroyed. Speaking before the Secretary of the Interior on the Hetch Hetchy question, McFarland contended that such undeveloped places would become increasingly valuable for recreation as more and more Americans

9. Roosevelt to Johnson, Dec. 17, 1908, Johnson Papers, Berkeley; Box 8.
11. Ibid., 488. Large portions of the article were borrowed from Muir's earlier essay: "Hetch Hetchy Valley: The Lower Tuolumne Yosemite," Overland Monthly, 11 (1879), 48-50.
14. McFarland to Johnson, Feb. 4, 1909, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 5; McFarland to Pinchot, Nov. 26, 1909, Pinchot Papers, Box 1809.
lived in cities. Yet when the preservation of wilderness conflicted
with "material interests," those financially affected cried: "that is
sentimentalism; that is aestheticism; that is pleasure-loving; that is
unnecessary; that is not practical." Usually such resistance carried
the day and wilderness was sacrificed. McFarland objected because
"it is not sentimentalism, Mr. Secretary; it is living." Elsewhere
he elaborated on his ideas: "the primary function of the national
forests is to supply lumber. The primary function of the national
parks is to maintain in healthful efficiency the lives of the people
who must use that lumber. . . . The true ideal of their maintenance
does not run parallel to the making of the most timber, or the most
pasturage, or the most water power."16

Lyman Abbott, the editor of Outlook, also felt it was a mistake
"to turn every tree and waterfall into dollars and cents." His maga-
azine found most of its readers among a class of people concerned
over what they thought was the eclipse of morality, refinement, and
idealism by urbanization, industrialization, and an emphasis on
business values. The defense of wilderness attracted them because
it permitted making a positive case—they could be for something
(wilderness) rather than merely against amorphous forces. Protect-
ing the wild from an exploitative civilization, in short, represented
the broader struggle to maintain intangibles against the pressure
of utilitarian demands. Sensing this, Abbott made Outlook one of
the chief organs of the Hetch Hetchy campaign. He explained his
stand in an editorial in 1909: "if this country were in danger of
habitually ignoring utilitarian practice for the sake of running
after sentimental dreams and aesthetic visions we should advise it
. . . to dam the Tuolumne River in order to instruct its citizens in
the use of the bathtub. But the danger is all the other way. The na-
tional habit is to waste the beauty of Nature and save the dollars of
business."17

The same disparaging reference to American tastes and values
appeared in the statements of preservationists in early 1909 at the
House and Senate hearings in regard to Hetch Hetchy. One man,
who had camped in the valley, pointedly asked: "is it never ceas-
ing; is there nothing to be held sacred by this nation; is it to be dol-
lars only; are we to be cramped in soul and mind by the lust after
filthy lucre only; shall we be left some of the more glorious places?"
Others joined him in pleading that "loftier motives" than saving
money for San Francisco be taken into consideration. "May we live
down our national reputation for commercialism," one letter
concluded.18

In the Senate hearings, Henry E. Gregory of the American Scenic
and Historic Preservation Society appeared in person and spoke of
the need to counteract "business and utilitarian motives" that
seemed to him to dominate the age. He pointed out that wilder-
nesses such as Hetch Hetchy had value beyond computation in
monetary terms "as an educator of the people and as a restorer and
liberator of the spirit enslaved by Mammon."19 Arguments along
these lines struck home, especially at a time when many Americans
squirmed uncomfortably at charges that their nation's aesthetic
sense was stunted and deformed.

Another tactic of the preservationists emphasized the spiritual
significance of wild places and the tendency of money-minded
America to ignore religion. Hetch Hetchy became a sanctuary or
temple in the eyes of the defenders. John Muir, for one, believed
so strongly in the divinity of wild nature that he was convinced he
was doing the Lord's battle in resisting the reservoir. The preserva-
tionists' innumerable puns about "damning" Hetch Hetchy were
only partly in jest. John Muir and his colleagues believed they were
preaching "the Tuolumne gospel." San Francisco became "the
Prince of the powers of Darkness" and "Satan and Co." Muir
wrote: "we may lose this particular fight but truth and right must
prevail at last. Anyhow we must be true to ourselves and the
Lord."20 This conviction that they were engaged in a battle be-
tween right and wrong prompted the preservationists to vituper-
ative outbursts against their opponents. In a popular book of 1912,
Muir labeled his foes "temple destroyers" who scorned the "God of

15. Proceedings Before the Secretary of the Interior in re Use of Hetch Hetchy
Reservoir by the City of San Francisco (Washington, D.C., 1910), pp. 18–19.
16. McFarland, "Are National Parks Worthwhile?" Sierra Club Bulletin, 8 (1912),
287.
17. Abbott, "The Hetch-Hetchy Valley Again," Outlook, 91 (1909), 330-31; Ab-
18. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, San Francisco
179, 325.
19. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, Hetch
20. Muir to Johnson, Feb. 7, 1909, Muir Papers, New York; Muir to Johnson,
March 23, 1913, ibid; Muir to "Kellogg's Three," Dec. 27, 1913, Muir Papers, Berkeley,
Box 1; Muir to William E. Colby, Dec. 31, 1908, ibid.
the Mountains" in pursuit of the "Almighty Dollar." A ringing and widely quoted denunciation followed: "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."\(^{21}\)

Using these arguments, and the especially effective one (unrelated to wilderness) that the valley as part of Yosemite National Park was a "public playground" which should not be turned over to any special interest, the preservationists were able to arouse considerable opposition to San Francisco's plans. Members of the Sierra and Appalachian Mountain Clubs took the lead in preparing pamphlet literature for mass distribution. *Let All the People Speak and Prevent the Destruction of the Yosemite Park* of 1909, for example, contained a history of the issue, reprints of articles and statements opposing the dam, a discussion of alternative sources of water, and photographs of the valley. Preservationists also obtained the sympathies of numerous newspaper and magazine editors in all parts of the nation. Even Theodore Roosevelt retreated from his earlier endorsement of the reservoir and declared in his eighth annual message of December 8, 1908, that Yellowstone and Yosemite "should be kept as a great national playground. In both, all wild things should be protected and the scenery kept wholly unmarred."\(^{22}\)

Evidence of the effectiveness of the protest appeared in the action of the House after its 1909 hearings. Although the Committee on the Public Lands had approved the grant in a close vote, a strong minority report dissented on the grounds that such action would deny the public's right to the valley for recreational purposes. Testifying to the amount of popular opposition, the report observed that "there has been an exceedingly widespread, earnest, and vigorous protest voiced by scientists, naturalists, mountain climbers, travelers, and others in person, by letters, and telegrams, and in newspaper and magazine articles."\(^{24}\) In the face of this expression of public opinion, the House pigeonholed and killed San Francisco's application in the Sixtieth Congress.

San Francisco was bewildered and incensed at the public unwillingness that it should have Hetch Hetchy as a reservoir. Was not supplying water to a large city a worthy cause, one that certainly took priority over preserving wilderness? The San Francisco Chronicle referred to the preservationists as "hoggish and mushy esthetes,"\(^{25}\) while the city's engineer, Marsden Manson, wrote in 1910 that the opposition was largely composed of "short-haired women and long-haired men."\(^{26}\) San Francisco argued that the beauties of wilderness were admirable, but in this case human health, comfort, and even human life were the alternatives. Phrased in these terms, even some of the members of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Sierra Club felt compelled to place the needs of civilization ahead of protecting wild country. In the Sierra Club, Warren Olney, one of the founders, led a faction which supported the city.\(^{27}\) In 1910 the Club held a referendum in which preservation won 589 to 161, but in order to prosecute the defense of Hetch Hetchy, the preservationists were obliged to act in a separate organization: the California Branch of the Society for the Preservation of National Parks. The wilderness enthusiasts in the Appalachian group formed an Eastern Branch of the Society.\(^{28}\)

At every opportunity the proponents of the dam expressed their belief that a lake in Hetch Hetchy would not spoil its beauty but, rather, enhance it. A prominent engineer reported on the City's behalf that roads and walks could be built which would open the


Several hundred of the communications addressed to the President, Secretary of the Interior, and various Congressmen have been preserved in chronological files in "Water Supply," National Archives.

25. As quoted in House, Committee on the Public Lands, *Granting Hetch Hetchy*, p. 16.

26. Marsden Manson to G. W. Woodruff, April 6, 1910, Marsden Manson Correspondence and Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.


The Hetch Hetchy controversy entered its climactic stage on March 4, 1913, when the Woodrow Wilson administration took office. San Francisco's hopes soared, because the new Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane, was a native, a former attorney for the city, and a proponent of the reservoir. But Lane upheld the policy of previous Secretaries that in cases involving national parks Congress must make the final decision. On behalf of San Francisco, Representative John E. Raker immediately introduced a bill to the Sixty-third Congress approving the grant. The preservationists prepared to send protest literature to 1418 newspapers and to make known their views before Congress. Robert Underwood Johnson distributed an Open Letter to the American People in which he declared Hetch Hetchy to be "a veritable temple of the living God" and warned that "again the money-changers are in the temple." The stage was set for a showdown.

On June 25 the House Committee on the Public Lands opened hearings on the Hetch Hetchy issue, with Gifford Pinchot as the star witness. Pinchot simplified the question into "whether the advantage of leaving this valley in a state of nature is greater than... using it for the benefit of the city of San Francisco." He admitted that the idea of preserving wilderness appealed to him "if nothing else were at stake," but in this case the need of the city seemed "overwhelming." Explaining his reasoning, Pinchot declared that "the fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will serve the most people." Former San Francisco mayor James D. Phelan told the Committee that the criteria for a decision should be the needs of the "little children, men and women... who swarm the shore of San Francisco Bay" rather than the few who liked "solitary loneliness" and "the mere scenic value of the mountains."

Since the House hearings were called on short notice, Edmund D. Whitman of the Appalachian Mountain Club was the only preservationist to testify. He attempted to show that the reservoir would substantially reduce the value of Yosemite National Park as a public recreation ground and beauty spot. But Whitman did not bring out the fact that wilderness was at stake in Hetch Hetchy. As a result Phelan's rejoinder that San Francisco would cover the dam with moss, vines, and trees and would build picnic spots and trails around the reservoir seemed to answer his objections. Whitman concluded his testimony more effectively with a quotation from a Robert Underwood Johnson letter on the danger that without unspoiled nature to provide a "touch of idealism," life degenerated into "a race for the trough."

On the basis of the June hearings, the Committee submitted a report unanimously endorsing the reservoir plans. When the bill reached the floor of the House on August 29, 1913, strong support immediately developed for its passage. Applying the time-honored utilitarian yardstick to the problem, Representative Raker of California asserted that the "old barren rocks" of the valley have a "cash value" of less than $300,000 whereas a reservoir would be worth millions. But most proponents of the dam were not so positive. They prefaced their support of the dam with a declaration of their love of wilderness and reluctance to have it destroyed. Finly

31. Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Boxes 7, 12. The Society for the Preservation of National Parks-Eastern Branch's The Truth about the Hetch Hetchy and the Application to Congress by San Francisco to Flood This Valley in the Yosemite National Park (Boston, 1913) is representative of the tracts the preservationists circulated.
Wilderness and the American Mind

H. Gray of Indiana, for example, explained: "Mr. Chairman, much as I admire the beauties of nature and deplore the desecration of God's Creation, yet when these two considerations come in conflict the conservation of nature should yield to the conservation of human welfare, health, and life." \(^{35}\)

The choice Representative Gray made between wilderness and the needs of civilization was especially difficult for William Kent, a Representative from California. Independently wealthy, he had chosen a career as a reformer in politics, first in Chicago and after 1906 in Marin County, north of San Francisco, where he had lived as a boy. Kent's devotion to wild country had the same characteristics as Theodore Roosevelt's. "My life," he declared in an autobiographical fragment, "has been largely spent outdoors . . . I have ridden the prairies, the mountains and the desert." \(^{36}\) A skilled hunter who deprecated the softness of his contemporaries, Kent called for a revitalization of the savage virtues. Understandably, he believed in the wisdom of preserving wilderness, and in 1903 bought several hundred acres of virgin redwood forest on the shoulder of Marin County's Mt. Tamalpais. In December 1907 Kent informed the Secretary of the Interior of his desire to give this land to the federal government as a national monument under the provisions of the Antiquities Act. His purpose was to keep in a primitive condition "the most attractive bit of wilderness I have ever seen." \(^{37}\) Kent requested the area be named in honor of John Muir, and on January 9, 1908, President Roosevelt issued a proclamation designating the Muir Woods National Monument.

In view of this record, preservationists believed they had found a champion in William Kent. The Sierra Club made him an honorary member while letters poured in from all parts of the country applauding him for upholding aesthetic and spiritual values in a materialistic age. \(^{38}\) Deeply touched by Kent's tribute, John Muir wrote personally, calling Muir Woods "the finest forest and park thing done in California in many a day." A few weeks later he again thanked Kent for "the best tree-lover's monument that could be found in all the forests of the world." Protecting the redwoods, Muir thought, was "a much needed lesson to saint and sinner alike, and a credit and encouragement to God." It astonished Muir that "so fine a thing as the tree-lover's monument should have come out of money-mad Chicago" and he ended by wishing Kent "immortal Sequoia life." Kent replied at once, inviting Muir to speak in Marin County and proposing collaboration in "the general cause of nature preservation." \(^{39}\)

A few weeks after arriving in Washington in 1911 to begin his first term as a California Congressman, William Kent received a letter from his friend John Muir about Hetch Hetchy. Assuming that Kent, the donor of Muir Woods, would champion the cause of wilderness preservation, Muir simply encouraged him to follow the Hetch Hetchy issue and "do lots of good work." \(^{40}\) But for Kent the matter was not so simple. While he realized that Hetch Hetchy was valuable as wilderness and part of a national park, he also knew that the powerful Pacific Gas and Electric Company wanted the valley as a step toward consolidating its control over California hydroelectric resources. Municipal control of Hetch Hetchy's water by San Francisco would block this plan, be a significant victory for the ideal of public ownership, and, beyond that, assert the democratic principle. Moreover, Kent had decided with his political friend Gifford Pinchot that "real conservation meant proper use and not locking up of natural resources." \(^{41}\) The sacrifice of Hetch Hetchy's wilderness qualities, Kent concluded, was regrettable but

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\(^{37}\) Kent to James A. Garfield, Dec. 23, 1907, Kent Family Papers, Box 6. Kent's account of his acquisition and disposition of the land in question may be found in Kent, "The Story of Muir Woods" (undated typescript), Kent Family Papers, Box 111.

\(^{38}\) Kent carefully preserved clippings and correspondence in regard to Muir Woods: Kent Family Papers, Boxes 6 and 162.

\(^{39}\) Muir to Kent, Jan. 14 and Feb. 6, 1908, Kent to Muir, Feb. 10, 1908, Kent Family Papers, Box 6.

\(^{40}\) Muir to Kent, March 31, 1911, Kent Family Papers, Box 26.

in this case necessary for a greater good. Answering Muir indirectly in a letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, Kent stated his conviction that conservation could best be served by granting the valley to San Francisco.42

In 1913, as a key member of the House Committee on the Public Lands, William Kent was in a position to exert considerable influence. He began by helping draft a bill permitting San Francisco to build its reservoir; then opened his home to the city's supporters as a campaign headquarters. The fact that Kent was widely known as the donor of Muir Woods lent extra weight to his opinions. Certainly he would not dismiss the claims of wilderness preservation lightly. Kent exploited this advantage fully. When the Hetch Hetchy bill came to the floor of the House, he stated simply: "I can lay claim to being a nature lover myself. I think that is a matter of record." The same technique appeared in a letter to President Woodrow Wilson in which Kent advocated San Francisco's claim and then added that in the cause of protecting nature he had personally "spent more time and effort... than any of the men who are opposing this bill."43

It remained for Kent, as an acknowledged admirer of Muir, to provide public explanation for their divergence over Hetch Hetchy. He did so in the summer of 1913 in a series of letters to his Congressional colleagues. To Representative Sydney Anderson of Minnesota he wrote: "I hope you will not take my friend, Muir, seriously, for he is a man entirely without social sense. With him, it is me and God and the rock where God put it, and that is the end of the story. I know him well and as far as this proposition is concerned, he is mistaken." Similarly, Kent wired Pinchot that the Hetch Hetchy protest was the work of private waterpower interests using "misinformed nature lovers" as their spokesmen. In October Kent told a meeting in California that because Muir had spent so much time in the wilderness he had not acquired the social instincts of the average man.44

Hetch Hetchy

It was not the case that Kent changed his mind about the value of wilderness between 1908 and 1913. In fact, at the very time he was advocating development of Hetch Hetchy, he asked Gifford Pinchot for a statement in support of a state park on Mt. Tamalpais. Specifically, Kent wanted Pinchot to show "the advantage of such a wilderness, particularly near San Francisco."45 And after Hetch Hetchy, Kent went on to help author the bill establishing the National Park Service, participate in the founding of the Save-the-Redwoods League, and add more land to Muir Woods National Monument. Kent's problem was that the necessity of deciding about Hetch Hetchy left no room for an expression of his ambivalence. The valley could not be a wilderness and a publicly owned reservoir simultaneously. And, ultimately, Kent and Muir gave wilderness preservation a different priority at the price of their earlier friendship.

As the consideration of the Hetch Hetchy question in the House continued into September, 1913, the sentiments of William Kent and other supporters of San Francisco encountered stiffer opposition. Halvor Steenerson of Minnesota declared it was nonsense to claim that an artificial lake would add to the beauty of the valley. "You may as well improve upon the lily of the field by handpainting it," he pointed out, and added that all the city offered was a power plant making a "devilish hissing noise" and a "dirty muddy pond." Concluding his remarks, Steenerson spoke in the agrarian tradition, deploping the tendency of Americans to live in cities, and in the Romantic manner, hoping that some day a poet would use the "pristine glory" of Hetch Hetchy "to produce something more valuable than money." Horace M. Towner of Iowa agreed, and pleaded with his colleagues to recognize that "dishwashing is not the only use for water, nor lumber for trees, nor pasture for grass." But Martin Dies of Texas rose to say the final word before the House vote. He felt that natural resources should serve civilization. "I want them to open the reservations in this country," Dies declared. "I am not for reservations and parks." Applause and cries of "Vote!" greeted the conclusion of Dies' remarks.46

On September 3 the House passed the Hetch Hetchy bill 183 to

42. Kent to Robert Underwood Johnson, April 6, 1911 (carbon), Kent Family Papers, Box 17.
44. Kent to Sydney Anderson, July 2, 1913, Kent Family Papers, Box 26; Kent to Gifford Pinchot, Oct. 8, 1913, Gifford Pinchot Papers, Box 18; San Rafael Independent, Oct. 21, 1913, in Kent Family Papers, Box 171.
45. Kent to Gifford Pinchot, March 5, 1913, Gifford Pinchot Papers, Box 164.
43, with 203 Representatives not voting. No Congressman from a Western state voted against it. Most of its support came from Southern and Middle Western Democrats. In fact, the bill was rumored to be an administration measure, connected, in some minds, with the votes California had given to Wilson in the recent election.47

The Senate still had to decide on San Francisco’s application, and in preparation the preservationists worked frantically. Their plan was “to flood the Senate with letters from influential people.”48 In addition, the Society for the Preservation of National Parks and the newly organized National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park published several pamphlets which called on Americans to write or wire their President and Congressmen and suggested arguments against the dam.49 Thousands of copies circulated, and the public responded. Between the time of the House passage and early December when the Senate began its debate, the destruction of the wilderness qualities of Hetch Hetchy Valley became a major national issue. Hundreds of newspapers throughout the country, including such opinion leaders as the New York Times, published editorials on the question, most of which took the side of preservation.50 Leading magazines, such as Outlook, Nation, Independent, and Collier’s, carried articles protesting the reservoir. A mass meeting on behalf of the valley took place at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. Mail poured into the offices of key Senators: Reed Smoot of Utah estimated late in November that he had received five thousand letters in opposition to the bill, and other Senators were likewise besieged.51 The protests came from women’s groups, outing and sportsmen’s clubs, scientific societies, and the faculties of colleges and universities as well as from individuals. The American wilderness had never been so popular before.

The arguments the preservationists used against the dam followed the lines laid down in the earlier stages of the controversy. The issue was represented to be between the intangible values of wilderness and the insensitivity of utilitarianism. One widely circulated statement from an editorial in the Brooklyn [N.Y.] Standard Union maintained that keeping Hetch Hetchy wild was an opportunity to answer the taunts of detractors and demonstrate “that there are some things even in America which money cannot buy.”52 Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who had succeeded to his father’s place as a leader in the field of landscape architecture, also published a defense of the valley. After distinguishing between the “beauty-value” and the “use-value” of nature, he observed that the previous century “has shown . . . an enormous increase in the appreciation of and resort to the wilder and less man-handled scenery as a means of recreation from the intensifying strain of civilization.” As a consequence, Olmsted contended, wildernesses like Hetch Hetchy had great importance to modern society. They must be preserved and held inviolate “if beauty of scenery is not to be pushed to the wall at every point of conflict [with] the more obvious claims of utilitarian advantages.”53

Robert Underwood Johnson worked for Hetch Hetchy at a fever pitch through the summer and fall of 1913 because he believed that “this is a fight between the sordid commercialism on the one hand and the higher interests of the whole people on the other.” The difference between a wild Hetch Hetchy and an artificial reservoir, he asserted, was not “a tweedledee and tweedledum distinction between two equally good kinds of scenery” but rather involved “worship and sacrilege.” In Johnson’s eyes there could be no compromise with San Francisco. “I am so confident that we are right in this matter,” he wrote young Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the controversy, that he would debate anyone anywhere on the subject.54 Johnson and his colleagues constantly emphasized that

50. The Committee’s Bulletins list and quote from several hundred papers.
54. Johnson to William R. Nelson, Oct. 27, 1913 (carbon); Johnson to William E. Borah, Nov. 6, 1913 (carbon); Johnson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nov. 11, 1913 (carbon). Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 1.
they had no desire of denying San Francisco an adequate water supply. Of course civilization must have its due, they conceded, but in this case other sources of water were available and keeping Hetch Hetchy wild was worth the extra cost of their development.

The wilderness advocates looked forward hopefully to the Senate debate and vote. They had succeeded in demonstrating that a large number of Americans resented the proposed alteration of Yosemite National Park. In mid-November, 1913, Muir cheered the hard-working Johnson: "we're bound to win, enemy badly frightened, Up and smite 'em!" But when the Senate began its consideration of the bill on December 1, it was apparent that San Francisco's representatives, who had not campaigned nationally but rather lobbied quietly in Washington, had done effective work. As was the case with many Representatives, most Senators first made clear that they too appreciated the values of unspoiled nature but went on to support the dam. "I appreciate the importance of preserving beautiful natural features of a landscape as much as anybody else," Frank B. Brandegee of Connecticut declared. Yet ultimately civilization won out because the "mere preservation of a beautiful, romantic, and picturesque spot ... for esthetic purposes" could not conceivably take precedence over "the urgent needs of great masses of human beings for the necessities of life." Echoing Brandegee, Marcus A. Smith of Arizona said that his affection for natural beauty "leads me as nothing else could to sympathize with those thousands of people who have sent their protests against the destruction of ... Yosemite National Park." However, Smith, too, was in favor of the reservoir, because while "we all love the sound of whispering winds amid the trees ... the wail of a hungry baby will make us forget it ... as we try to minister to its wants." Few Senators supported the dam because they opposed wilderness. Most either thought the benefits coming to San Francisco greater than the good that accrued from the wild park or, as with George D. Norris of Nebraska, conceived of the issue only in terms of publicly owned hydroelectric development.

The Senators opposing San Francisco stressed the availability of other reservoir sites and the need to respect the sanctity of a region that had been dedicated to providing the public with a sample of wilderness. Asle J. Gronna of North Dakota believed it was a mistake "to commercialize every bit of land" and to "destroy the handiwork of God's creation." Exchanges were heated, and for several evenings the lights of the Senate burned late into the night.

A decision had been made to vote on December 6, and when the Senators entered their chamber that morning they found copies of a "Special Washington Edition" of the San Francisco Examiner on their desks. Skillful drawings showed how the valley might appear as a man-made lake with scenic drives for automobiles and boating facilities for happy family groups. The Examiner also published experts' testimony justifying the grant in a variety of ways. In comparison, the preservationists' campaign literature was considerably less impressive.

At three minutes before midnight on December 6, the Senate voted. Forty-three favored the grant, twenty-five opposed it, and twenty-nine did not vote or were absent. Eighteen votes from Southern Democrats were the decisive factor, and suggested, as in the case of the House, that the Wilson administration was behind San Francisco. Only nine of the "yeas" came from Republicans.

A Presidential veto was the last hope of the preservationists. After the Senate passage, Wilson received numerous letters calling upon him to defend Yosemite National Park. Robert Underwood Johnson wrote, characteristically, that "God invented courage for just such emergencies. The moral effect of a veto would be immense." He even called in person on the President, but when he left the office, William Kent was waiting to enter! On December 19, 1913, Wilson approved the Hetch Hetchy grant. In signing he declared that "the bill was opposed by so many public-spirited men ... that I have naturally sought to scrutinize it very closely. I take

58. San Francisco Examiner, Dec. 6, 1913.
59. For a detailed account of the final stages of the controversy and the political factors behind the decision see Jones, pp. 155-69.
60. Wilson Papers, File VI, Box 199; Johnson to Wilson, Dec. 9, 1913, Wilson Papers, File VI, Box 199, Folder 109.
the liberty of thinking that their fears and objections were not well founded.”62

The preservationists had lost the fight for the valley, but they had gained much ground in the larger war for the existence of wilderness. A deeply disappointed John Muir took some consolation from the fact that “the conscience of the whole country has been aroused from sleep.”63 Scattered sentiment for wilderness preservation had, in truth, become a national movement in the course of the Hetch Hetchy controversy. Moreover, the defenders of wilderness discovered their political muscles and how to flex them by arousing an expression of public opinion, and in Hetch Hetchy they had a symbol which, like the Maine, would not easily be forgotten. In fact, immediately after the Hetch Hetchy defeat the fortunes of wilderness preservation took an abrupt turn for the better. Early in 1915 Stephen T. Mather, a highly successful businessman and wilderness enthusiast, became director of the national parks. Along with Horace M. Albright, Robert Sterling Yard, J. Horace McFarland, and the Sierra Club, Mather generated a campaign on the park’s behalf that resulted in the enactment in 1916 of the National Park Service Act. The publicity that accompanied its passage did much to increase the national interest in preserving wilderness that the Hetch Hetchy fight had aroused.64

Near the close of the Senate debate on Hetch Hetchy, James A. Reed of Missouri arose to confess his incredulity at the entire controversy. How could it be, he wondered, that over the future of a piece of wilderness “the Senate goes into profound debate, the country is thrown into a condition of hysteria.” Observing, accurately, that the intensity of resistance to the dam increased with the distance from Yosemite, he remarked that “when we get as far east as New England the opposition has become a frenzy.” In Senator

Reed’s opinion this was clearly “much ado about little.”65 He might have said the same about the enthusiasm for Joe Knowles, the Boy Scouts, or Tarzan of the Apes (see Chapter 9) that occurred simultaneously with the Hetch Hetchy battle. But the point, as Reed himself suggested, was that a great many of his contemporaries did regard wilderness as worth getting excited about.

Indeed the most significant thing about the controversy over the valley was that it occurred at all. One hundred or even fifty years earlier a similar proposal to dam a wilderness river would not have occasioned the slightest ripple of public protest. Traditional American assumptions about the use of undeveloped country did not include reserving it in national parks for its recreational, aesthetic, and inspirational values. The emphasis was all the other way—on civilizing it in the name of progress and prosperity. Older generations conceived of the thrust of civilization into the wilderness as the beneficent working out of divine intentions, but in the twentieth century a handful of preservationists generated widespread resistance against this very process. What had formerly been the subject of national celebration was made to appear a national tragedy.

Muir, Johnson, and their colleagues were able to create a protest because the American people were ready to be aroused. Appreciation of wild country and the desire for its preservation had spread in the closing decades of the nineteenth century from a small number of literati to a sizeable segment of the population. The extent and vigor of the resistance to San Francisco’s plans for Hetch Hetchy constituted tangible evidence for the existence of a wilderness cult. Equally revealing was the fact that very few favored the dam because they opposed wilderness. Even the partisans of San Francisco phrased the issue as not between a good (civilization) and an evil (wilderness) but between two goods. While placing material needs first, they still proclaimed their love of unspoiled nature. Previously most Americans had not felt compelled to rationalize the conquest of wild country in this manner. For three centuries they had chosen civilization without any hesitation. By 1913 they were no longer so sure.

64. Donald C. Swain, “The Passage of the National Park Service Act of 1916,” Wisconsin Magazine of History, 50 (1966), 47-17; Robert Shankland, Steve Mather of the National Parks (New York, 1951). One indication of the extent of public interest was the number of articles on the national parks published in popular magazines. Between September 1916 and October of the following year over 900 appeared in 95 journals. The figures for the next two years were equally impressive: Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service (1917) (1918) (1919), pp. 1017-30, 1051-63, and 1247-61.