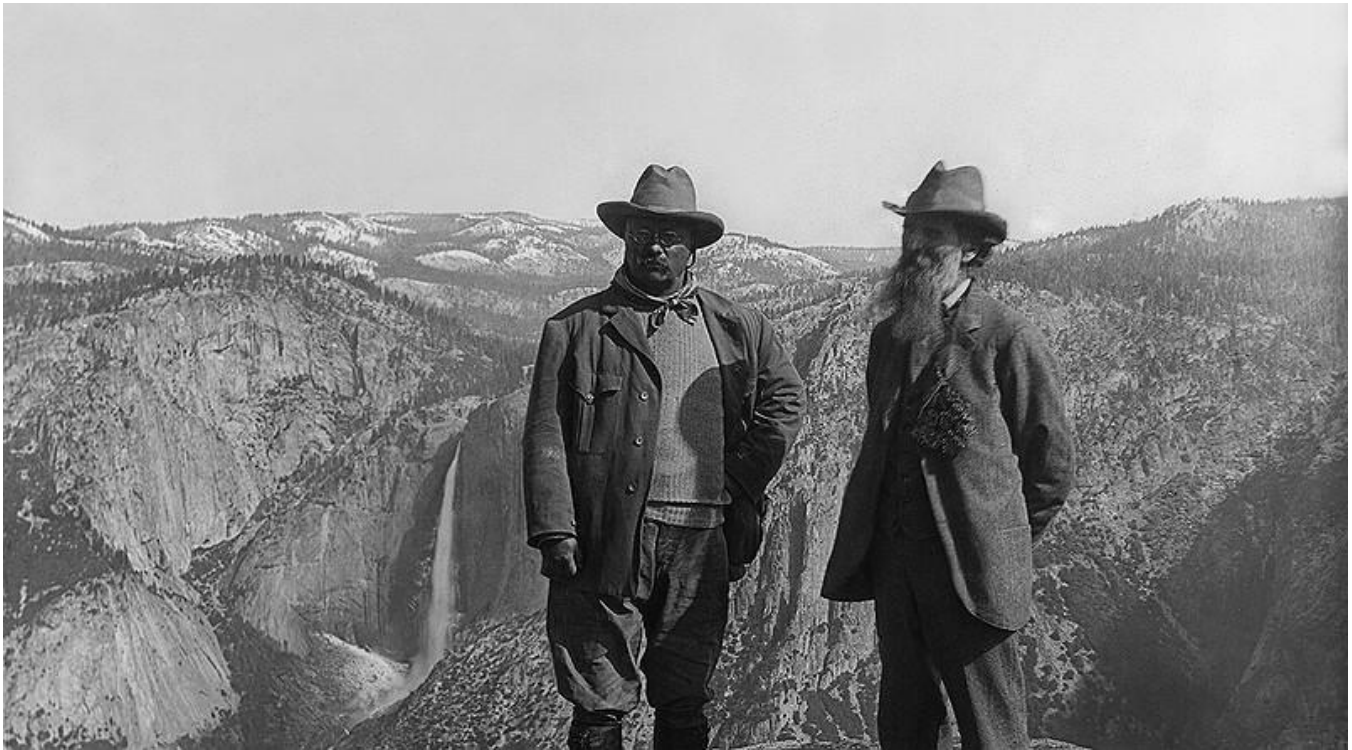


# Some say Muir's ideas about the wilderness are out of date

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

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

LOS ANGELES—John Muir helped create the national park system. Some people say he's the godfather of environmentalism, the movement to save and protect nature.

He was also the first president of the Sierra Club. As president of that famous environmental group Muir had power. He shaped ideas about how people should think of the wilderness. His writings led to the idea that these lands should be protected.

But now some environmentalists say that his ideas are wrong. They claim that the world has changed so much in the hundred years since he died that Muir is no longer important.

Christensen is a historian at UCLA. He said Muir's ideas are "just not useful anymore."

## An Unspoiled Wilderness

Christensen and others see Muir's thoughts as out of date. They say now there are new environmental challenges. Muir could not have imagined population growth, the spread of cities, or climate change.

The argument is over Muir's major idea. He thought of wilderness as something to be left untouched. He wanted people to experience pure nature. That idea helped shape environmentalism for 100 years. It made sure that there would be unspoiled wilderness for new generations.

"He had a huge passion for nature," said Mary Ellen Hannibal, an author and a Muir fan. He believed in "experiencing nature firsthand."

To Christensen and others, Muir's notions give the wrong idea. Sending people just to a wilderness like Yosemite gives the message that only awe-inspiring parks are worth saving, and allows us to neglect smaller city spaces.

Some environmentalists also say Muir's vision of wilderness assumes everyone is rich. It assumes that everyone will have the free time and money to visit the wilderness.

## **A Low Latino Membership**

Muir thought that Californians should backpack, ski or rock climb through the Sierra Mountains. He thought it would show them how important they were to save. Some people now say Californians would be better off having more city parks, and more roads and trails in wild lands.

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

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

The Sierra Club is having a hard time connecting with nonwhite Californians. In particular, its Latino membership is low. But surveys show Latinos as one of the groups most interested in environmentalism in the state. Latinos are expected to become a majority in California by 2050.

A strong and multiracial Sierra Club membership in California is important to the group. Members make decisions about saving lands, and raise money for environmental education.

Yet environmentalists still support Muir's ideas, Christensen said. Muir's ideas are those of people "older and white—and that's a problem."

## **"Under Their Fingertips"**

D.J. Waldie agrees. Waldie is a writer and expert on Southern California culture.

He said for many nonwhites nature is found in city parks, nearby mountains and rivers, "and under their fingertips in the stuff they grow in their own backyards."

One stain on Muir's past is hard to get past: His views on California's Native Americans. He claimed they had no place in the Sierra wilderness.

Laura Pulido is a professor at USC. She said Muir's feelings should be understood as being part of his time.

Pulido said, "He was a man of his times, who actively worked to disgrace California Indians by taking their lands."

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

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