

25 In Wilderness Is Preservation



John Muir once said, "I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." What did he mean by that?

Speaking of the New World, Captain John Smith wrote this in 1608: *Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for human habitation.* Almost 300 years later, John Muir said the same kind of thing. Do you agree with them?

Sometimes too much of a good thing turns out to be not such a good thing. We Americans were so rich in land, we became wasteful. It was the existence of the frontier that was in part to blame. The frontier—empty, inviting land—had a bewitching effect on the nation. It seemed as if it were endless, and that there would always be new land to settle, plant, and use up. Thomas Jefferson thought America a land "with room enough for our descendants to the hundredth and thousandth generation." After 1890, most people knew that was not so.

In 1890 the U.S. Census Bureau said there was no more frontier.

That was a shock. What did it mean? It meant that the great stretches of habitable empty land were gone. The country was filling up. The frontier had been what is called a mixed blessing. It made hard work, cooperation, and resourcefulness important American traits. On a frontier it is what you can do—not who you are—that people care about. The frontier made America more democratic. But that frontier also made us wasteful, and it wasn't only land we wasted.

Muir always hurried back to the mountains from the city shouting, "I'm wild once more!"



When tourists first came to Overhanging Rock on Glacier Point above Yosemite Valley—on foot, horse, or muleback—the thrilling end to the trip was a stunt above the 3,214-foot drop. Today, it's fenced off.



By 1890 the passenger pigeon was extinct; the endless herds of buffalo were being mowed down and would soon be gone; millions of acres of towering, ancient trees were gone or going; and mining was leaving mountainsides ravished and barren. A few citizens—a very few—began to talk of ways to preserve the land. One of them was John Muir.

Muir arrived in Wisconsin from Scotland at age 11. His new neighbors soon realized that he was a genius. It was his inventions that most impressed them. He invented a field thermometer so sensitive that it registered the heat of an approaching person or animal. He invented a wooden clock that struck the hours, started the fire in his stove. (It his lamp and—with levers and wheels—raised the head of his bed and woke him in the morning. He might have been another Thomas Edison, but an accident set him on a different path. Muir was working in a factory when a file flew into his eye. For a while he was blind and believed he would never see again. When he recovered he said he would waste no more time, but would live with nature. "God has to nearly kill us sometimes," he said, "to teach us lessons.")

It was 1867. Muir was 29, and he wrote, "I set forth...joyful and free, on a thousand-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico...by the wildest, leafiest, and least-trodden way I could find." He was embarking on the life he most wanted to live. "I might have been a millionaire," he said. "I chose to become a tramp." He spent much of the rest of his life in the out-of-doors. He took other Americans outdoors with him in the journals he kept and the articles he wrote:

As long as I live I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing; I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the earthquake. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.

Come with me along the glaciers and see God making landscapes.

—JOHN MUIR

A **habitable** area is livable (as opposed to barren mountains, waterless deserts, soggy swamps, etc., which cannot support permanent human settlements).

Muir called himself a citizen of the "Earth-planet-universe," and went on "rambles," seeking knowledge, in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. When the elderly poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson met young Muir, Emerson added Muir's name to a list of great men he had met. (The feeling was mutual.)

John Muir was a naturalist; he studied nature (and loved it). Some other American naturalists were Thomas Jefferson, John James Audubon, and Henry David Thoreau.