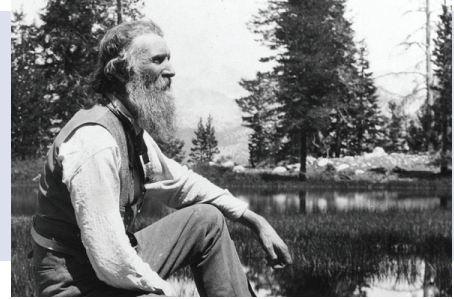


JOHN MUIR

John Muir

Lesson Length: 45 Minutes

Grade Levels: Recommended for high school grades, though elementary and middle school teachers may be able to incorporate concepts from this lesson plan into their teaching



Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about John Muir, the Father of America's National Parks, who after a life-changing accident, dedicated his life to preserving the natural beauty of America. Founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir was instrumental in protecting Yosemite, one of the most famous and internationally renowned national parks in America. His efforts have convinced countless Americans of the significance of the country's wilderness. Students will study Muir's view of the relationship between man and nature, consider different conservation philosophies, and discuss how different types of communities interact with nature and view their relationship with America's wildlife.

Objectives

Students will:

- Identify how John Muir championed environmental preservation
- Consider the tension between environmental and economic interests
- Learn how different communities interact with nature
- Examine how environmental preservation efforts have changed over time
- Compare different types of environmental preservation strategies

Historical Background

John Muir was born in 1838 in Scotland but emigrated to the United States in 1849. Though an inventor by trade—he was a wood carver and won prizes at state fairs in Wisconsin—Muir had always been captivated by the natural world. As he travelled throughout the country, he published several books and articles recounting his adventures and sharing his preservationist philosophy.

During the second half of the 19th century, however, Muir’s environmental preservation efforts ran up against commercial interests. Natural resources were exploited, land was being taken over by developers, and waste was rampant. In California specifically, the Gold Rush and subsequent industrialization had done significant damage to the environment. Muir, who had moved to California in 1868 and fallen in love with the Sierra Nevada Mountains, was instrumental in convincing President Roosevelt to designate Yosemite as a National Park, which led to greater protection of forests, reserves, and parks across California and the nation more broadly.

Muir often differed from other environmentalists, for example, Gifford Pinchot: whereas Pinchot sought to preserve the instrumental value of forests (i.e., the resources they provided), Muir believed that natural resources provided by forests ought to be “off-limits to industrial limits.” Tension between environmental and economic interests almost stymied Muir and President Cleveland’s attempts to prevent commercial exploitation of forests.

Primary Source

“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.”

Teacher Note: Cited from John Muir’s 1912 book, *The Yosemite*.

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 Lesson Flow (45 Minutes)**Warm-Up (5 minutes)**

Quick write: “what types of environmentally friendly actions do you take, and can you take, in your own life?”

Historical Context (10 minutes)

Teacher presentation of John Muir’s upbringing, and the broader economic trends and developments that necessitated his actions to preserve natural places.

Primary Source Analysis (10 minutes)

Students analyze the primary source quotation, focusing on the relationship between man and nature, and thinking about what the natural world offers to us that we don’t find or get in urban society.

Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Students discuss their responses to the quote, and answer the observation and walk-in-the shoes questions

Large Group Discussion (10 minutes)

As a class, students share any interesting responses from their small group discussions, before teacher guides larger conversation based on the discussion questions above. Teachers should draw students’ attention to the trade-offs faced by society between economic and environmental needs and discuss how environmental conservation ought to consider the needs of different communities.

 Guiding Questions**Walk-In-The-Shoes**

- If you had suffered a life-changing accident like John Muir, how do you think your perspective on life would shift?
- Are there any elements of American life--either cultural, political, or environmental--that you would fight to protect, as John Muir did?
- John Muir wrote to Congress and worked with government officials, but who are the people in your life you would reach out to if you wanted to impact an issue of importance to you?
- What challenges do you think John Muir faced during his walk?

Observation

- What did John Muir envision as the purpose of the Sierra Club?
- Why did John Muir walk across the United States from Indiana to Florida?
- What did John Muir’s learn during his walk about America’s natural beauty?
- Who were some of the important people with whom John Muir worked to achieve his objectives?

Discussion

- What should be the relationship between man and nature?
- What does nature offer that we can’t find in urban society?
- How has preserving natural places affected Americans and American society?
- How do we balance our economic needs with our concern for environmental preservation?
- What do you think you would learn about America today if you walked through the country as John Muir did?
- Why do you think John Muir carried only a satchel and journal with him?
- Do you think it would be harder today to advocate for environmental preservation than it was during John Muir’s time?

Research Base and Source Documentation

- National Endowment for the Humanities, *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities*, “John Muir, Nature’s Witness” - <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/marchapril/feature/john-muir-natures-witness>
- SA Explorer, “A brief history of conservation in California” - <https://www.saexpeditions.com/blog/post/a-brief-history-of-conservation-in-california>
- Sierra Club, “John Muir: A Brief Biography” - https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx
- National Park Service: “John Muir Quotes” - <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/john-muir-quotes.htm>
- Encyclopedia Britannica, “John Muir” - <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Muir>