Criticizing Muir and misunderstanding the foundation of American nature conservation

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The recent controversy within the Sierra Club about whether their founder, John Muir, held racist views provides a useful opportunity to examine a much more important issue: the anthropocentric worldview that is the root cause of the global environmental crisis. The claims against Muir are easily refuted by a thorough and fair reading of his work; they are based on out-of-context quotes and revisionist interpretations of his early writings. But those claims give rise to a harmful misinterpretation of the history and philosophy of American nature conservation. The founders of American conservation had all been influenced by the life and work of Alexander von Humboldt. Muir, Thoreau, and all of Humboldt's other acolytes were slowly constructing a new ecological worldview that combined science, philosophy, aesthetics and spirituality. They were revolutionaries, far ahead of their times in arguing against human domination of nature or other humans. The real unfinished business of the environmental conservation movement is the need to overthrow the dominant paradigm of human supremacy and adopt an ecocentric worldview that can heal the human–nature relationship and create a society in which justice and reconciliation within the whole biotic community can occur, including within the human species.

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The Sierra Club, one of America's premier nature conservation organizations, was founded in 1892 by John Muir and a group of mountain-loving friends. In July 2020 the Sierra Club's executive director, Michael Brune, wrote in a public post on the organization's website that John Muir was a racist who disparaged African Americans and Native Americans (Brune, 2020). Many of us who have been inspired by Muir were horrified, because this claim seemed so contrary to what most Muir experts knew about

him. Then, in March of this year, an essay in *Sierra* magazine by Rebecca Solnit titled "Unfinished business: John Muir in Native America" amplified the claim that Muir held negative views of Native Americans (Solnit, 2021). By August 2021 the controversy about Muir and racism in conservation that had been swirling behind the scenes broke into the open with an article in *Earth Island Journal* by some members of the Sierra Club board, who took issue with the criticism of Muir and his legacy (Mair *et al.*, 2021; Colman, 2021).

The debate about Muir's supposed racism toward African Americans and Native Americans is not worth spending much time on, although I will consider it briefly below. But it is the tip of a dangerous iceberg. The real issue is that those claims give rise to a harmful, revisionist misinterpretation and mischaracterization of the history and philosophy of American nature conservation. The recent controversy within the Sierra Club provides a useful opportunity to examine this bigger, more important issue.

The founders of American nature conservation were far ahead of their time; many of their views on conservation are as relevant and valid now as they were in their time. Beginning almost two centuries ago, writers, philosophers, scientists and conservationists – including Muir – started to piece together a non-anthropocentric worldview to counter the dominant human-centered worldview that they understood to be driving the rapid destruction of North America's natural landscape. That new worldview is the real 'unfinished business' needed to save nature's diversity and resilience and that of our own species. Ironically and unfortunately, revisionist interpretations of the history and philosophy of American nature conservation will hurt, not help, the adoption of an ecocentric worldview and the transformation to a culture and society grounded in it.

Was Muir a racist?

Before examining the deeper issues, we should dispense with the claims that Muir was a racist who saw African Americans and Native Americans as inferior. Those claims simply misrepresent the evidence; they are based mainly on out-of-context quotes and revisionist interpretations of Muir's early writings and are easily refuted by a thorough, properly contextualized and fair reading of his work.

The claim of racism against African Americans, for example, comes mainly from a selective and biased reading of *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916). This is Muir's account of walking from Indiana through Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia to Florida in 1867 and 1868, only a few years after the end of the Civil War. He hitched wagon rides with African American farmers, was invited to share meals and stay overnight in their houses, and described them as intelligent and "eloquent in no mean degree" (p. 6), courteous and generous, and said that they appear always "to be delighted to find opportunity for obliging anybody" (p. 83). In contrast, in that book he described some of the Euro-Americans he encountered on his journey as dangerous (p. 17), "primitive" (p. 37), and prejudiced (p. 59). He called a group of loggers he met in Florida "the wildest of all the white savages I have met. The long-haired ex-guerrillas of the mountains of Tennessee and North

Carolina are uncivilized fellows; but for downright barbarism these Florida loggers excel" (p. 95).

As for the claim that Muir looked down on Native Americans, although in some early writings he described the few he met in negative terms, when he finally came in contact with relatively intact Native cultures in Alaska, he quickly developed a deep respect for their ecological knowledge and skills (Barrett, 2019). In their commentary on the issue in *Earth Island Journal*, Sierra Club board member Aaron Mair and his coauthors say that "Muir wrote repeatedly about … how traditional Indigenous peoples lived in peaceful coexistence with wild nature, while he described White settlers as selfish, base, and lacking honor" (Mair *et al.*, 2021). Although he sometimes did express his dislike of sloth and slovenliness (*e.g.* Muir, 1916: 67), that did not seem to have a racial basis, and perhaps should be expected from someone with a strict, Scots Calvinist upbringing like Muir.

Humboldt's influence on American nature conservation

Before turning to the more significant issue of the misreading of our ecological 'ancestors,' it is important to note that they were all acolytes of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the path-breaking German explorer, scientist and writer. Over more than a century, Muir and all of Humboldt's other followers were slowly piecing together a new, ecological worldview that combined science, philosophy, aesthetics and spirituality. It was a slow but coherent cultural rebellion against the Western, anthropocentric worldview of their times. To understand Muir's work, we need to see him as part of that rebellion, not a lone pioneer.

Humboldt was the most popular, widely-read scientist of his day, and every one of the founders of American ecological philosophy and nature conservation had been influenced by him (Humboldt, 1997; Sachs, 2006; Walls, 2009; Wulf, 2015). We are finally coming to realize what a profound influence he had on science, nature conservation and art. Humboldt was an inspiration to natural scientists like Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace, Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz; ethnographers and anthropologists like Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied and Franz Boas; nature writers and philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs; and artists like George Catlin and the many landscape painters of the Hudson River School such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Moran and Edward Bierstadt (Byers, 2021).

Besides being an explorer and scientist, Humboldt was a moral and political activist. He wanted to make the world a better, more moral place. His thought touched on philosophical and ethical questions about the relationship of ecology and society, and his followers – including Muir – continued to seek answers to those questions.

An untrammeled wilderness inhabited by Native Americans

The charge that Muir was biased against Native Americans is linked with a broader accusation – that he, and other conservationists of the day, pictured

North America as an empty, unpopulated wilderness with no, or few, native inhabitants, and tried to 'erase' knowledge of the indigenous presence and its ecological effects (Cronon, 1995; Gilio-Whitakker, 2020; Solnit, 2021). These critics use this claim to try to debunk the very idea of wildness and wilderness, arguing that there is no such thing because every part of the planet except Antarctica has been inhabited by humans for millennia.

However, Muir and other conservation founders knew full well that North America was fully inhabited by native peoples who shaped its ecosystems, but also lived within them sustainably. Thoreau, for example, knew about Native American burning practices and their ecological effects on the forests around Walden Pond (Walls, 2017) more than a century before environmental historian William Cronon wrote about it (Cronon, 1983). Humboldtian ethnographic explorers like Prince Maximilian and painters like George Catlin documented Native American habitation of the continent in the 1830s. Hudson River School painters, beginning with Thomas Cole in the 1830s and continuing to later generations like Albert Bierstadt in the 1870s, pictured Native Americans in ways that alluded to their harmony and ecological integration with the land. Photographers like Edward Curtis exalted Native American cultures. Franz Boas and his legion of students documented the cultural and ecological sophistication of Native Americans (King, 2019). Those who argue that the history and evolution of American ideas of nature, wilderness or nature conservation ignored Native Americans simply haven't done their historical homework.

For example, in her recent essay in *Sierra*, Solnit noted that Muir spoke effusively about the "gardens" of nature, and in particular the landscape of the Yosemite Valley, but claimed that he must not have been aware that Yosemite and other California landscapes were the work of Native Americans "gardening" with fire (Solnit, 2021). In fact, Muir knew that Native Americans had shaped the ecological landscape of the Yosemite Valley, and the rest of the continent. He spent some of his formative years at a homestead at Fountain Lake in east-central Wisconsin, where the Muir family arrived in 1849. The area had been recently opened for Euro-American settlement after US soldiers defeated Native American resistance to the annexation of their traditional lands in 1832. Muir later wrote effusively in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1913) about the beauty and biodiversity of the "oak openings" around Fountain Lake. He saw how that beloved landscape changed over the decade after he arrived, as Native American burning and hunting practices were supplanted by Euro-American agriculture (Byers, 2016). In *My First Summer in the Sierra* – the same book in which he talked about the "gardens" of Yosemite – Muir (1911: 73) wrote as follows:

> *How many centuries Indians have roamed these woods nobody knows, probably a great many, extending far beyond the time that Columbus touched our shores, and it seems strange that heavier marks have not been made. Indians walk softly and hurt the landscape hardly more than the birds and squirrels, and their brush and bark huts last hardly longer than those of wood rats, while their more*

> *enduring monuments, excepting those wrought on the forests by the fires they made to improve their hunting grounds, vanish in a few centuries.*

A perverse reading of this passage might charge Muir with being paternalistic or even racist for comparing Native Americans to animals – which Muir clearly loved!

The founders of the American nature conservation movement didn't imagine an empty, uninhabited continent; instead, they saw with their own eyes an *untrammeled* continent, with natural ecosystems still functioning and intact. The operant phrase in the definition of "wilderness" in the Wilderness Act of 1964 is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man" (https://uslaw.link/citation/us-law/public/88/577). That is precisely what the early proponents of nature conservation saw and documented across most of North America, even as they also saw and described it as fully occupied by indigenous peoples. Native American cultures, with their relatively sparse populations, high dependence on hunting and gathering wild foods even if engaged in agriculture, and ecocentric worldviews that tended to hold their ecological impact in check, were almost universally 'untrammeling' societies. With the colonization of the Americas by Europeans, who brought with them the agriculture and other technologies that had destroyed natural ecosystems and driven human population growth above carrying capacity there – not to mention their human-supremacist worldview that encouraged their ecological impact (White, 1967) – the trammeling of North American ecosystems began.

Re-spiritualizing nature

The founders of American nature conservation *did* try to re-spiritualize our view of nature. Perhaps the rebellion against a sterile, desacralized view of nature started with Humboldt and his unified-field, "cosmos" thinking (Humboldt, 1997) – an approach which was portrayed with aesthetic passion by Thomas Cole and the other Hudson River School painters, for example. It then was pushed further by the Concord Transcendentalist nature philosophers, Emerson and Thoreau, who gathered fuel for their radical ideas from the Stoics, Emanuel Swedenborg, Hindu scriptures and Buddhist sutras. American nature philosophers were rediscovering or recreating – from scientific, indigenous, ancient and Asian sources – the aboriginal worldviews of America, in which nature was spiritual and sacred.

Muir was a leader in this movement to restore the spiritual status of nature. Describing his solo ascent of Cathedral Peak in Yosemite in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he wrote "This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper. In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars" (Muir, 1911: 336).

A year after climbing Cathedral Peak, in the autumn of 1870, Muir wrote to his friend and mentor Jeanne Carr from Yosemite, using a brown ink that he had made by steeping the bark from a giant sequoia (Muir, 1870). The letter is

playful, and completely free and un-self-censored. Combined with his description of being "at church" on Cathedral Peak, it shows how far Muir's views of religion had evolved since the harsh Calvinist upbringing of his youth. In the letter he wrote:

> *Some time ago I left all for Sequoia. I have been & am at his feet fasting & praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods – in the world. … I've taken the sacrament with Douglass Squirrels, drunk Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, & with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter. … I wish I was so drunk & sequoical that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from this divine wilderness like a John Baptist eating Douglass squirrel & wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand.*

This letter would be blasphemous if Muir really still believed in the Christian tradition in which he was so strictly raised.

Muir's worldview, as expressed in his writing, was much more congruent with those of the Native American inhabitants of California than with the worldviews of the Euro-American society in which he lived. In traditional Native American cultures, and for Muir, landscapes were seen as spiritual and sacred, and non-human species were viewed as our kin. Muir often referred to "plant people" (*e.g.* Muir, 1911: 208; 1916: 156) and "animal people" (*e.g.* Muir, 1898: 21) in ways reminiscent of Native American perspectives. Perhaps the many nights Muir spent alone in the wilderness settings that Native American peoples experienced enabled him to channel their vision and ecocentric worldview. Anyone who accuses Muir of not understanding or honoring America's indigenous peoples hasn't understood his philosophy at its depth.

The relationship of anthropocentrism and social justice

We live in a society of systemic human supremacism, enshrined in the humans-first worldview of the Middle Eastern monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the colonizing, expansionist empires of the Mediterranean and European world. In that dominant, human-supremacist worldview, nature is 'other,' and 'man' is granted 'dominion' over all of it. Many authors have argued persuasively that this anthropocentric worldview is the root cause of the global environmental crises we are experiencing today (White, 1967; Naess, 1972; Nelson and Sauer, 2016; Crist, 2019; DeJonge, 2021).

Where do issues of social justice, such as racism, stand in relation to this deeper view of ecological ethics? Crist argues that the dominant worldview of human supremacy creates or enables the conditions for racism and other kinds of social injustice. "The bedrock of nature colonialism on which civilization stands has built perpetual violence into its very edifice," she writes. As long as ecosystems and non-human species are treated as merely "resources" to be exploited for human benefit, competition for those resources will ensure that "social injustice and inequality will continually rehearse themselves in one

form or another" (Crist, 2019: 246). In contrast, as Arne Naess (the Norwegian philosopher credited with coining the term "deep ecology" in 1972) wrote, an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric worldview supports "diversity of human ways of life, of cultures, of occupations, of economies," promotes "the fight against economic and cultural, as much as military, invasion and domination," and is "opposed to the annihilation of seals and whales as much as to that of human tribes or cultures" (Naess, 1972: 96).

The idea of deep-ecological justice echoes that of another important ecophilosophical voice, the poet Gary Snyder. Snyder also believed that the most fundamental revolution needed to bring about our transformation to an ecological civilization was the overthrow of human supremacy. In his poem "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" (1970: 39), Snyder wrote:

> *The country surrounds the city*
> *The back country surrounds the country*
>
> *"From the masses to the masses" the most*
> *Revolutionary consciousness is to be found*
> *Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes:*
> *Animals, trees, water, air, grasses*

John Muir rebelled deeply and resolutely against anthropocentrism. His writings show the evolution of a nature-based spirituality that is strikingly congruent with that of the Native American cultures of the continent and the Californian bioregion that he came to call home. He and his ecophilosophical forebears were revolutionaries, far ahead of their times (in the Western world, at least) in arguing against human domination and advocating for an ecocentric worldview.

In their response to the Muir-as-racist controversy, Aaron Mair and his coauthors wrote of Muir that "In all, he kickstarted a new era of environmentalism, fueled by ideals that are still relevant as we continue to face a series of ecological crises. … More than a century later, we are seeing the consequences of the failure of human societies to recognize the values Muir espoused" (Mair *et al.*, 2021). At the core of the "values Muir espoused" was ecocentrism and justice for all species and all of nature.

In a letter to his friend Alden Sampson in 1904, Muir ecocentrically extended the sentiment regarding human equality expressed in Scots poet Robert Burns's poem "A Man's A Man For A' That" to non-human species – "our horizontal fellow-mortals" as Muir called them – writing "I fondly hope & pray that the present feeble glimmering light on the rights of our horizontal fellow-mortals may grow in brightness over all the world until man to man & man to beast shall brothers be an a' that" (Muir, 1904).

The Sierra Club and other conservation organizations have worked to bring people into contact with nature, and to protect wild nature and wilderness to bring them into contact with, thereby contributing to the evolution and adoption of an ecocentric worldview. To criticize that work shows a lack of

understanding of what is really needed. The attack on John Muir is a misplaced and counterproductive attempt to appeal to (or appease) a subset of the Sierra Club's members. It could hurt their work and that of other environmental conservation organizations toward the real 'unfinished business': the adoption of an ecocentric worldview that can heal the human–nature relationship, and create a society in which justice and reconciliation within the whole biotic community can occur, including within the human species.

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