Hetch Hetchy Valley

John Muir (1838-1914) was, perhaps, America's most influential naturalist. In 1849 he and his family came to the United States from Scotland, where he was born. After abandoning plans to attend medical school, he worked at odd jobs and established a reputation as an inventor. In 1867 he decided to tramp the wilderness as an avocation. He took a 1,000-mile walk from Indiana to Florida, sailed to Cuba and then through the isthmus of Panama, and arrived in San Francisco, California, in 1868. He eventually settled in the summits of the Sierra Nevada. Muir referred to his years of wandering across meadows, around lakes, and up mountains as a lifelong education in the "University of the Wilder-
tness." The detailed observations that he recorded daily were the source of both his rapturous, poetic descriptions of the natural world, and of his published works. In 1871, Muir proposed that Yosemite Valley had been formed by glacial action. This theory, now widely accepted, was ridiculed by the geologists of the time. The establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890 was largely a result of Muir's inspirational descriptions of this remarkable wonderland.

Muir was a vociferous proponent of an ecocentric rather than an ecolo-
gist concept of the natural world. He wrote extensively about the unique character of the world's mountains, the diversity of life in them, and the significance of their preservation. Muir believed that human society should be guided by a philosophy of nature that recognized the intrinsic value of natural ecosystems. He was a key figure in the development of the conservation movement in the United States, and his writings and activism helped to secure the protection of Yosemite Valley as a national park.

Key Concept: The primacy of nature and the case for wilderness preservation

Yosemite is so wonderful that we are apt to regard it as an exceptional
creation, the only valley of its kind in the world; but Nature is not so poor as to have only one of anything. Several other yosemites have been discovered in the Sierras that occupy the same relative positions on the range and were formed by the same forces in the same kind of granite. One of these, the Hetch Hetchy Valley, is in the Yosemite National Park, about twenty miles from Yosemite, and is easily accessible to all sorts of travelers by a road and trail that leaves the Big Oak Flat road at Bronson Meadows a few miles below Crane Flat and continues by way of Yosemite Creek basin and the head of the middle fork of the Tuolumne. It has been said to have been discovered by Joseph Screene, a hunter, in 1850, a year before the discovery of the great Yosemite. After my first visit to it in the summer of 1871, I have always called it the "Tuolumne Yosemite." For it is a wonderfully exact counterpart of the Merced Yosemite, both in its relative height and extent, and in its sublimity, rocks and waterfalls but in the gardens, groves and meadows of its flowery
park-like floor. The floor of Yosemite is about four thousand feet above the
sea; the Hetch Hetchy floor about thirty-seven hundred feet. And as the Merced
cascades among talus boulders. It is in all its glory in June, when the snow
melted in all the cascades, and the cliff-gardens are formed. As I have often
seen the Hetch Hetchy Fall, Wapama, the only fall in the world, and in front of it, Tiouela's silvery
fall burning with iris sunlight. In the first white outburst at the head there is abundance of visible energy, but it is speedily hushed and concealed in divine
repose, and its tranquil progress to the base of the cliff is like that of a doowy
feather in a still room. Now observe the burnished and magnificent dryness of the
valley; you would be a piece of embroidery held in the hand. Toward the
beginning of the fall you see groups of booming, clear-bronze, solid, white heads separate, their tails like combed silk interlacing among delicate
gray and purple shadows, ever forming and dissolving, worn out by fricition in
their rush through the air. Most of these vanish a few hundred feet below the
summit, changing to varied forms of cloud-like drapery. Near the bottom the
width of the fall has increased from about twenty-five feet to a hundred feet. Here it is composed of yet finer tissues, and is still without a trace of disorder—air, water and sunlight woven into stuff that might persuade.

So fine a fall might well seem sufficient to glorify any valley; but here, in
Yosemite, Nature seems in no wise to participate of the commercial use of Lake Eleanor and the Hetch Hetchy Valley was made
commercial, with
parks and peace and health of the people, is in danger of being dammed and made
cliff-garden and fernery, but they are too unsurpassed to be noticed in so grand a
place.

It appears... that Hetch Hetchy Valley, far from being a plain, common
rockbound meadow, as many who have not seen it seem to suppose, is a grand
landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples.
As in Yosemite, the sublime rocks of its walls seem to glow with life, whether
leaving back into or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes, giving welcome to
storms and calm alike, their brows in the sky, their feet set in the groves and
grow flowery meadows, while birds, bees, and butterflies help the river and
waterfalls to stir all the air into music—things frail and fleeting and types of
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repose, and its tranquil progress to the base of the cliff is like that of a downy
feather in a still room. Now observe the fineness and marvelous distinctness of
most of the conservators of his time, who tempered their respect for
nature with the multiple-use concept that gave primacy to human needs and
appetites. The preservation movement, supported by Muir, saw the need to
set aside wilderness areas where no commercial or industrial activity would
be permitted. The first such "primitive areas" were established by an
administrative fiat of the U.S. Forest Service in the 1920s, a decade after Muir's
death, but they were not officially protected by federal law until the passage
of the Wilderness Act in 1964.

The most bitter disappointment of Muir's life was his failure to prevent the
flooding and submerging of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite Na-
tional Park by a dam built to supply water and electricity to San Francisco.
Muir focused on the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the following selection from his book The Mountains of California (Houghton Mifflin, 1916). In it, Muir displays his mastery in conveying an image of the wonders of nature and his
animosity toward those who would sacrifice such wonders in the interest
of commercialism.

Key Concept: the primacy of nature and the case for wilderness preservation

excels even that favorite fall both in height and airy-fairy beauty and behavior.
Lowlanders are apt to suppose that mountain streams in their wild career over
cliffs lose all their character and are reduced to a noisy chaos of foam and spray.
On the contrary, on no part of their travel are they more harmonious and self-
controlled. Imagine yourself in Hetch Hetchy on a sunny day in June, standing
waistdeep in grass and flowers (as I have often stood), while the great pines
sway dreamily with the scented perfumes of summer. Glancing northward across
the Valley you see a plain, gray granite cliff rising abruptly out of the gardens
and groves to a height of eighteen hundred feet, and in front of it Tieu-elала's silvery
fall burning with iris sunlight. In the first white outburst at the head there is
abundance of visible energy, but it is speedily hushed and concealed in divine
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width of the fall has increased from about twenty-five feet to a hundred feet. Here it is composed of yet finer tissues, and is still without a trace of disorder—air, water and sunlight woven into stuff that might persuade.
in 1903, and on December 22 of that year it was denied by the Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Hitchcock, who truthfully said:

Presumably the Yosemite National Park was created such by law because of the natural objects of varying degrees of scenic importance inclosed within its boundaries, inclusive alike of its beautiful small lakes, like Eleanor, and its majestic wonders, like Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite Valley. It is the aggregation of such natural scenic features that makes the Yosemite Park a wonderland which the Congress of the United States sought by law to reserve for all coming time as nearly as practicable in the condition fashioned by the hand of the Creator—a worthy object of national pride and a source of healthful pleasure and rest for the thousands of people who may annually sojourn there during the heated months.

That any one would try to destroy such a place seems incredible; but sad experience shows that there are people good enough and bad enough for anything. The proponents of the dam scheme bring forward a lot of bad arguments to prove that the only righteous thing to do with the people's parks is to destroy them bit by bit as they are able. Their arguments are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden—so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water and Tuolumne scenery going to waste. Few of their statements are even partly true, and all are misleading.

Thus, Hetch Hetchy, they say, is a "low-lying meadow." On the contrary, it is a high-lying natural landscape garden, as the photographic illustrations show.

"It is a common minor feature, like thousands of others." On the contrary, it is a very uncommon feature; after Yosemite, the rarest and in many ways the most important in the National Park.

"Damming and submerging it one hundred and seventy-five feet deep would enhance its beauty by forming a crystal-clear lake." Landscape gardens, places of recreation and worship, are never made beautiful by destroying and burying them. The beautiful sham lake, forsooth, would be only an eyesore, a dismal blot on the landscape, like many others to be seen in the Sierra. For, instead of keeping it at the same level all the year, allowing Nature centuries of time to make new shores, it would, of course, be full only a month or two in the spring, when the snow is melting fast; then it would be gradually drained, exposing the slimy sides of the basin and shallow parts of the bottom, with the gathered drift and waste, death and decay of the upper hasins, caught here instead of being swept on to decent natural burial along the banks of the river or in the sea. Thus the Hetch Hetchy dam-lake would be only a rough imitation of a natural lake for a few of the spring months, an open sepulcher for the others.

"Hetch Hetchy water is the purest of all to be found in the Sierra, unpolluted, and forever unpollutable." On the contrary, excepting that of the Merced below Yosemite, it is less pure than that of most of the other Sierra streams, because of the sewerage of camp-grounds draining into it, especially of the Big Tuolumne Meadows camp-ground, occupied by hundreds of tourists and mountaineers, with their animals, for months every summer, soon to be followed by thousands from all the world.

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.

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.