

John Muir and Our National Parks

As summer begins, it's a good time to appreciate our national parks and those who founded them. Put the following facts on the board or pass them out to your class and see if students can guess the name of the person they describe:

Who is he?

- Born in Scotland, where he used to hunt for birds' nests as a child. Immigrated to the United States with his family at age 11.
- As a young man, memorized most of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament. Ideas about religion influenced his writing about the glory of nature.
- An inventor—improved machines when he worked in a factory and later designed a water-powered mill to cut trees felled by the wind.
- Studied things like botany, chemistry, and geology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but took such an odd assortment of classes that he never graduated.
- Walked 1,000 miles from Indiana to Florida and wrote a book about it.
- Eventually moved to the Yosemite wilderness and lived in a small cabin he built with a stream running through one corner.
- Came up with the glacier theory for the formation of Yosemite Valley. Turned out to be right, though his ideas went against those of leading scientists of his day.
- Went camping with Teddy Roosevelt, who helped found national parks.
- Cofounded the Sierra Club and was its president for 22 years, until his death. The Sierra Club helped found new national parks after his death and today has more than 2.4 million members.
- Strongly influenced by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and especially Henry David Thoreau. Emerson came out and spent a day with him in Yosemite.
- Having met him, Ralph Waldo Emerson considered him the embodiment of the “prophet-naturalist” he had envisioned in his writings.
- Explored the Alaska wilderness.
- Wrote 12 books and more than 300 articles that inspired people to love nature and strengthened the push for national parks and forests.

- Places named for him include two mountains, four trails, a mountain pass, a wilderness area, a national monument, a beach, a camp, a highway, an asteroid, and a glacier in Alaska. Has also been on a US postage stamp and the California state quarter and has been honored in Scotland, where he was born.
- Today known as the “Father of the National Parks.”

Now put his name on the board:

John Muir

How did the national parks begin? Explain that Yellowstone, founded in 1872, is considered the world's first and oldest national park. Various men who had explored the area proposed that it should be preserved for the American people. Congress agreed, and President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill into law. However, there were no real plans for managing the park.

Two men who were very influential in establishing more national parks and figuring out how to manage them were President Teddy Roosevelt and naturalist John Muir. Muir is especially known for his work with the Yosemite Valley. It had been set aside, though not as a national park, in 1864 by President Lincoln, but it was given to the state of California and Muir felt that the state was not taking good care of it. He pushed Congress to pass the National Park bill in 1890, creating the Yosemite and Sequoia national parks. The National Park Service was created later, taking over management of the parks in 1916.

Ask your students if they have ever been hiking or camping. Have they visited any of the state or national parks and forests? What was that like? Ask them to share some examples of their experiences in nature. How do your students feel about nature?

Hand out copies of the excerpt from John Muir's writing provided below and have students read through it. (The full excerpt can be found at this Sierra Club site: http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/mount_ritter.aspx.) As they read, students should use a highlighter or pen to mark the best sentences and details. Then discuss the excerpt as a class. How does Muir feel about nature? How does he convey his love of nature to readers? How does he help readers to picture what it was like to explore the glacier and watch the sun set? What specific details stand out? Having read the excerpt, why do your students think Muir's writing made many Americans more interested in nature and the wilderness?

John Muir and Our National Parks

Assign students to write a narrative essay of 3–6 paragraphs about a particular experience they have had with nature. They should try to convey it the way John Muir did, using details to make the experience come alive for readers. What made their own experience memorable? How did it make them feel more connected to the natural world? Give students time to share parts of their writing with small groups or with the class.

From “Mount Ritter” in John Muir’s book *The Mountains of California*

The inclination of the glacier is quite moderate at the head, and, as the sun had softened the neve, I made safe and rapid progress, running and sliding, and keeping up a sharp outlook for crevasses. About half a mile from the head, there is an ice cascade, where the glacier pours over a sharp declivity and is shattered into massive blocks separated by deep, blue fissures. To thread my way through the slippery mazes of this crevassed portion seemed impossible, and I endeavored to avoid it by climbing off to the shoulder of the mountain. But the slopes rapidly steepened and at length fell away in sheer precipices, compelling a return to the ice. Fortunately, the day had been warm enough to loosen the ice-crystals so as to admit of hollows being dug in the rotten portions of the blocks, thus enabling me to pick my way with far less difficulty than I had anticipated. Continuing down over the snout, and along the left lateral moraine, was only a confident saunter, showing that the ascent of the mountain by way of this glacier is easy, provided one is armed with an axe, to cut steps here and there.

The lower end of the glacier was beautifully waved and barred by the outcropping edges of the bedded ice-layers which represent the annual snowfalls, and to some extent the irregularities of structure caused by the weathering of the walls of crevasses, and by separate snowfalls which have been followed by rain, hail, thawing and freezing, etc. Small ribs were gliding and swirling over the melting surface with a smooth, oily appearance, in channels of pure ice their quick, compliant movements contrasting most impressively with the rigid, invisible flow of the glacier itself, on whose back they all were riding.

Night drew near before I reached the eastern base of the mountain, and my camp lay many a rugged mile to the north; but ultimate success was assured. It was now only a matter of endurance and ordinary mountain-craft. The sunset was, if possible, yet more beautiful than that of the day before. The Mono landscape seemed to be fairly saturated with warm, purple light. The peaks marshaled along the summit were in shadow, but through every notch and pass streamed vivid sunfire, soothing and irradiating their rough, black angles, while companies of small luminous clouds hovered above them like very angels of light. Darkness came on, but I found my way by the trends of the canyons and the peaks projected against the sky. All excitement died with the light, and then I was weary. But the joyful sound of the waterfall across the lake was heard at last, and soon the stars were seen reflected in the lake itself. Taking my bearings from these, I discovered the little pine thicket in which my nest was, and then I had a rest such as only a tired mountaineer may enjoy. After lying loose and lost for a while, I made a sunrise fire, went down to the lake, dashed water on my head, and dipped a cupful for tea. The revival brought about by bread and tea was as complete as the exhaustion from excessive enjoyment and toil. Then I crept beneath the pine-tassels to bed. The wind was frosty and the fire burned low, but my sleep was none the less sound, and the evening constellations had swept far to the west before I awoke.