

A [sample entry](#) from the

# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005  
All Rights Reserved

## Sierra Club

Founded in 1892, largely through the labor of John Muir in order to protect the wildlands of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Sierra Club has become a recognized name worldwide for its efforts in conservation. Though steering a course free of any formal religious affiliation, the organization has nonetheless been influenced in its decisions and bolstered by the strength of its founders' and members' religious perceptions, beliefs and identities.

It was Muir's mix of sacred metaphor, along with a perception of the aesthetic, spiritual and intrinsic value of wilderness, which served as a fundamental inspiration for the Club. The mountains were the "cathedral" that John Muir trafficked, and nature was forever his house of worship, as he described in *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911): "In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars" (Muir 1987: 250). His pilgrimages in the Sierra Nevada Mountains led him to champion their protection, for they were his place of revelation, where God became visible:

Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fibre thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing for the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself (Muir 1987: 146).

Remnants of Muir's Protestant upbringing are still evident in such passages and he continued to use metaphors borrowed from Christianity throughout his life. Recent scholarship, however, has found his religious beliefs had more affinity with pantheism, animism, and Daoism, although during his time, Muir's religious sentiments remained largely unknown, leading Stephen Fox to conclude:

Muir lived in a Christian society and wrote for a Christian readership. Not wishing to offend, he generally kept the precise nature of his religious ideas to himself, confining them to journals, letters, and private discussions (Fox 1981: 80).

This may help to explain why for Muir and later generations of the Sierra Club, the spirituality of the movement has been complicated and often obscure, perhaps especially to outsiders, more the subject of conversation around campfires during wilderness outings than in Club publications and position papers.

Muir was, of course, a fervent evangelist for what has been called the "out-of-doors gospel of wilderness." Attentive readers of his writings have long perceived something

other than orthodox Christianity animating them. Muir trekked through what he called a "terrestrial eternity" in the California hills, urging those who shared his vision to join him in proclaiming, not a kingdom in heaven, but a kingdom of Earth. For Muir, the sacred was woven into earthly life, and he expressed this famously in his metaphysics of interdependence:

When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken to everything else in the universe. I fancy I can hear a heart beating in every crystal, in every grain of sand and see a wise plan in the making and shaping and placing of every one of them. All seems to be dancing to divine music . . . (John Muir Papers, University of the Pacific: Journal, 27 July 1869, in Fox 1981: 291).

This worldview was echoed a century later in *The Sierra Club: A Guide*:

The history of the Sierra Club is the history of an idea . . . Wild places are not just inconvenient parcels of land to be exploited for human use; they are – along with humans themselves – integral parts of a universe in which everything is hitched to everything else. That was John Muir's creed, and it is what we believe today (Carr and Foster 1989: 48).

While such metaphysics of interdependence have animated the Club for generations, its mission statement evolved with the times, along with new challenges and perceptions. The Sierra Club's mission, as signaled in its incorporation documents, was:

to explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast; to publish authentic information concerning them [and] to enlist the support and cooperation of the people and the government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains (in Cohen 1988: 9).

At the time, the notions of "rendering accessible" and "preserving" worked in tandem, and the primary interest of the Club was to create and maintain national parks as "scenic resources" as opposed to economic properties. More importantly, the parks were to be sites of spiritual insight. As Muir once put it, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness" (Muir 1954: 312), and this sort of perception undergirds his and much of the Club's subsequent spiritual epistemology: to hear the divine music, one must pilgrimage into wilderness.

The Sierra Club therefore became famous for its "outings" (also known as High Trips) – backcountry excursions

into the stunning wilderness areas of California – trailblazing, mountaineering, and seeking direct communion with nature. The outings functioned not only to bind together the community of faith but also to evoke a reverence for wildlands and empower members to ethical action, namely, the defense of wild places. Indeed, for Muir, domestication of sheep, humans, and other animals was a form of desecration. When describing wild mountain sheep Muir glowed; but tamed sheep he dismissed as “hooved locusts.” Likewise, he passionately believed that the “the gross heathenism of civilization,” which destroys “nature, and poetry, and all that is spiritual,” could be purged from the body by “a good hard trip” (in Fox 1981: 13–14), for what both men and sheep need is “a little pure wildness” (in Oelschlaeger 1991: 200).

The outings thus offered not only adventure but also spiritual therapy for humans who had become spiritually impoverished by domesticated lives in oppressive, profane cities. “Service trips” were later added to help clean up or restore wildlands desecrated by those who visited them without the proper wilderness reverence and ethics. Empowered by the wilderness, Muir and his progeny returned to the city and struggled to influence government land-management practices.

The Sierra Club’s first major public battle, led by Muir, involved plans to dam Hetch Hetchy valley in Yosemite National Park in order to provide water for the city of San Francisco. The United States Forest Service Chief, Gifford Pinchot, and other “progressive conservationists” favored the dam, which they considered a “wise use” of public land for the benefit of all. Muir viewed the dam as a sacrilege and its proponents as “temple destroyers” (in Cohen 1988: 28). Muir died a year after losing the battle to save the valley from inundation, but the Sierra Club gained a reputation as a strong voice contesting the unrestrained rush toward economic development by asserting that the non-material benefits of nature outweigh the social benefits that might result from such desecration.

Many ironies inhere to the Club’s preservationist philosophy and spirituality. Fighting to keep the National Parks immune from ski resorts, dams and timber interests has often involved compromises in which the Club agreed not to contest the projects outside of park boundaries, oftentimes sacrificing these areas before realizing the consequences. The rise of automobile use in post-war America, which brought more visitors to the Parks to experience these scenic wonderlands, delivered a different type of tourist who demanded new roads and amenities that compromised the terrain. In 1951, partly in response to these trends, the Club mission statement was altered: “rendering accessible” became “preserve.” This reflected anxiety about the impacts of the growing number of tourists, as well as the long-standing ambivalence of mountaineers and wilderness lovers toward those outside of the wilderness church. As Linda Graber observed, “wilderness

purists,” including Sierra Club members, “resent the outsider’s presence in sacred space because his ‘inferior’ mode of perception” leads such a person to “desecrate wilderness” (Graber 1976: 28, 81).

Throughout the 1950s in the United States the very idea of wilderness management was being reformulated, and the Club was instrumental in this process. In 1949 Aldo Leopold’s classic, *A Sand County Almanac*, was published and reviewed in the Sierra Club *Bulletin*. Dave Brower, who would go on to be a crucial and controversial figure in the Club, attributed his change in outlook from recreational ideas of wilderness to ecological ideas of wilderness directly to his reading of this book (Cohen 1988: 117). The *Bulletin* itself, under Brower’s leadership, also changed its emphasis, from articles about outings to issues of wilderness policy. Biennial wilderness conferences, beginning in 1949, were hosted by the Sierra Club and brought together several conservation groups and government organizations to hammer out common strategies and goals. Bestor Robinson, a Sierra Club member and member of the advisory committee to the secretary of the interior at the time, recognized two different philosophies emerging among participants at these conferences. For some, “the sole function of wilderness is to contribute to the inspiration and wellbeing of people,” while for those more in synch with Muir himself, “wilderness itself has a personality – a soul – and should be preserved for its own sake” (in Cohen 1988: 128).

Brower, whose term as executive director began in 1952, and Richard Leonard, a long-time member and Club President in 1953, spearheaded another campaign reminiscent of the Hetch Hetchy battle, calling for the protection of Dinosaur National Monument in Utah in the face of another dam proposal. While the Club argued that the dam was not the only economic alternative, a central aspect of the campaign was to portray Dinosaur as a sacred place. The religious nature of the language used is evident in Brower’s plea to Congress:

The axiom for protecting the Park System is to consider that it is dedicated country, hallowed ground to leave as beautiful as we have found it, and not country in which man should be so impressed with himself that he tries to improve God’s handiwork (in Cohen 1988: 182).

Wallace Stegner was successfully recruited to edit a photographic book about the site to sway popular support and advertisements were placed in newspapers. These sorts of publications would become a powerful tool of persuasion for the Sierra Club in the future – particularly notable was the stunning landscape photography of Ansel Adams, who was himself motivated by his spiritual connection to the land. The victory at Dinosaur was considered a “David over Goliath” event (Cohen 1988: 160),

and the Club achieved recognition as a political force to be reckoned with. However, because the Club did not oppose projects outside of National Parks or Monuments at the time, it did not fight the proposal to build a dam at Glen Canyon on the Colorado River. This decision was later lamented by Brower, who vowed never again to restrict his concern in such a way, thus marking a further broadening of the mission of the Club.

Many of the disagreements between the Sierra Club and the government, including a decisive break with the United States Forest Service in 1960, had much to do with nature-as-sacred religion. Sierra Club members such as Brower, among others, believed that in saving the wilderness, they were protecting the only thing that, in the final analysis, could save humankind (Cohen 1988: 257). According to Nancy Newhall – who wrote the text to complement Ansel Adams' breathtaking photography in the Sierra Club's *This is the American Earth* (1960) – America still held Edenic possibilities and in the freedom of wilderness there were “answers to more questions than we yet know how to ask” (Newhall in Cohen 1988: 258). Club publications began to attract critical acclaim and some reviewers recognized their religious dimensions. John B. Oakes of the *New York Times*, for example, wrote about *This is the American Earth* that, “Essentially it is a song of praise to the Earth, a prayer and supplication for its endurance. We can use such songs and prayers” (in Cohen 1988: 259).

The Glen Canyon Dam taught difficult lessons. When proposals for further dams in the Grand Canyon were submitted, the Club responded with a barrage of advertising, both in the form of new books and newspaper ads taken out in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Responding to the supposed recreational benefits of lakes for Canyon tourism, one memorable Sierra Club advertisement in the summer of 1966 asked: “Should We Also Flood The Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer The Ceiling?” (poster reproduced in *The Sierra Club: A Guide* (1989: graphics insert). This kind of publicity resulted in the rapid growth of club membership and enhanced the Club's reputation for challenging commercial interests and government policy. The Sierra Club's publishing program continued to play an important role in the latter decades of the twentieth century by publishing not only ecological texts but also works by prominent figures promoting nature spirituality of one form or another, including books by Thomas Berry, Wendell Berry, Jerry Mander, Theodore Roszak, and Paul Shepard.

As Club membership became more geographically diverse, advocacy efforts expanded to include a wide variety of environmental issues, such as population growth, energy use, pollution, and human rights. In the late 1990s, the Club began to recognize the potential alliance between religious institutions – particularly Christian ones, whom Club leaders had previously written off as unimportant –

and environmental protection. In 1997, for example, Carl Pope, who was then the executive director of the Sierra Club, attended a symposium at the University of California campus in Santa Barbara. On this occasion, Bartholomew I, the patriarch of the Orthodox Christian Church, broke new ground in labeling environmental degradation a sin. In his address to those gathered, Pope apologized for the failure of environmental activists to reach out to the religious community. He later wrote,

After all, many of the environmental challenges we face today are moral ones. The sin of pride tempts us to imagine that the world exists for our use alone, and Mammon, the god of greed, leads us down the path to environmental destruction (Pope 1998: 14).

Pope also compared environmental issues to the social changes brought about during the civil rights era in which religious organizations led the way. “Yet,” he stated,

for almost 30 years most professional environmentalists stubbornly, almost proudly, denied the need to reach out to the religious community . . . We failed to realize – as some eminent scientists now tell us – that science and religion offer two distinct approaches to knowledge, and that neither has a monopoly on the truth . . . We acted as if we could save life on Earth without the same institutions through which we save ourselves (1998: 14).

Indeed, some Club members have joined their activism and their faith, as is evidenced by various collaborations on urban sprawl, calls for ending commercial logging, political lobbying, and promotion of renewable energy. One example of such collaboration, from a recent article in the Sierra Club Newsletter, noted that priest and Sierra Club member Father Charles Morris conducted a dedication and prayer ceremony for the installation of solar panels and a wind turbine (Heim-Jonson 2001).

No group is immune from criticism, and the Sierra Club has often been criticized sharply from within the environmental movement and from without, and internal debates are likewise often fierce. One long-standing external critique applies not only to the Sierra Club but to the wilderness ideal itself: that the notion of a pristine wilderness absent of humans inappropriately separates human beings from nature. This separation occurs not merely in an abstract, philosophical sense. It separates some humans physically, as with the National Parks model that the Sierra Club helped to spawn, which facilitated the removal (sometimes by murder) of Aboriginal peoples from their land. Moreover, critics argue, with the globalization of the National Park's wilderness ideal and model, deracination from the land and cultural genocide has often followed the development of wilderness-oriented National Parks. Many

contemporary Sierra Club and National Park advocates, however, recognize the validity of such criticisms and are now promoting community-based models of environmental protection that promote both biological and cultural diversity. The United Nations' biosphere reserve model, which endeavors to incorporate rather than exile people while protecting biologically sensitive areas, suggests that the criticisms of the inherited wilderness ideal have been undergoing their own globalization.

Other criticisms are explicitly or implicitly religious. Some critics of the Club argue its members care more for nature than people and even promote an irrational if not pagan spirituality that is an affront to God. Meanwhile some avowedly Pagan environmentalists believe the Club has strayed from Muir's spirituality and uncompromising passion to preserve wilderness. Such perceptions have contributed to the emergence and proliferation of radical environmental groups, such as Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front. This has also served to inspire internal reform movements in the Club that endeavor to return to and revitalize the original charismatic vision of the Club's founder.

The most important of these revitalization movements has been the "John Muir Sierrans," which was founded in 1993 and funded in part by David Brower through organizations he launched after being ousted from the Sierra Club. Led by Chad Hanson (who eventually served on the Sierra Club board) and David Orr, the John Muir Sierrans ran a slate that helped turn the Club in a more radical, biocentric direction. They won membership approval for a strong position against commercial logging on public land in 1996, despite strong opposition from figures they considered the conservative "old guard" of the Club. And trying to reverse the earlier, much lamented capitulation over Glen Canyon, they even urged the draining of Lake Powell, which had been created by the Dam. Moreover, they pushed strong, uncompromising positions across the environmental spectrum, in ways considered misguided, divisive, and counterproductive by more pragmatic Club members. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the Sierrans and other biocentric activists, such as David Foreman (co-founder of Earth First!) and Captain Paul Watson (of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society) had come close to controlling the Sierra Club board. This reflected a large increase in membership support for strong if not radical positions, and arguably, for biocentric spirituality.

In the early twenty-first century internal Club politics continued to be divided largely along the lines of those who considered themselves pragmatic (some of whom were more theistic in their religious sensibilities and anthropocentric in their axiology) and those who confessed that nature is sacred and believed that compromise is cowardly and taboo. Another fault line persisted between environmentalists with a strong social justice

agenda, who considered morally wrong many approaches to population stabilization and reduction, including anti-immigration policies, and more biocentric activists, such as Paul Watson, who argued that nonhuman life should not suffer because anthropocentric social justice agendas hinder strong advocacy for policies that would reduce human numbers.

Criticisms from environmental radicals both inside and outside of the Club have helped push it to take increasingly strong positions in defense of the Earth's biodiversity. Left unclear is whether the Club's new-found interest in building bridges to religious communities – many of which have strong anthropocentric, social justice-oriented concerns – will broaden the Club's appeal and influence or exacerbate internal tensions, some of which are religion-related. If the latter dynamic proves decisive, nature-related religion could, ironically, weaken the Club's environmental protection efforts.

Gavin Van Horn  
Bron Taylor

#### Further Reading

- Adams, Ansel and Nancy Newhall. *This Is the American Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1960.
- Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977.
- Carr, Patrick and Lynn Foster. "Coming into the Club." In Patrick Carr, ed. *The Sierra Club: A Guide*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1989.
- Cohen, Michael P. *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892–1970*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988.
- Fox, Stephen. *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981.
- Graber, Linda. *Wilderness as Sacred Space*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1976.
- Heim-Jonson, Sarah W. "In Good Faith." *The Planet Newsletter* (September 2001), [www.sierraclub.org/planet/200109/commonground.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/200109/commonground.asp).
- Holmes, Steven J. *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.
- Johnson, Trebbe and Vitale Stefano. "The Second Creation Story." *Sierra* 83:6 (1998), 50–6.
- Mander, Jerry. *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1991.
- Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987 (1911).
- Muir, John. *The Wilderness World of John Muir*. Edwin Way Teal, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American*

- Mind*. 2nd edn. 1967; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Pope, Carl. "Reaching Beyond Ourselves." *Sierra* 83:6 (November/December 1998), 14-15.
- Roszak, Theodore, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner, eds. *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1995.
- Sears, John. *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Shepard, Paul. *Nature and Madness*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982.
- Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Turner, Frederick. *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- See also: Adams, Ansel; Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch; Berry, Thomas; Berry, Wendell; Biocentric Religion – A Call for; Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites; Brower, David; Leopold, Aldo; Manifest Destiny; Muir, John; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Shepard, Paul; Watson, Paul – and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society; Wilderness Religion; Wilderness Society.

## Sierra Treks

Begun in the late 1960s, Sierra Treks exemplifies a new form of environmental concern within evangelical Christianity. The letterhead of Sierra Treks' parent organization, Wild Hope, proclaims Wild Hope's Sierra Treks and Littlefoot Expeditions' programs to be "Wilderness Trips for People" and "People Trips for Wilderness." Combining environmental concern with Christian faith, this small outdoor/public lands advocacy group combines strong belief in the value of wilderness with the idea of God as Creator/Redeemer.

Started in 1968 by Robin Wainwright for the Mount Hermon Association, an evangelical camp and conference center in California, Sierra Treks initially combined wilderness camping/fishing trips with evangelistic Bible studies. Given Wainwright's Boy Scout background and Mount Hermon's conservative Christian ideology, trips until 1973 were open only to boys. Sierra Treks expanded and developed its more advocacy-oriented environmental mission under the leadership of Dave Willis, hired as the program's director in 1972. Willis brought a Sierra Club and Outward Bound approach to Sierra Treks, as well as a developing Christian faith that led him to a Bible-based theology that recognizes God's love for all creation.

In 1973, Sierra Treks expanded to include both girls and coed wilderness trips. The activities of all Sierra Treks continued to be modeled after Outward Bound courses. Greater expansion occurred in 1974 when Willis began hiring staff shaped by the environmental movement and progressive evangelical Christianity. Sierra Treks began offering winter mountain courses in 1976 and winter desert treks in 1980. Over the years Sierra Treks has offered courses for colleges, seminaries, churches, women's groups, couples' groups, high school and junior high students, youth-at-risk, seminars for rock climbers, trips for the hearing-impaired, and others. Trips have been in the Sierra Nevada Range in California, the Cascade Mountains in Oregon and Washington, Joshua Tree National Monument in California, the Oregon/California Siskiyou Mountains, and elsewhere.

Sierra Treks and Dave Willis left Mount Hermon in 1983. By 1985 Sierra Treks added a sister organization, Littlefoot Expeditions, that offers custom trips for targeted individuals to endangered wildlands. Politicians, government officials, environmental leaders, media representatives, and foundation staff have all participated in Littlefoot Expeditions, becoming allies in ongoing efforts to protect the areas they visit by experiencing those areas personally. Many years of Littlefoot trips in southwestern Oregon's Soda Mountain backcountry led to President William Jefferson Clinton's June 2000 proclamation of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

The nonprofit organization Wild Hope was formed in 1988 to incorporate both Sierra Treks and Littlefoot Expeditions. Sierra Treks remains the "Wilderness Trips for People" branch in which students participate in Outward-Bound-type wilderness trips encouraging Christian faith development. According to Dave Willis, Sierra Treks believes in the "value of a wilderness experience for its own sake, while attempting to point to a God who is faithful to all creation." Littlefoot Expeditions remain the "People Trips for Wilderness" branch, emphasizing public lands advocacy. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sierra Treks ran up to thirty wilderness trips per year. As Willis has become more involved in wildlands advocacy, more Littlefoot Expeditions (and fewer Sierra Treks) have been offered.

The environmental concern common to both the trip program and the advocacy branch combines a deep belief in the value of wilderness with an all-creation theology. This theology proclaims hope in a Creator/Redeemer God whose faithfulness to humanity is inseparable from faithfulness to all creation.

*Lois Ann Lorentzen*

### Further Reading

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine, 1968.