

What We Can Learn from Muir, Pinchot

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainable-tompkins.org.

John Muir (1838-1914) is perhaps the grandfather of the modern American environmental movement. A Scottish immigrant to the U.S. in 1849, he is familiar especially to Californians as the author of "The Mountains of California," as a key creator of Yosemite National Park in 1890 and as a founder of the Sierra Club in 1892.

Muir led a rich and complex life. He homesteaded with his parents, studied chemistry and other sciences at the University of Wisconsin, went to Canada in 1864 to avoid the draft for the Civil War, steeped himself in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau and wrote 12 books and more than 300 articles. Most of these writings were nature pieces that inspired others to commune with nature in the expanding national park system in the American West.

Muir believed that wilderness was a healing environment for humans, who had been otherwise distorted and disoriented by much of modern civilization. As influenced by Emerson and Thoreau, he viewed nature as a community in which all living creatures serve their own purposes and in which humans should have no special privileges. In 1868, Muir replicated Thoreau's famous Walden Pond experiment (described earlier in this series), living for months in a cabin or under the stars in Yosemite Valley.

Muir worked to protect natural resources because of their inherent beauty and what he believed was their contribution to a healthy emotional life for humans. Muir's life overlapped that of Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), son of a wealthy Pennsylvania lumber and land-speculation family. Pinchot became the first director of the U.S. Forestry Service in 1905.

While Muir celebrated nature and stood in awe of it, Pinchot wanted to use it "wisely" for the benefit of small landowners and the public.

To this end, he coined the term "wise use" in 1907. Muir was mostly self-educated in environmental issues; Pinchot had a degree from Yale and had studied at the French National Forestry School.

In 1900, Pinchot organized the Society of American Foresters. This helped establish forestry as a scientific discipline and was further aided by the decision of Pinchot's family in that same year to donate a portion of their substantial fortune to the establishment of a forestry school at Yale. This made Yale the third U.S. university, after Cornell, to have such a school. Cornell's school, established in 1898, closed in 1903. It partially reopened in 1910 as the Department of Natural Resources.

The Biltmore Forest School in North Carolina was the other early school to offer scientific training in forestry. Pinchot fought against big-business lumber enterprises. However, he opposed Muir's concept of protecting the environment on the basis of beauty and emotion.

Please turn to page 7

Muir

Continued from page 6

Pinchot won a climactic battle from 1908 to 1913 over whether to dam a river in the Hetch Hetchy Valley in north Yosemite to provide a water reservoir for San Francisco. Pinchot won over Muir in part on the argument of wise use over aesthetic beauty. A sustained-yield business-oriented approach to natural resources appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt and his allies in Congress.

In 1988, a new wise-use movement was created by several of the largest corporate lobbying groups to counter what they believed had become the excessive power of grassroots environmental organi-

zations, including the Sierra Club. Represented at the founding conference in Reno, Nev., were the American Petroleum Institute, the American Mining Congress, the National Rifle Association, Exxon and Dupont.

Whether this late 20th century wise-use movement resembles the original small landowner and public beneficiaries as envisioned by Gifford Pinchot is an open question. Were John Muir alive today, it is highly likely that he would oppose them.

This is the latest in a series of articles on the history of sustainability. Richard W. Franke is professor emeritus of anthropology at Montclair State University, a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.