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## Muir Mania

### A Legacy With Legs

by Kit Stolz

Accustomed to roaming alone in the mountains, John Muir once wrote in his journal that "oftentimes we are nearest our friends when furthest from them." Even mortality, he insisted, could not separate true lovers. Eighty-seven years after his own death, the devotion of Muir's fans has proven his words prophetic--although the Sierra Club's founder might be surprised by the lengths to which some will go to honor his legacy. There are said to be more places named after John Muir in California, including some three dozen schools and libraries, than for any other person. A national monument and a wilderness area in that state, as well as a glacier and a mountain in Alaska, pay tribute to the nature-defender. Three plants (including Muir's fleabane), a rabbitlike pika in Yosemite, a butterfly, and a mineral (muirite) have been named after him. Two U.S. stamps have been issued in his honor. The bow of a World War II "liberty ship" bore the bearded muser's moniker. (While hundreds of these cargo ships sank under enemy fire, the Muir, appropriately enough, refused to become ocean garbage and was eventually recycled for scrap in 1966.) California has designated April 21 John Muir Day, and its official state tartan is fashioned after that worn by the Muir clan. The Sierra Club's highest honor is the John Muir Award.

Exploitative adoptions of Muir's name are refreshingly few and far between: There's the unfortunately named John Muir Parkway, a four-lane freeway in Martinez, California, that gives you easy access to the Best Western John Muir Inn, the John Muir Apartments, and the John Muir Executive Center. (The Martinez home where Muir lived from 1890 until his death in 1914 is now preserved as the John Muir National Historic Site.) Not far from Muir's Scottish birthplace in Dunbar, you'll find the John Muir putting green at Winterfield Golf Course. An "audio-animatronic" Muir greets visitors at Disney World's Epcot, even though a living, breathing Muir probably couldn't have survived a minute in this den of plasticity. And while you can buy a Muir polo shirt from the John Muir Memorial Association, it's actually tasteful, as commemorative polo shirts go.

What's most impressive about Muir's legacy is its vibrancy so long after his death. Last year, hundreds of people joined the Canadian Friends of John Muir in a walk guided by botanists, zoologists, and historians along a road Muir trod in 1864. In Scotland, a 1999 exhibit on Muir entitled *An Infinite Storm of Beauty* attracted thousands to an Edinburgh museum and moved on last year to his childhood home in Dunbar. (Plans to convert part of the home into a "virtual reality" museum have caused a storm of protest.)

Dozens of songs and several CDs are devoted to the conservationist, as well as almost a hundred books about Muir's efforts and impacts. Nearly two dozen books (including a downloadable "e-book") are available to readers interested in absorbing Muir's writings firsthand, including the timeless *My First Summer in the Sierra* from 1911 and *Travels in Alaska* from 1915.

Muir inspired two recent stage dramas. Lee Stetson, who has been performing as Muir for 18 years, opened a new show in 2000 (with fellow actor Doug Brennan) called *The Roughrider and the Tramp*, which focuses on Muir's 1903 Yosemite camping trip with Teddy Roosevelt. Stetson's show was dwarfed by a musical mounted by the Willows Theatre Company in Concord, California. The four original performances of *Mountain Days* required a cast of 80, a chorus of 50, an orchestra of 28, and a revolving stage, all under the unlikely sponsorship of AT&T, Chevron, and PG&E. After its successful opening last year, it has become an annual event in Martinez.

If the self-effacing Muir were to visit our times, he might be impatient with all the fuss over his own life, preferring the efforts of activists to save the wildlands he loved. No doubt, though, Muir would have been pleased to hear then-president Bill Clinton quote him last year while unveiling Giant Sequoia National Monument in California. "These majestic trees will continue to 'preach God's forestry fresh from heaven,'" Clinton proclaimed.

Last year the National Park Service purchased the Martinez meadow in which Muir is buried. It's not yet open to the public, but you can hike on the John Muir Nature Trail on nearby Mount Wanda, named after one of his daughters, where the family took walks. You could look for some of the 74 wildflower species that enchanted Muir nearly a century ago, and take to heart his enthusiasm for "places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike."

It's no surprise that everlasting Muir has his own Web sites: For more information, go to [www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit), [www.johnmuir.org](http://www.johnmuir.org), and [www.johnmuir.wytbear.com](http://www.johnmuir.wytbear.com).