

Raymond Barnett on John Muir and the Race Issue

When Dr. Barnett published his book on John Muir (Earth Wisdom) in 2016, little did he imagine that John Muir might ever stand accused of racism. When Dr. Barnett heard of such an accusation with respect to Native Americans, he re-read the numerous biographies and all his journal entries he had consulted for his 2016 book. He presented the results of that investigation (John Muir: Racist or Admirer of Native Americans?) in a talk to the 2018 History Conference of the Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association, later published as blogs on his website. Dr. Barnett's thorough investigation and report concluded quite resoundingly: "John Muir was not a racist, but to the contrary an admirer and staunch defender of North America's Native Americans, all the while honestly portraying the terrible burden they endured during their Sierra Nevada holocaust, and its affect upon them. Isolated instances in his journals or private letters when he occasionally expresses distaste for the appearances or manner of the holocaust-scarred Sierra Nevada Native Americans cannot be taken out of the much broader context of his many expressions of admiration of the Sierra Nevada and Alaska tribes; his touching enthusiasm for Alaska's Native American life, especially; his insistence that Native Americans were fully human "brothers;" and his heated in-the-face defense of California's Native Americans to a U.S. Army Colonel involved in exterminating them.'

Later, Dr. Barnett addressed the same charges against racism, this time directed with respect to Blacks. To do that, he re-published on his blog a portion of *Earth Wisdom*, "Through the Heart of the South: John Muir's 1867 Thousand Mile Walk." In that essay, he notes "One is struck by how winning Muir's ways were with the vast majority of the people he met, White and Black. With the Blacks, he is usually freely given food and lodging and enjoys the company. With the Whites, sometimes the same is the case, though often there is initial refusal and considerable questioning and conversation before his acceptance. This ability of Muir to attract and "win over" his fellows was a constant throughout his life, from post-bellum South to, later, the salons of San Francisco, New York, and London."

As the summer of 2020 progressed, there was a wave of protests over the repeated and horrible brutality of police to Black people, especially over the murder of George Floyd by police. The cause morphed into a wider protest over the indefensible historical treatment of Blacks and Native Americans in America and colonialism in general. The Sierra Club's executive Director Michael Brune decided that just as statues of Confederate soldiers should be torn down, so too should legendary conservationists like John Muir.

In response to these protests, Dr. Barnett confirmed that such protest has been long overdue and that they cast an unquestionably harsh light on a subject that America needs to confront—and resolve. But he argued that deciding what exactly needs to be done, however, is not something that street protests are well-equipped to do. In Selecting and De-Selecting Our Model Americans, Dr. Barnett contended that in assessing historical figures, **factual accuracy and context** must be assured. Dr. Barnett wrote: "Any assessment of John Muir's attitude toward Native Americans, for example, must include his fulsome and detailed praise of Alaska's tribes after much time amongst them; his long support of Indian rights activist Charles Lummis and his

Sequoyah League; and particularly his actions at an 1880 San Francisco dinner party hosted by Mary and John Swett, when he got in the face of Colonel Boyce of the Indian Extermination Campaign and denounced the ‘mean, brutal policy’ as something Boyce should be "ashamed of..." A full and representative array of factual information must be acknowledged on any matter being considered, rather than "cherry-picking" isolated episodes out of context.”

Secondly, Dr. Barnett contended that we must keep proportionality in mind; **the consequence should "fit" the offense**. He gave as example from Muir’s life: “Is our natural revulsion at Muir's occasional unflattering descriptions of Sierra Native Americans affected by our realization that these unfortunate people likely appeared and acted very much as he describes them? They were, after all, in the very midst of a holocaust, their people murdered by White militias, the survivors scraping a living in marginal habitats. Muir in fact was one of the few Californians of his time to actually look closely and see their suffering. Does it matter that in nearly every instance Muir follows his descriptions with praise of their positive accomplishments, and sometimes a reminder that all men are brothers?”

Thirdly, Barnett argued that “we should consider whether relatively minor offenses might be **balanced** by signal achievements in other, positive areas.”

As 2020 progressed, the accusation that Muir was a racist continued to persist. Dr. Barnett responded with [“John Muir a Racist? Scholars, Sierra Club Leaders Refute Charge.”](#) In that blog entry, Dr. Barnett summarized the critical response to the July 22, 2020, Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune manifesto ("Pulling Down our Monuments") accusing founder John Muir of being a racist. He noted how former Sierra Club national president Richard Cellarius had promptly emailed Brune the day of Brune’s blog entry: "Before you further continue the cleansing of John Muir from the Sierra Club...please read and reflect on the essay by Raymond Barnett, 'John Muir: Racist or Admirer of Native Americans?'"

Similarly, Lee Stetson (well known for three decades of live portrayal performances of Muir and a recipient of awards from the Sierra Club) wrote, "To attribute racist comments to Muir... You'd have to disregard his entire lifetime of considered thoughts and good deeds, and to turn your back on any kind of historical perspective. It's unjust and stupid, but you could do it.”

Likewise, “The preeminent Muir biographer, Dr. Donald Worster, soon published an article coming to the same conclusion: "Muir has been dead for more than a century, but if he could speak from the grave, I can easily imagine him agreeing that systemic racism is bad and should be repudiated, for he never published a word in support of black slavery, racial segregation, the Confederacy, forced sterilization of minorities, or genocidal policies toward Native Americans.”

Dr. Barnett’s emphasis on Muir’s stance against anthropocentrism were recently echoed by another Muir scholar and ecologist, Bruce Byers. In [Criticizing Muir and misunderstanding the foundation of American nature conservation](#) (October 2021), Byers writes: “The recent controversy within the Sierra Club about whether their founder, John Muir, held racist views provides a useful opportunity to examine a much more important issue: the anthropocentric

worldview that is the root cause of the global environmental crisis. The claims against Muir are easily refuted by a thorough and fair reading of his work; they are based on out-of-context quotes and revisionist interpretations of his early writings. But those claims give rise to a harmful misinterpretation of the history and philosophy of American nature conservation.”

Unfortunately, as of this writing, rather than re-focusing our efforts to expand the tradition of “nature conservation” to the wider need for global ecological citizenship, public debate even within the environmental movement (as well as in the public sector) appears to have largely sunk into a focus on human society alone. The larger debates regarding an array of forces variously described as either pro- or anti- “woke” has blossomed as of 2023 into a full-scale cultural divide of “identity politics” that prevails over any other political issue save perhaps the current war in Ukraine. At a time when we should be focused on halting the “existential crisis” of the loss of biodiversity and destructive global climate change, political leaders of all stripes, and people in general, seem instead embroiled in a purely *internal* concern relating to the racial and cultural divide. That division seems not only hard to find any middle-ground, but ignores what our true priorities should be with regard to the *external* natural world upon which we depend, including the loss of biodiversity, and the specter of destructive climate change.

Ultimately, the issue of whether or not Muir may have used racist language in some situations 100 years ago, is a very small part of his story. His wider message against “specism” is completely compatible with a stance against human racism, and that is the important part of Muir’s story.

I for one, still believe that John Muir can point the way back to a view that honors the natural world and allows humans to live-in-place in harmony with it.

For regularly-updated news on the topic of our racial reckoning as related to John Muir specifically see:

The Sierra Club vs. John Muir

<https://johnmuir.org/sierra-club-vs-john-muir/>

John Muir and Native Americans

<https://johnmuir.org/native-americans/>

Living and Writing the Natural World - Ray Barnett’s Blog

<https://www.raymondbarnett.com/blog/>

This book review is an updated and expanded version of a review originally published in 2018.

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