

NHD 2015 – Leadership and Legacy

Interview with Dayton Duncan, author of “The National Parks: America's Best Idea an Illustrated History” companion book to the PBS series by Ken Burns, produced by Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns.

1/ What would you consider to be John Muir’s greatest accomplishments in regard to National Parks?

John Muir played a pivotal role in the creation of a number of national parks—Yosemite (switched from California state control), Sequoia/Kings Canyon, Mount Rainier, and farther down the line, Glacier Bay, Petrified Forest, and a few others. But I would say Muir’s greatest accomplishment was his eloquent advocacy of a new way of looking at Nature and giving its protection a higher priority in our national consciousness. Muir pointed our nation in a different direction and helped launch a new era of conservation that extended beyond even his significant accomplishments with national parks.

2/ What obstacles did John Muir have to overcome to reach his goals?

Muir faced an American attitude in the late 1900s that did not value Nature for anything other than what could be extracted from it. His view—that Nature was important to us for its restorative powers and that vast sections of wild Nature should be protected from commercial exploitation—was not widely shared at first. His eloquence and his persistence eventually helped persuade a large segment of the public to his way of thinking.

3/ How and why was John Muir’s early life influential to his work?

John Muir’s studies of science—biology, zoology, geology—prepared him to understand the works of Nature; his harsh upbringing (being forced by his stern father to memorize much of the Bible) at least prepared him to be a powerful and persuasive writer who could “preach the Gospel of Nature.” Without either of those elements of his early life, he would not have become the person he became.

4/ Why were John Muir’s writings so important in accomplishing his goal of establishing National Parks?

Muir began writing for newspapers and magazines at a time when they were virtually the only way to reach a large audience, many of whom would not personally visit the places he wrote about. The power of his vivid writings helped those people not only “see” what Muir was describing but also appreciate his argument that such special places needed to be protected as national parks.

5/ Why was John Muir’s camping trip with Theodore Roosevelt influential in Roosevelt’s decision to promote the establishment of National Parks?

Theodore Roosevelt was already a committed conservationist and national park defender when he spent three glorious days camping with John Muir in Yosemite in 1903. But the experience of meeting Muir in person and discussing the future of places Muir fervently believed needed to be set aside as national parks strengthened Roosevelt’s commitment to conservation and the national park idea.

President Roosevelt's own speeches immediately after the camping trip almost sound as if Muir could have written them.