John Muir  
The National Parks and Forest Reservations  
(1895)  

Word Count: 1,721  


[...] The Yosemite National Park was made October 1, 1890. For many years I had been crying in the wilderness, 'Save the forests!' but, so far as I know, nothing effective was done in the matter until shortly before the park was organized. In the summer of 1889, I took one of the editors of the *Century Magazine* out for a walk in Yosemite and in the woods and boulder-choked cañons around it; and when we were camped one day at the Big Tuolumne Meadows, my friend said, 'Where are all those wonderful flower gardens you write so much about?' And I had to confess—woe 's me!—that uncountable sheep had eaten and trampled them out of existence. Then he said, 'Can't something be done to restore and preserve so wonderful a region as this? Surely the people of California are not going to allow these magnificent forests, on which the welfare of the whole State depends, to be destroyed?' Then a National Park was proposed, and I was requested to write some articles about the region to help call attention to it, while the *Century* was freely used for the same purpose, and every friend that could be found was called on to write or speak a good word for it. The California Academy of Sciences became interested, and began to work, and so did the State University. Even the soulless Southern Pacific R. R. Co., never counted on for anything good, helped nobly in pushing the bill for this park through Congress. Mr. Stow in particular charged our members of Congress that whatever they neglected they must see that the bill for a National Park around Yosemite Valley went through. And in a little over a year from the time of our first talk beside that Tuolumne camp-fire the bill organizing the park passed Congress, and a troop of cavalry was guarding it.

But no sooner were the boundaries of the park established, than interested parties began to try to break through them. Last winter a determined effort was made to have the area of the park cut down nearly one-half. But the Sierra Club and other good friends of the forests on both sides of the continent made a good defense, and to-day the original boundaries are still unbroken.

The battle we have fought, and are still fighting, for the forests is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and we cannot expect to see the end of it. I trust, however, that our Club will not weary in this forest well-doing. The fight for the Yosemite Park and other forest parks and reserves is by no means over; nor would the fighting cease, however much the boundaries were contracted. Every good thing, great and small, needs defense. The smallest forest reserve, and the first I ever heard of, was in the Garden of Eden; and though its boundaries were drawn by the Lord, and embraced only one tree, yet even so moderate a reserve as this was attacked. And I doubt not, if only one of our grand trees on the Sierra were reserved
as an example and type of all that is most noble and glorious in mountain trees, it would not be long before you would find a lumberman and a lawyer at the foot of it, eagerly proving by every law terrestrial and celestial that that tree must come down. So we must count on watching and striving for these trees, and should always be glad to find anything so surely good and noble to strive for.[...]

When I first saw Yosemite, and read the notices posted by the State Commissioners, forbidding the cutting or marring the beauty in any way of the trees and shrubs, etc., I said, 'How fine it is that this grand valley has been made a park, for the enjoyment of all the world! Here we shall have a section of the wonderful flora of the mountains of California, with most of its wild inhabitants preserved, when all about it has been injured or destroyed.' But instead of enjoying special protection, on account of its marvelous grandeur, it has suffered special destruction, for lack of the extraordinary care that so much trampling travel in it required. Therefore, now, instead of being most preciously cared for as the finest of all the park-gardens, it looks like a frowzy, neglected backwoods pasture. The best meadows are enclosed for hay-fields by unsightly fences, and all the rest of the floor of the valley is given up to the destructive pasturage of horses belonging to campers and those kept for the use of tourists. Each year the number of campers increases, and, of course, destructive trampling and hacking becomes heavier from season to season. Camping parties, on their arrival in the valley, are required to report to the Guardian, to register and have camp-grounds assigned them, and their attention is called to the rules and regulations prohibiting the cutting of trees and underbrush, etc.; but as the Guardian has no power to enforce the rules—has not a single policeman under his orders,—they are of non-effect, or nearly so. Most campers and tourists appreciate their privileges, but some, I am sorry to say, need the services of a soldier as much as the sheep-owners who break over the boundaries of the park. Not a single horse or cow should be allowed to trample the Yosemite garden. It was given to the State for a higher use than pasturage. Hay and grain in abundance may be hauled into the valley and sold to the owners of saddle-trains and campers, at moderate prices, at stables and corrals provided by the Commission. Then, of course, every disfiguring fence would be useless, and the wild vegetation would be gradually restored.

Since the fires that formerly swept through the valley have been prevented, the underbrush requires much expensive attention, that will call for the services of a skilled landscape artist. The wasting banks of the river also require treatment of the same kind, and so, indeed, does the whole wasted floor of the valley. As far as the hotel and saddle-train service is concerned, little fault can be found; but good management of the valley in general by a Board of Commissioners appointed by the Governor, whose terms of office depend on ever-changing politics, must, I think, be always difficult or impossible as long as the people of California remain lukewarm and apathetic in the matter. The solution of the whole question, it seems to me, is recession of the valley to the Federal Government, to form a part of the Yosemite National Park, which naturally it is. One management for both is enough; and management by the unchanging War Department must be better than State management, ever changing and wavering with the political pulse. Anyhow, people usually get what they deserve; and Californians can obtain immensely better results,
even from a State Commission, if they really care enough. Golden Gate Park, under State Commissioners, is well managed. Emerson says: 'Things refuse to be mismanaged long,' and now, when Yosemite affairs seem at their worst, there are hopeful signs in sight.

A landscape artist has lately made a complete topographical survey of the valley floor with reference to a general plan of treatment. This is a good beginning, and speaks well for the present managing board. To Commissioner Fields in particular I think the thanks of our Club are due for what he has done for the valley, and is doing.[...]

This year, nearly as many campers as tourists visited the valley, and their stay was much longer. It is encouraging to learn that so many of the young men and women growing up in California are going to the mountains every summer and becoming good mountaineers, and, of course, good defenders of the Sierra forests and of all the reviving beauty that belongs to them. For every one that I found mountaineering back of Yosemite in the High Sierra, ten years ago, I this year met more than a hundred. Many of these young mountaineers were girls, in parties of ten or fifteen, making bright pictures as they tramped merrily along through the forest aisles, with the sparkle and exhilaration of the mountains in their eyes—a fine, hopeful sign of the times.[...]

It has been said over and over again, by those who know them best, that ours are the grandest as well as the most beautiful trees in the world. Once I was seated by a camp-fire on Mt. Shasta, in the main forest belt, with Asa Gray and Sir Joseph Hooker, who, as you know, has seen and studied all the great forests of the world, and I then asked him if he knew any coniferous forest that rivaled ours. He said 'No; in the beauty and grandeur of individual trees, and in number and variety of species, the forest of the Sierra surpasses all others.' In the forests of Switzerland which I saw a few years ago, and which are so carefully preserved and managed, it would be difficult to select a hundred of the largest trees that would equal in weight a single specimen of the largest of our sequoias, to say nothing of their kingly beauty and majesty. ‘They are,’ as Hooker says, ‘the noblest of a noble race,’ while the sugar pine is the king of pines, though no less than eighty species are known to science.

The Sierra forests are growing just where they do the most good and where their removal would be followed by the greatest number of evils. The welfare of the people in the valleys of California and the welfare of the trees on the mountains are so closely related that the farmers might say that oranges grow on pine-trees, and wheat, and grass.

Now, any kind of forest on the flank of the Sierra would be of inestimable value as a cover for the irrigating streams. But in our forests we have not only a perfect cover, but also the most attractive and interesting trees in every way, and of the highest value, spiritual and material, so that even the angels of heaven might well be eager to come down and camp in their leafy temples.