

Genre Biography

Essential Questions

What are the differences between preservation and conservation? How can you show an appreciation for the environment? How are national parks good for nature?



JOHN MUIR

AMERICA'S NATURALIST

by Sarah Middleton

MUIR'S EARLY LIFE

One of America's greatest resources is its system of national parks. These parks are found across the nation, from Maine to California; from Florida to Alaska. They are places of great natural beauty that have been preserved for the enjoyment of people around the world. Much of the credit for the American National Park System belongs to a man who was not even born in the country: John Muir.

John Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland in 1838. As a boy, he loved the outdoors and spent a lot of time exploring the Scottish countryside. In 1849, when Muir was eleven years old, his family moved to the United States and settled on a farm in Wisconsin.

Muir and his brother worked long hours on the farm, but whenever possible they escaped to the surrounding fields and forests. Muir was curious about the natural world and most everything else. He enjoyed working with his hands and came up with ideas for inventions, including different types of clocks, a table saw, a thermometer, a barometer, and even a machine to tip him out of bed in the mornings.

However, farming did not interest Muir. In 1860, when he was 22, he left home to attend the University of Wisconsin. He took with him some of his inventions, and exhibited them at the state agricultural fair. They won several prizes and caught the attention of people who would later become strong supporters of Muir's work.

Muir attended the university for more than two years, studying botany and geology. However, he never graduated—he decided he would rather attend the “University of the Wilderness,” as he called it. He headed off on foot, which was the beginning of a lifetime of travel and exploration.

Muir walked through the northern United States and parts of Canada. He worked odd jobs to support himself and finally ended up in Indianapolis, Indiana. There, he took a job in a shop that made parts for horse-drawn carriages.

In 1867, Muir was injured at work and lost the sight in one eye. Although his sight came back after a few weeks, the accident convinced him that he wanted to spend his life observing nature, not making carriage parts. He left Indianapolis and began a 1,000-mile journey, again on foot, to the Gulf of Mexico. From there, he sailed to Cuba and then to Panama, where he crossed a narrow strip of land to reach the Pacific Ocean. In 1868, he found passage to San Francisco. California would be his home for the remaining forty-six years of his life.

LOVE FOR THE YOSEMITE VALLEY

San Francisco was a bustling city, and city life was not what John Muir wanted. Before long, he left the city and set out to explore the wilder parts of the state. He walked through the broad valley of central California and up into the Sierra Nevadas. There he found a place that would inspire his life's work: Yosemite Valley.

Yosemite was an area of steep cliffs, snow-capped peaks, roaring rivers, and magnificent waterfalls. Just four years earlier, President Abraham Lincoln had named Yosemite as a Land Grant. Under the terms of the grant, the valley belonged to the state of California and was set aside for the enjoyment and use of the people.



Muir fell in love with the valley and soon found work as a ranch hand so he could remain in the area. The next summer, he took a job as a shepherd. His flock lived in the flower-filled Tuolumne Meadows of the High Sierra. Muir spent the summer watching his sheep, and observing and recording his surroundings. He made sketches of the plants, animals, and natural features of the valley. Later he wrote about his experiences in his book *My First Summer in the Sierra*.

Sketching on the North Dome. It commands views of nearly all the valley besides a few of the high mountains. I would fain draw everything in sight, —rock, tree, and leaf. But little can I do beyond mere outlines, —marks with meanings like words, readable only to myself, —yet I sharpen my pencils and work on as if others might possibly be benefited.

After his shepherding job came to an end, John wanted to stay in Yosemite. He found a job at a sawmill in the valley. He worked there for two years and even started building his own cabin nearby. At the same time, he wrote passionate articles about the wonders of Yosemite. The mill owner, James Hutchings, resented the attention Muir's writing received. In 1871, Muir quit his work at the sawmill and devoted his time to writing.



LIFE AS A WRITER

John Muir's first nationally published piece, "Yosemite Glaciers," was printed in the New-York Tribune in December 1871. In it, he shared his thoughts about how the Yosemite Valley came to be:

The great valley itself, together with all its domes and walls, was brought forth and fashioned by a grand combination of glaciers, acting in certain directions against granite of peculiar physical structure. All of the rocks and mountains and lakes and meadows of the whole upper Merced basin received their specific forms and carvings almost entirely from this same agency of ice.

Muir's idea that glaciers formed the canyons and domes of Yosemite was not well received by everyone. At the time, it was thought that such a steep valley could only have been formed in one way—there must have been a major event that caused a section of the earth to drop. While some agreed with Muir, others made fun of his ideas. Today, we know that he was on the right track. Glaciers, along with river erosion, did indeed help to form Yosemite's deep valleys.

For the next two years, Muir continued living in the Yosemite Valley, supporting himself by writing articles for newspapers and magazines. He wrote about the natural wonders he had seen in his travels. His words and poetic descriptions attracted followers who agreed that these places needed to be protected and preserved. American opinion gradually began to change. At one time, people saw America's wild places as merely a resource for human use. Now they began to view wilderness areas as treasures that should be preserved for future generations.

In 1873, Muir left Yosemite and moved closer to San Francisco. He continued to write articles for important magazines and newspapers across the country. In 1878, a California newspaper published a piece by Muir. It was titled "In God's First Temples: How Shall We Preserve Our Forests." In this article, Muir criticized California lawmakers for not preventing the cutting of trees in the state's forests. Muir was also concerned with the damage done to the plants of the area by grazing animals. He called sheep "hoofed locusts" who did terrible damage to the fragile ecosystem of the Sierras.





LIFE AS A RANCHER

Eventually, John Muir became friends with Dr. John Strentzel, a rancher who had orchards in a small town near San Francisco. Muir admired Dr. Strentzel's scientific approach to growing fruit. In time, Muir also became enamored with Dr. Strentzel's daughter Louie, and in 1879, asked her to marry him.

Shortly after Louie said yes, Muir set off for his first trip to Alaska as a writer for a San Francisco newspaper. In his book *Travels in Alaska*, he explained why he was interested in the area.

After eleven years of study and exploration in the Sierra Nevadas ... studying ... their ancient glaciers and the influence they exerted in sculpturing the rocks over which they passed... I was anxious to gain some knowledge of the regions to the northward.... I left San Francisco in May 1879, on the steamer Dakota, without any definite plan ...

In Alaska, Muir continued his study of glaciers. He is credited with the discovery of Glacier Bay, a 65-mile-long inlet filled with glaciers. His writing made the bay a popular tourist spot in the 1880s and 1890s.

In 1880, Muir and Louie were married. The bride's father gave the couple twenty acres of land and a house to live in. Muir still had the urge to travel, and family life did not slow him down. He made two more trips to Alaska before agreeing to take over as ranch manager for his father-in-law in 1882.

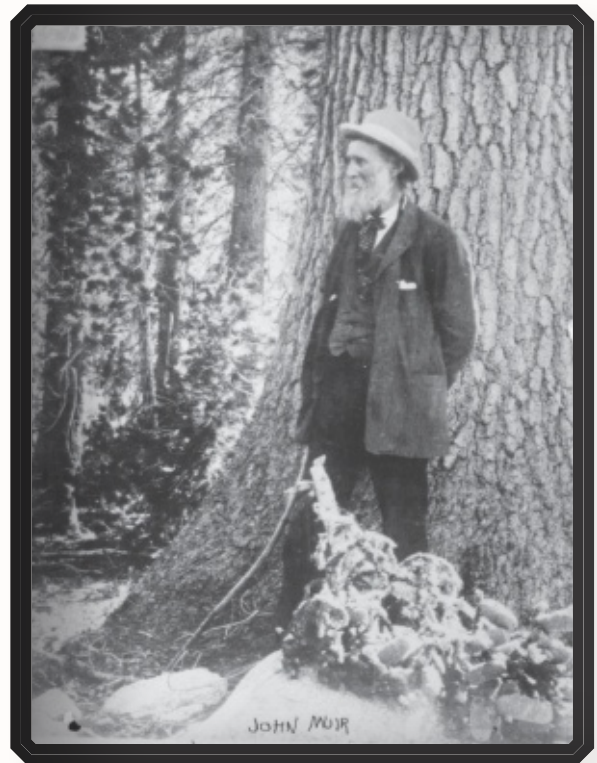
Muir spent the next ten years as a rancher. He was successful at running the orchards and made enough money to pay for his travels. During his time as a rancher, he visited Australia, South America, Europe, China, and Japan. He also made frequent trips to his favorite spot—Yosemite and the Sierra Nevadas. In a letter to his wife in 1881, Muir wrote of his desire to “truly get into the heart of the wilderness.”

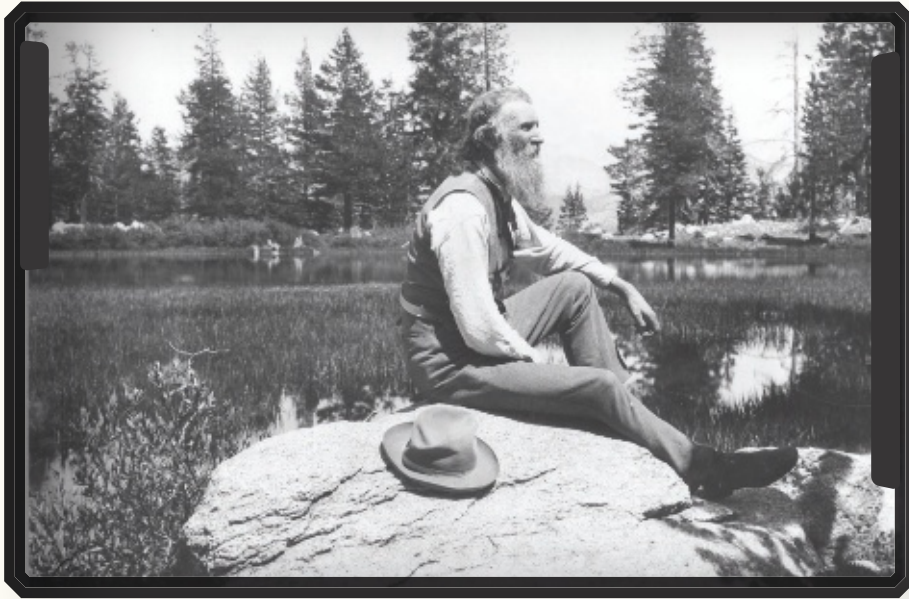
Muir’s travels convinced him that the only way to save Yosemite was to make it a national park. As a Land Grant, the area belonged to the state. The state could decide how the land was used, so there was always a chance that the wilderness could be damaged. As a national park, Yosemite would be protected by the federal government. Muir lobbied Congress to designate Yosemite as a national park, and on October 1, 1890, Yosemite became the third national park in the United States.

PRESERVATIONIST VS. CONSERVATIONIST

Muir wanted to do still more to protect wilderness areas and make them available for people to enjoy. There were others who felt as he did. In 1892, Muir met with a group that included artists, lawyers, professors, and scientists. Together, they formed the Sierra Club. One of their goals was to preserve the forests of the Sierra Nevadas, but according to Muir, the main purpose of the club was to “do something for the wilderness and make the mountains glad.” Muir was the Sierra Club’s first president, an office he held for the rest of his life.

Clearly, many others shared Muir’s passion for the environment. However, not everyone agreed on how wilderness areas should be handled. Muir was a naturalist, or preservationist. He believed that large areas of land should be preserved as they were for all time. Others, known as conservationists, believed that natural areas should be set aside and controlled by the government. But they also believed that these lands should be available for uses that would benefit people.





One of the most noted conservationists at the time was Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot was a forester, and had been named by President Theodore Roosevelt as the first chief of the United States Forest Service. At first, Muir and Pinchot were friendly. In 1893, they traveled together to study the forests of the American West. Their goal was to evaluate the problems facing these areas. However, they could not agree about how to solve those problems. As a naturalist, Muir wanted the forests preserved as they were. Ideally, he felt, as much forest land as possible should be protected by being included in the National Park System. As a conservationist, Pinchot wanted large areas of wilderness to be part of the Forest Service. That meant the government could decide how to best use the forests, which might mean cutting down areas of trees for lumber.

Muir could not go along with Pinchot. He stated his case in his book *Our National Parks*.

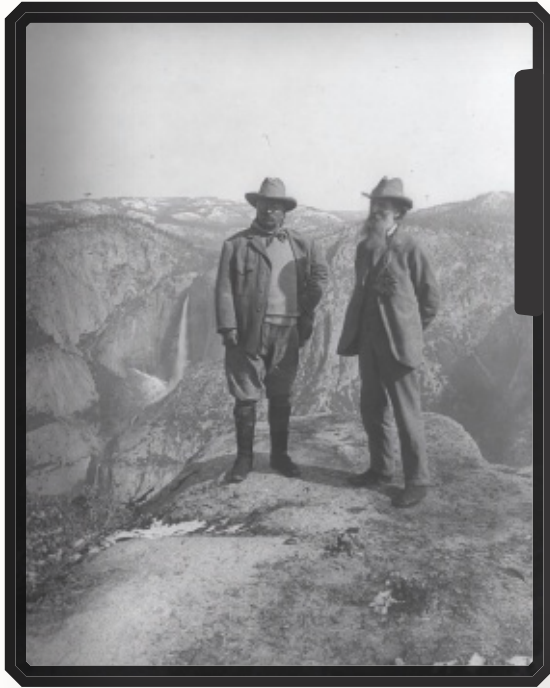
It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods—trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. ... God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and... floods; but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that.

Their disagreement over this issue meant an end to the friendship between the two men.

INFLUENCE ON A PRESIDENT

Our National Parks, which was published in 1901, caught the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was also a naturalist and outdoorsman who shared John Muir's passion for the environment.

In May of 1903, Roosevelt joined Muir at Yosemite for a three-day trip into the wilderness. Their adventure started at Mariposa Grove,



a stand of huge Sequoia trees that were hundreds of years old. On the second night, there was a snowstorm that dumped five inches of snow on the five feet already on the ground.

On the third night, president and naturalist sat around the campfire and talked for hours. Muir spoke about his concerns for the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove. The two areas were surrounded by Yosemite National Park, but were state land. They were not protected as part of the park.

Roosevelt agreed with Muir. In 1906, the president signed a bill that put the valley and the

grove under federal control as part of Yosemite National Park. Muir's words became fact: Uncle Sam—the government—had saved the trees from “fools.”

Muir's words likely also inspired Roosevelt to protect other areas. During his time in office, President Roosevelt is credited with working to create five national parks. He also set aside lands for hundreds of national forests, bird and game preserves, and national monuments.

A SIGNIFICANT DEFEAT

Not all of John Muir's efforts were as successful as his efforts to create Yosemite National Park. In 1908, the city of San Francisco proposed building a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley to provide water to the growing city. However, the valley was part of Yosemite National Park, which meant that only Congress could approve the dam.

A heated debate began. On one side of the issue were Muir and the naturalists, or preservationists. They believed that national park lands should be protected from human activities. On the other side were conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot. They believed that the parklands should be used wisely to help society. Citizens and groups across the country expressed their opinions on the matter and signed petitions for and against the plan. The petitions were then sent to Congress to read and consider.

After a long battle, Congress sided with the conservationists. Its members passed a bill that approved building a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley. On December 19, 1913, President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill into law. Construction started in 1915 and the dam was completed in 1922. Almost 100 years later, the dam still provides clear mountain water to the city of San Francisco. However, the debate still goes on. Today, environmental groups want the dam to be destroyed and the valley returned to its former beauty.

Muir never saw the flooding of his beloved valley. He died on December 24th, 1914, before the construction began.





A LASTING LEGACY

John Muir left behind a legacy that still benefits Americans today. Although he was not responsible for the creation of the agency, he is often called the “Father” of the National Park Service. Because of his efforts, leaders of the country realized the importance of setting aside land as parks. Muir’s writing led to the creation of a number of national parks. In addition to Yosemite, these include Sequoia, Grand Canyon, Glacier, and Rainier.

The Sierra Club is another important aspect of Muir’s legacy. This club is the oldest and largest “grassroots” environmental agency—one run by ordinary citizens. Today, the Sierra Club has more than one million members. The club sponsors adventures such as rock climbing and river rafting. Its purpose is more than just giving people exciting experiences with nature. It is also to make them aware of the beautiful and amazing places that exist. When people see these places, they are more likely to want to protect them.

Today, Muir is also remembered by places that bear his name. Muir Glacier in Alaska and Muir Woods in California are two examples. Every year, millions of people visit these and other parks and preserves to get closer to nature. That is what Muir would have wanted. As he wrote in his book *The Mountains of California*:

It is a good thing, therefore, to make short excursions now and then to the bottom of the sea..., or up among the clouds on mountain-tops, ...or even to creep like worms into dark holes and caverns underground, not only to learn something of what is going on in those out-of-the-way places, but to see better what the sun sees on our return to common everyday beauty.

Essential Question

Why do we find nature so beautiful?

A Winter Scene

by Henry David Thoreau





The rabbit leaps,
The mouse out-creeps,
The flag out-peeps
 Beside the brook;
The ferret weeps,
The marmot sleeps,
The owlet keeps
 In his snug nook.

The apples thaw,
The ravens caw,
The squirrels gnaw
 The frozen fruit.
To their retreat
I track the feet
Of mice that eat
 The apple's root.

The snow-dust falls,
The otter crawls,
The partridge calls,
 Far in the wood.
The traveler dreams,
The tree-ice gleams,
The blue-jay screams
 In angry mood.

The willows droop,
The alders stoop,
The pheasants group
 Beneath the snow.
The catkins green
Cast o'er the scene
A summer's sheen,
 A genial glow.

You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Did You Know?

The Sierra Club has not only helped to protect millions of acres of wilderness but also helped pass the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act. These pieces of legislation protect our planet and the creatures that call it home.

Text Connections

1. Where did John Muir attend college? Why didn't he graduate?
2. How did Muir think the canyons and domes of Yosemite were formed? Was his hypothesis correct?
3. In "A Winter Scene," Henry David Thoreau names many forest creatures. Muir was also a writer. How might writing about nature help preserve it?
4. Where did Muir publish his nature writing? Why do you think the public enjoyed reading his descriptions of nature?
5. Based on this selection and "Midnight Forests," do you agree more with Muir, the preservationist, or Pinchot, the conservationist? Explain.



Write

What kinds of trees and plants grow near you? What kinds of wild animals, birds, and insects have you seen? Write about nature in your area and what you can do to protect it.

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

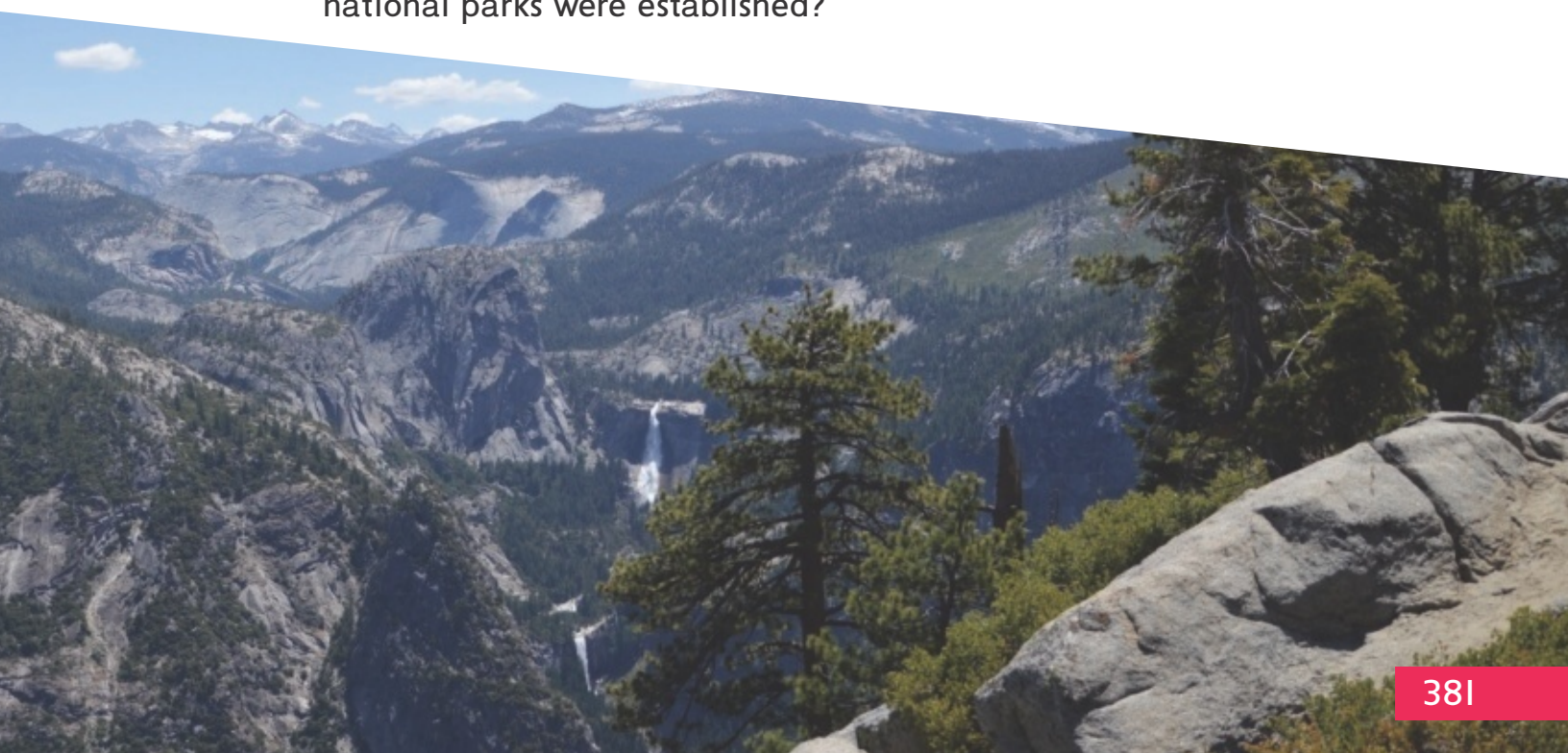
1. Based on “John Muir” and “Midnight Forests,” what did Muir and Pinchot have in common? On what did they disagree? Support your answer with text details.
2. How did Muir feel about society’s relationship with nature? Quote from Muir’s writing to support your answer.

Writer’s Craft

3. What does the speaker mean by *feet* in the second stanza of “A Winter Scene”? Why doesn’t he say exactly what he means?
4. Look at how Thoreau arranged the stanzas in “A Winter Scene.” What is the rhyme scheme?

Concept Development

5. Think about “Midnight Forests” and “John Muir.” What do you now know about how national parks were established?





Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Photographs show the reader what something looks like in real life. They support and clarify information in the text.

The Sierra Club

You just read about the life of naturalist John Muir. Muir believed that people need to experience wilderness. He believed that if a person touched a giant sequoia tree, stood at the Grand Canyon, or watched the geysers of Yellowstone, that he or she would be more likely to work to preserve those treasures for future generations. One goal of the Sierra Club, which Muir helped found in 1892, is to make sure people from all communities and backgrounds have access to wilderness.

The Sierra Club's actions have led to the protection of 250 million acres of land, and the group continues to lobby for the preservation of America's great outdoors. It focuses its efforts on protecting public lands and waters, both in the wilderness as well as in natural spaces near cities and their suburbs. Like John Muir, the Sierra Club believes that a healthy and diverse ecosystem is important for the planet and that society must be a good steward of the environment. It encourages people to evaluate how their activities can either harm or help the natural world.

Today the Sierra Club has almost 3 million members and supporters and 64 local chapters all over the country. These chapters lead trips in national parks and other conservation areas throughout the United States. By joining these expeditions, people can go backpacking, canoeing, kayaking, and rafting through some of the lands John Muir worked to protect.

Sierra Club members are inspiring a new generation of Americans who are passionate about nature. This group is preserving not only the wilderness, but also John Muir's legacy.



1. The text explains that local chapters of the Sierra Club lead trips. Where do people go on these trips? What activities are available?
2. Why did John Muir think it was important for people to spend time in the wilderness? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. If you are not able to take a trip into the wilderness, how could you learn more about wilderness areas like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon? Name some ways you can help protect and preserve the wilderness even if you cannot visit it.



Go Digital

Search for information on the Sierra Club. You may find out about local chapters in your area. What are they doing to protect the environment and inspire a love for nature near you?