



CALIFORNIA CHAPARRAL INSTITUTE

...the voice of the chaparral

To the Pacific Crest Trail Association
Re: John Muir

July 24, 2021

Dear Ms. Sabin,

Thank you for taking the time to reply. I appreciate your willingness to continue this conversation.

The primary issue for us is to base our conclusions about Muir on what we actually know about him, which now is limited to his published works and journals. I've spent a significant amount of time reading these original sources and I have yet to find one example of where Muir expressed racist views, advocated for exclusion of other groups, or expressed approval of how non-white immigrants, Blacks, or Native Americans were being treated by the dominant society at the time.

The three main points you list below are assumptions about Muir's character based on the actions, views, or intentions of others. There is no evidence that he held or agreed with any of those actions or perspectives you list.

Yes, the Sierra Club required prospective members to find a sponsor when the Club began. However, Muir never expressed the desire to exclude people of color. Was he a member of a club that was composed of only white people? I think so, but I've haven't gone through the membership rolls of the Club while he was alive to confirm that. I'd be interested in knowing if you have been able to examine those.

When I joined the Club in 1970, a member sponsorship was still required. So, I asked a member who was my neighbor in the all-white neighborhood in which I lived and grew up. Interestingly, he was also a wonderful photographer who was friends with Ansel Adams, who sponsored him. I don't ever remember seeing any Black members when I attended Club meetings back then, nor did I during most of my early years in the Club. Fortunately, the Club's integration efforts have changed that, an effort that reflects a long standing rejection of discrimination in the organization. You may not know that the Club had a LGBT group in the 1970s and the Club's own membership *rejected by vote* a takeover by anti-immigrant forces when that was all the rage in California. And earlier, in the 1950s, the Club's Board of Directors overturned a local chapter's inappropriate denial of membership to a black person. You would be hard pressed to find other environmental organizations as forward thinking on racism and discrimination as early on as the Club was – the organization John Muir founded.

Regardless, because of my association with an organization that has a history of being mostly white, am I a racist who approves of eugenics? Was my friend who sponsored me? Were all my neighbors? Was Ansel Adams?

Due to where I was raised, I didn't have a Black friend until recently. In fact, I never associated with Black people most of my life. However, after an enlightening experience in 2016 with ornithologist Drew Lanham, I realized what a failure that was. I have actively sought out friendships with Black members of our society ever since. I wrote about this experience in my article, [For People, for Nature – Acknowledging the Racist Within](#). I encourage you to read it.

To help others better understand the importance of diversity in our society, I always mention the need to diversify the environmental community during talks I give to environmental groups – most of which are still composed of primarily white people. Lots of the folks in the audience nod their heads, of course, because most have enlightened, liberal views. Then I ask how many have had a Black person at their home for dinner over the last few years. No one usually raises their hand.

There's a lot of talk about diversity. Companies hire diversity coordinators. People and groups write articles about how important diversity is, and recently, condemn others who they have concluded are racist without actually knowing much about the individual in question. None of this will help what I think is the ultimate goal, creating a more inclusive, fairer society.

What *will* help change society for the better and make it more inclusive are **individual actions to change our personal lives to invite people who do not look like us into our inner, social circles**. My life is much richer now because I have done so over the past five years. It was awkward at first, and it has been difficult to convince others to give it a try, but reaching out is really the only way we're going to change society. Gay marriage didn't happen because people were advocating for it and condemning those who were opposed. It happened because so many began to know or became friends with openly LGBT people. I'm wondering if the PCTA is making an effort to encourage its staff and membership to change their personal behavior to bring people different from themselves into their personal lives. I'm not talking about encouraging Black or Hispanic members in our society to hike the PCT, but expanding personal relationships.

Yes, Muir championed the preservation of wild, open spaces to protect them from the industrial machine, a machine that has been, and remains, responsible for both the destruction of such spaces and the genocide of Native Americans. There is no evidence, anywhere, that Muir championed the preservation of wild spaces to specifically exclude Native Americans. He is not responsible for what others may have caused or said. He did, however, express his sadness over how Native Americans were treated in this country and believed in the oneness of all humankind, regardless of color.

I have been advocating for the preservation of wildlands, and have actively supported Wilderness designations throughout my life. Does that mean I promote the exclusion of Native Americans from those spaces? No, it means I want to protect what's left of native ecosystems and protect indigenous plants and animals as best we can, which includes keeping human impacts and visitation as low as possible. Humans, *all humans*, have destroyed enough of Nature already.

Yes, some of Muir's colleagues advocated for ugly social policies. Did he? No. In fact, he was a gentle soul who advocated for the brotherhood of all human beings. Such sentiment can be found throughout his writings. I challenge the PCTA to find otherwise, with context.

I have a handful of friends who are racists who have used horrible words to describe people not like themselves. Some I have had to distance myself from because they were actively participating in promoting racism. Others, I have maintained a relationship with in hopes of helping them find understanding and love. I have found that love and forgiveness are the only effective ways to combat hate. Martin Luther King lived by this philosophy as I'm sure you know. Unfortunately, ridiculing, personally attacking, and shunning others we do not agree with only has one consequence – it embitters and empowers them. Such behavior played a fundamental role in electing Donald Trump.

It is certainly important to recognize our racist past. It is important to remove monuments that celebrate that past. But throwing out a too broad a net, as PCTA has done with Muir, not only ensnares the innocent, but creates a distraction from our important work of protecting Nature.

Regarding Clayton's editorial, it would be great if people actually did what he suggests – acknowledging the racist within. But this is not what's happening in regards to Muir. Both Sierra Club's Michael Brune and the PCTA are attributing attitudes and actions to Muir that he neither held nor agreed with. The entire labeling of Muir as a racist is based not on the man or what he actually wrote or did, but on the people he was around and the consequences of what they and others did. I challenge the PCTA to find otherwise. Clayton was not advocating the condemnation of Muir. He was encouraging each and everyone of us to look within.

A quick note about Brune's editorial. Nearly all of what Brune wrote about Muir was hearsay that no one, to my knowledge, has ever been able to verify. In an age of alternative facts, this is an issue we should all be concerned about, especially when what we hear confirms what we already believe. It's also important to know that Brune's editorial was a personal one, not a representation of the Club's Board of Directors or the Club's official policy – even though it was reported as such. As a fellow Executive Director, you know the kinds of unproductive conflicts that can cause.

In all the reading of Muir's work, I have only found the man to be a gentle spirit who cared deeply about all life around him. His only flash of negativity was directed at the colonial powers that were destroying what he loved, especially during his fight to save Hetch Hetchy. He was seriously abused by his father, yet he came out of it all by finding a deep connection with Nature that anyone can find inspirational, as I wrote in [the essay I originally sent to you](#).

While it is productive to examine the inner racist within, the essay the PCTA wrote about Muir was not in that spirit. It only facilitated the distribution of misconceptions about a man who can help us all better understand ourselves, each other, and the fellow mortals we share this earth with.

Sincerely,

Richard Halsey
Director