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Editorial: Muir's plea

A voice for the ages and for Hetch Hetchy

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Naturalist, author and activist John Muir introduced Yosemite to the outside world more than a century ago through his exquisite writings. He championed the creation of the national park. And when San Francisco proposed to dam one of Yosemite's two deep glacial valleys - the Hetch Hetchy Valley on the Tuolumne River - Muir led the opposition. In 1913, he failed. Congress granted the city the authority to build the dam and establish its water supply in the national park. Less than a year later, Muir died at age 76.

That did little to diminish Muir, then and now, as the leading voice for Hetch Hetchy. No living activist ever saw the valley before it was flooded. It was submerged in 1923.

Muir's role, as the witness and environmental conscience for the debate over the valley, is unchanged. His lasting power comes from his extensive collection of articles and letters about Yosemite, about San Francisco, about politics. They are remarkably timeless. So timeless, that with a little journalistic license, questions facing Hetch Hetchy today can be answered using quotations from Muir's writings nearly a century ago. The imaginary conversation would go something like this:

Bee: Congratulations on Gov. Schwarzenegger choosing your image to adorn the official California quarter.

Muir: You don't know how accomplished a lobbyist I've become.

Bee: And Yosemite Valley will be on the quarter as well.

Muir: Valleys.

Bee: Pardon us.

Muir: Nature is not so poor as to have only one of anything. Hetch Hetchy is one of a magnificent brotherhood of Yosemite valleys.

Bee: We have only seen Yosemite Valley. Hetch Hetchy could not possibly compare.

Muir: It is a wonderfully exact counterpart of the great Yosemite.

Bee: So where is its El Capitan?

Muir: Standing boldly forward from the south wall near the lower end of the valley is the rock Kolana. Facing Kolana on the north side of the valley is a rock about 1,800 feet in height, which represents a bare sheer front like El Capitan.

Bee: OK, where's Hetch Hetchy's big "Yosemite Fall?"

Muir: The great Hetch Hetchy fall, called Wapama by the Tuolumnes ... is about 1,800 feet in height, and seems to be nearly vertical when one is standing in front of it. Its location is similar to that of the Yosemite Fall.

Bee: A miniature of the Yosemite Fall?

Muir: The volume of water is much greater.

Bee: But is there a fall as delicate as Bridal Veil?

Muir: Tueeulala. It makes a free descent of a thousand feet and then breaks up into ragged, foaming web of cascades among the boulders of an earthquake talus. The only fall that I know with which it may fairly be compared is the Bridal Veil, but it excels even that.

Bee: Sounds peaceful. But Hetch Hetchy is peaceful these days because it is submerged.

Muir: It would be just the same thing as saying that flooding Yosemite would do it no harm.

Bee: But this is San Francisco's water supply.

Muir: I am heartily in favour of a Sierra or even a Tuolumne water supply for San Francisco, but all the water required can be obtained from sources outside the park.

Bee: Are you surprised that all these years later the Hetch Hetchy debate is still alive?

Muir: Never for a moment have I believed that the American people would fail to defend it.

Bee: It all boils down to money. Probably taxpayer money. Or water ratepayer money. How much should be thrown at San Francisco, Modesto and Turlock to restructure their water supplies and water agreements to regain Hetch Hetchy?

Muir: Woe is he and thee and me and all the world's beauty-lovers that such dollar-dotted tangles should approach our sacred Sierra temple.

Bee: There you go. This is why you failed back in 1913. Where's the pragmatism?

Muir: We are preparing data ... which will demonstrate that San Francisco can obtain abundance of pure water from other sources than Hetch Hetchy.

Bee: Data?

Muir: They will see what I mean in time.

Bee: Soon maybe? San Francisco may have to look at options, including Hetch Hetchy, as a legal requirement to expand its plumbing system. That would be a first. Would you settle for a fair independent study of how to ween the city from Yosemite and see just how feasible this truly is - or isn't?

Muir: Evidently we have to fight the battle all over again, and must stir our pegs accordingly. Truth and right must prevail at last. How this business Hetch-hetches one's time. It won't even let me sleep.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This editorial draws from the writings of the late naturalist John Muir, who died in 1914, less than a year after Congress decided to allow San Francisco to build a dam in the valley. Here are the sources for the quotations:

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