THE HOUR OF LAND

A Personal Topography of America's National Parks

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At the intersection of landscape and culture, diversity and inclusion, patterns of cooperation emerge in the name of community. The power of what binds us together, rather than what tears us apart, becomes a shared priority. A creative tension between needs, both human and wild, must be considered and negotiated. An unexpected harmony begins to emerge as something to be honored and safeguarded like water in the desert.

We, the people, have made mistakes. We have made mistakes in our relationships with those who came before us and the land that holds their histories. We have made mistakes in how we have managed and misunderstood the wild. But after spending a lifetime immersed in our national parks, I believe we are slowly learning what it means to offer our reverence and respect to the closest thing we as American citizens have to sacred lands. Our national parks are places of recognition. When I see a mountain lion's tracks on pink sand in the desert, I am both predator and prey. When I see the elusive Everglade kite hovering above the sawgrass, I am that manifestation of hope and survival. And when I visit the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York, and listen to Sojourner Truth's speech, "Ain't I a Woman," her voice becomes the voice I want to cultivate in the name of courage.

We are at a crossroads. We can continue on the path we have been on, in this nation that privileges profit over people and land; or we can unite as citizens with a common cause—the health and wealth of the Earth that sustains us. If we cannot commit to this kind of fundamental shift in our relationship to people and place, then democracy becomes another myth perpetuated by those in power who care only about themselves.

The time has come for acts of reverence and restraint on behalf of the Earth. We have arrived at the Hour of Land.

"All the world seems a church and the mountains altars," wrote John Muir. But perhaps the naturalist's most prescient words were these: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

The world is intertwined. Life is evolving. We, too, are evolving. We revise our ideas over time. What John Muir advocated for in his lifetime—the protection of wild country and our national parks—is still, I would argue, a noble cause, worthy of our admiration and respect. When the environmental historian Donald Worster says that Muir started a new American religion, if I am honest, I am part of his congregation. When I saw Yosemite Valley for the first time, I felt I was standing in Eden. I have followed in his footsteps of environmental activism as an American writer. And when Richard White argued at the Aurora Forum at Stanford University in 2009 that "Muir's vision for the nineteenth century . . . is not going to be a vision for the twenty-first century," I understand his point of view.

"Muir's view that you can protect the mountains while everything else is opened up to development . . . global warming has finished that . . . It's all one world." White goes on to say, "It's not that I'm against wilderness areas, it's not that I'm against national parks, but essentially, we've now instituted a system of change that is going to take over—the entire planet."

What Muir could not see from the vantage point of Mount Ritter in 1872, the same year Yellowstone became America's first national park, was the scale of changes that would be piled onto the Earth by modernity. How could he have imagined that the work of a backcountry ranger now includes picking up five pounds of toilet paper in a two-foot radius on the trail to Half Dome in Yosemite National Park? How could he have comprehended the appetite of an expanding global population and the carbon load now weighing heavy on all of us? We don't need to denounce John Muir's legacy, we need to broaden it.