



<https://orionmagazine.org/2020/08/op-ed-we-are-still-here-john-muir-is-not/>

JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST

Orion Magazine > Justice & Community > Op-Ed: We Are Still Here. John Muir Is Not.

Op-Ed: We Are Still Here. John Muir Is Not.

by REBECCA TORTES, JENNIFER MALONE, LEAH MATA FRAGUA,
HILLARY RENICK, A-DAE BRIONES, *and* FRED BRIONES



Photo by Vincent Battault

“They’re still killing us. In that way, the genocide has not stopped. . . .The genocide isn’t over as long as they’re denying tribes their rights.” Bill Leonard, Tribal chairman of the Southern Sierra Miwuk, in response to the denial of Federal recognition of the Tribe in 2019 despite the fact they are recognized as one of seven Tribes that called the Yosemite Valley Home.

The Indigenous story, the story of displacement and reclamation, genocide and revival, sadness, and strength is the beginning. From the first beings to our present society, Indigenous people have held the best and worst of our lands, the story of their creation, their trade, extraction, potential, and hopefully, their eventual return to purpose.

IN THE RECENT ARTICLE [“Liberal, progressive — and racist? The Sierra Club faces its white-supremacist history \[https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/07/22/liberal-progressive-racist-sierra-club-faces-its-white-supremacist-history/?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most\] .”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/07/22/liberal-progressive-racist-sierra-club-faces-its-white-supremacist-history/?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most) the *Washington Post* confronts the story of John Muir, Joseph LeConte, and other founders of the modern environmental movement. Muir, of course, was the Sierra Club’s first president, and, as the article explained, demonstrated a pattern of racist behavior, championing the voices of white supremacists within the club.

But Muir was inextricably bound to his time and circumstances, and his legacy is but a reflection of his society’s ideologies. In the mid-nineteenth century, when California was being settled, the state university system adopted professional identities, definitions, and practices developed in European universities. These standards displaced local knowledge, values, and understandings of the world; it seemed the very nature of being a scientist entailed a disregard and distrust for the generations of knowledge accrued by California’s first people. For more context, add the industrial frenzy of the California Gold Rush of 1849, the eugenics movement, the government-sponsored bounty on California Indigenous body parts, and the eighteen secret and unratified treaties. Simply put: the Indigenous California community was easy to ignore.

Muir, then, was not the only problem, and to place emphasis on him as an individual detracts from the real work needed — to challenge established racist ideologies embedded in our largest and most influential institutions. Instead of asking how John Muir was racist, perhaps the better question is how the scientific thought that justified those racist behaviors is still actively at the center of the environmental movement? There is little that can be done to reform John Muir at this point, but there is plenty that can be done to rectify present processes and influences.

The same day of that article’s publication, the Sierra Club’s President, Michael Brune, echoed the damage made by John Muir’s opinions on Black and Indigenous people, acknowledging that the

Sierra Club was then and continues now to be a largely white organization, both in membership and staffing. He states [<https://www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/07/john-muir-early-history-sierra-club>] :

The whiteness and privilege of our early membership fed into a very dangerous idea — one that's still circulating today. It's the idea that exploring, enjoying, and protecting the outdoors can be separated from human affairs. Such willful ignorance is what allows some people to shut their eyes to the reality that the wild places we love are also the ancestral homelands of Native peoples, forced off their lands in the decades or centuries before they became national parks. It allows them to overlook, too, the fact that only people insulated from systemic racism and brutality can afford to focus solely on preserving wilderness.

We are thankful for the acknowledgment of the racist beginnings and willful ignorance of this century-old environmental organization. We are equally thankful of the Sierra's Club internal investment of \$5 million to address unequal pay among staff members. But if large environmental conservation organizations like the Sierra Club are to truly take on the work of healing the damage done by their selective gatekeeping of the natural world, then they'll find that the damage cannot solely be attributed to their ancestors. The work of healing will require directly challenging the present systematic racism that still exists in the environmental movement today. John Muir might not have advocated for Indigenous people then, but the Sierra Club can do so now, by addressing their displacement and exclusion.

This is especially the case for Native people in California, where the Sierra Club is based. When California Native people are punished by game wardens and park authorities while gathering roots, food, and materials in our homelands, we are being challenged both on a personal and on a systematic scale. We are being asked to wholly accept an unjust transfer of lands, to forget a history that is ignored by government actors and environmental advocates, and to internalize and bear the burden of a society in which neither we nor our children have rights or access to our own lands. Even in Brune's statement, we remain unnamed. The voices of those who have been silenced remain silent despite all attempts to confront structural racism.

America and American ideas about land are predicated on the eradication of Tribal Nations, and any attempt to confront structural racism must center the faces of the Indigenous people who are still fighting for federal recognition, still struggling not to be erased off the earth, still seen as less important than a mining claim or ranch or park. The continued growth of our society depends on their voices and their stories.

We need to tell the story of the Ahwahneechees, of Louisa Tom, who, in her old age, still hid from men in uniform because she remembered being hunted by uniformed men in Yosemite Valley. Of

Helen Coates, born in Yosemite Valley in 1927 and who was one of the last Indians living in Yosemite up until 1969 when she was moved by the Park Service when they decided only Indians working full time for the park service could remain. Of Bill Tucker and Les James, both close to eighty, who spent over thirty years working for the park service in order to remain in their homelands. Of Tenaya, who lost his son, his family, his village, his land, and said, “Yes, kill me, as you killed my son; as you would kill my people, if they should come to you! . . . Yes, sir American, you can tell your warriors to kill the old chief. ”

We need to tell the story of how the Sierra Southern Miwuk, as recently as December 2019, were denied Federal recognition because the petitioning group didn’t comprise a “distinct” community. In their Federal recognition petition, they state they are the lineal descendants of the Southern Miwuk, Paiute, Cassons, or Chuckchancee Indian Indigenous to the area which is now known as Yosemite National Park, Mariposa County, and its immediate environs. Ironically, they live in Mariposa County, the namesake of the Mariposa Battalion, the militia group that arose to collect government sponsored Indian head bounties in the Valley.

If Sierra Club and, more broadly, the environmental movement wants to do a reckoning that transcends lip service, then we expect them to set aside the time and financial and human resources needed to restore the land bases of those Tribes who are displaced from protected areas such as the Sierras – the club’s namesake — and task their stakeholders with fighting for federal Tribal recognition for the Southern Sierra Miwok, the Wukchumni, the YTTYTT Chumash, and many others. We expect them to use their influence to allow for Tribal gatherers to access their Tribal foods, tribal arts, and stories that stay hidden and silent in some of the most public parts of our national, state, and county parks. We expect their money to fund Indigenous organizations and the institutional support that allows for Indigenous stewardship practices and stories to be heard widely. We expect to be heard. We are still here. John Muir is not.

Rebecca Tortes, Luiseño/Cahuilla/Assiniboine Sioux

Jennifer Malone, Wukchumni/Tachi/Yolumni

Leah Mata Fragua, Yak Tityu Tityu Yak Tilhini Northern Chumash

Hillary Renick, Pomo/Paiute

A-dae Briones, Cochiti/Kiowa

Fred Briones, Pomo [[#_ftnref1](#)]