Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we thank you for coming out tonight on this beautiful evening for a conversation entitled “A Passion for Nature: Exploring the Life of John Muir.” Our guests tonight, whom our moderator will soon introduce in greater detail, are Richard White, a professor of history and co-director of the Lane Center for the Study of the American West here at Stanford, and Donald Worster, a professor of history and now the biographer of John Muir from the University of Kansas.

Tonight’s conversation is being recorded for later broadcast on KQED Public Radio. For this and other good reasons, please turn off your cell phones. This program will also be available on Stanford on iTunes. To learn more about this and other Aurora Forum programs, and we also provide transcripts of each of these conversations, please visit our Web site, auroraforum.stanford.edu.

Tonight we will follow our typical format of approximately 45 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience-inspired discussion. If, when we get to that portion of our program, you have a question or a comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle microphones and our moderator will bring you into the discussion.

Let me introduce our moderator, Jon Christensen. Jon has been an environmental journalist and science writer for 21 years. His work has appeared in the New York Times, the Western regional newspaper High Country News, and many other newspapers, magazines, journals, and public radio and television shows. Jon was a Knight Professional Journalism Fellow at Stanford in 2002-03 and a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University in 2003-04. He is now finishing his Ph.D. in the Department of History and is associate director of the Spatial History Project of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University. Please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Jon Christensen: Good evening. My name is Jon Christensen. Welcome to the Aurora Forum for tonight’s conversation about John Muir with historians Donald Worster and Richard White. Don Worster is the Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Professor of U.S. History
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and Environmental Studies at the University of Kansas and author of a great number of important books in Western and environmental history, including *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s; Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas; Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*; a biography of John Wesley Powell; and now this new biography of John Muir, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*. This is a really terrific book with some very interesting new and timely arguments about John Muir, and it is justifiably getting rave reviews from all corners, including some of the most critical corners, and that brings me to Richard White.

Richard White is the Margaret Byrne Professor of History and the co-director of the Bill Lane Center for the American West here at Stanford University and also the author of numerous great books about the American West, Native American history, and environmental history, including *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*.

I can’t tell you what a great pleasure it is to be able to be here with both of you living legends and such a great audience, particularly given the legends that I’ve heard about how things sometimes have seemed on the verge of getting pretty Western between the two of you. [Laughter] They say there were times at Western history conferences when the room looked like it might clear out when the two of you started to get into it with each other. So I hope that the audience tonight will stick around. This is indeed a rare treat, and I do hope things get a little Western. [Laughter] And what better figure to start an argument over than John Muir. It seems to me Muir is good to argue with. But Don, in your new biography *A Passion for Nature*, you kind of slyly preempt the critics by arguing with yourself over John Muir, and some of that seems to actually come from arguments you have had with yourself. How did that get started? Why Muir and why you, and what’s your personal connection to Muir’s story?

**Donald Worster:** I don’t think I’m arguing with myself in this. I’m trying to explore the many dimensions of John Muir, and it seems to me that you can see those in conflict, and therefore he’s in argument with himself and I’m arguing with him. My own personal connections here are not that interesting, I think, but I’ll lay them out and you can judge for yourself how important that is to the writing of this book. I was born in California. John Muir was not, but he is a California figure these days. I was born a long way from San Francisco in Yosemite Valley. I won’t tell you where. My great-grandparents were Scottish immigrants to the United States. John Muir’s parents brought him to the U.S. in the 1830s thirty or forty years earlier. My grandparents were followers of Alexander Campbell, the offshoot of the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Scotland, which became the Christian Church, the Church of Christ. That was also the religion of John Muir’s father. I didn’t follow in that family tradition, nor did John Muir. Both of us left and, I think, basically left Christianity. John Muir became a pantheist or a theist. It’s kind of hard to figure out really which he was, probably changing during his life. I’m an atheist. If I were a religious person, I would be a pantheist. I think that’s the only religion that any atheist can probably follow. What else? I became an environmentalist, but not through reading John Muir. So there are the connections. You can make of them what you like.
Christensen: Muir is one of our best-known and well-loved environmental heroes. He’s even on the California state quarter now, gazing up at Half Dome. What made you decide to write a new biography of Muir?

Worster: I wish I’d known that the quarter was coming out when I got started. I told my publishers they should put one of these quarters on the cover of every book. That would sell the book itself. You all have got the quarter in your pocket, right? You can take it out and look at it. There’s John Muir standing very erect and respectful towards … and I think it’s that combination, respectful and erect, a lone individual facing Half Dome with this strange condor flying right over his head. [Laughter] I think that coin, that design, is interesting. Very few states have put any single individual on their commemorative coin. What that says about California and about its attachment to Muir or environmentalism I don’t know exactly, but the problem with that coin is it’s so flat and it’s so simple. It doesn’t begin to get into the complexities of this man. It tells an important story about individuality, freedom, virtue, rightness to the world, as well as reverence, respect, relationship to the natural world, but it really doesn’t tell a very complicated story. And in this case, I think the old adage that one picture is worth a thousand words is flatly untrue. Ten of my words are worth ten million of those coins. [Laughter] I’m mean, there’s just so much more in this life that we need to look to beyond the coin and that design.

Christensen: So you all better go out afterwards and buy a bunch of books. But there’s also a historical argument that I think you’re engaging here through this biography. What is it?

Worster: I am an historian. I’m interested in putting this guy into this context, and I should say here that it seems to me we’ve never had an historian looking at this man’s life. We’ve had a lot of books on John Muir. We’ve not had a comprehensive biography of him – a fully researched, comprehensive biography of his whole life since the 1940s, when San Francisco librarian Linnie Marsh Wolfe wrote her book Son of the Wilderness, which at times is a highly imaginative book. But no historian has really looked at this. A lot of people in the literary field – literary studies – have been interested in Muir, but they’ve been mostly interested in him as a writer and in his published writings. Muir wrote a lot that was not published – letters galore – and he kept them all through his life, and he wrote journals that were never published. So to go through those systematically as an historian would do to try to find the Muir that we have not seen and that we do not know about, I thought was rather important to do.

As far as making an historical argument about this guy, other than laying out his life and all its turns and twists, I suppose there are a couple in this book. One: the importance of doing biography as an historian. I won’t push that too far, but it does seem to me that historians now and then need to move away from the big ideas and generalizations that we come up with about American society or the fate of Western civilization, etcetera, and begin to look at history through the lens of a single individual, and almost any individual begins to look a lot more difficult to understand and explain than you ever realized.
before. That’s a humbling experience for an historian, and that’s what I think this book in some ways demonstrates.

On a broader scale, the key argument of this book, I suppose, is that John Muir came from someplace culturally. We have to understand this man in the context of what came right before his life, and in doing so, to begin to understand where environmentalism came from in this society and in other parts of the world. I think we have to go back to the half century before John Muir was born – born in 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland. We’re talking about a period 50 or 60 years before that – the 1770s, 1780s, up to the time of his birth, the first half of the nineteenth century. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm has called this the “Age of Revolution.” He meant that particularly in a political and economic context, but in many ways it was a revolutionary age: exploring new ideas about the individual, human rights, gender, race, class, new ideas about nature, democracy, new ideas about money, making money, getting rich, markets – a whole swirl of ideas that we’re still working through, we’re still living with today. I mean, I think it really was in a whole sweeping way a revolutionary period, and John Muir comes out of that; he is a product of that. So for me, the idea of the book is that if we go back to John Muir, we can in some ways – at least in this one individual – see where those revolutionary ideas begin to take form in the period after the American Civil War and into the early twentieth century, the sort of post-revolutionary generation. We begin to see where environmentalism comes from, what the environmental dimensions of that earlier revolution were, we begin to see some of the contradictions that were in that revolutionary era that begin to work their way out by the late nineteenth century. So the argument of the book is: that’s where John Muir comes from. He comes out of a revolutionary era that is focusing on liberalism, democracy, capitalism, and he is a product of all that.

Christensen: So Richard, in Don’s book he calls John Muir a conservationist, a liberal, and a Democrat. We know that first one. What do you make of John Muir as a liberal and a Democrat?

Richard White: When I first heard that, I didn’t believe it. Don and I are a lot mellower now so it’s not like it used to be. But I think the liberalism that Don talks about is a nineteenth-century liberalism. It’s rooted in two kinds of things. One of them is individual rights, and that’s been sort of the center of modern liberalism. Don talks a lot about nature having a set of rights like you assign to human beings, but they’re assigned to animals, they’re assigned to other species. But Don also talks about – and it’s one of the most interesting parts of the book – a liberalism that is really like modern conservatism. It believes that, in fact, freedom comes from property. And Muir is very much rooted in that, too. That’s a kind of liberalism that soon turns out that property is what secures freedom, and soon it becomes freedom is the freedom to secure property. And Muir is not divorced from that, and I think one of the striking things about the book – why I found it such an impressive book – is that what you can begin to see in Muir is these two tendencies of nineteenth-century liberalism moving apart. It’s like watching somebody do the splits. Muir tries to keep his foot in both camps. He really can’t do it, and I think for me – though Don, I’m sure, will deny it because I’m saying it – it really
prefigures much of what happens to modern environmentalism, which also doesn’t know where it stands in terms of these kinds of things. So when Don is writing about John Muir, to me, he’s not just writing about John Muir since John Muir is such a fundamental figure in modern environmentalism. Much of what he says about Muir seems to me to be true of environmentalism, too.

**Worster:** May I interject here?

**Christensen:** Yes, of course.

**Worster:** I’m not going to take on that particularly, but to me, this phrase “liberal” has meanings besides economic liberal, which is what we talk about today in terms of what Richard is talking about – conservatism, property rights, etcetera – or liberalism in terms of voting rights or whatever rights, human rights. The way John Muir uses this – the only time I’ve found him using it – is when he talks about “We live in an age of liberal principles.” I asked myself, What is he talking about here? How is he using this work? And I think he’s using it primarily in a religious sense. He’s talking about freeing ourselves from the religious traditions of the past, his own religious traditions, ideas that have come to him through the Church of Scotland, Presbyterianism. Open-mindedness, in a broad sense, is what he’s talking about – a willingness and an openness to new ideas about spirituality. That’s a kind of liberalism that I think is extremely important to remember and to think about. Certainly in that sense, John Muir is also a liberal as well as in these other ways.

**Christensen:** Isn’t that the point at which he encounters the bear?

**Worster:** Exactly.

**Christensen:** Tell the rest of that story. He’s writing in his diary.

**Worster:** A journal. I picture him sitting by a campfire somewhere up in the mountains. And it’s just a little scrap in one of his journals; it’s not connected with anything else. But he talks about coming one afternoon along the trail and there’s a dead bear lying there in the path. And he sits down to think about this bear – how it died, etcetera. It’s a very short piece. You have to extrapolate, I guess, and I’ll let Richard extrapolate more than I will extrapolate. Basically, he starts to muse in his journal. He says, We live in an age of liberal principles and the Anglo-Saxon heaven has now opened up to include (I think he says) Jews and Muslims. It’s a very sarcastic note. We’re now letting everybody into this world that we once kept sacrosanct. But liberal principles have not yet extended to bears. We don’t let them into our moral universe, is what he’s saying; they don’t have any standing morally for us. And he’s clearly disagreeing with this. He thinks that this bear’s death is something we ought to think about, mourn, and that’s as far as he goes. So it’s liberalism in terms of who is covered by our moral universe and our moral imaginations, which I think also has some deep religious implications. I don’t know whether he’s saying that bears are going to be going to heaven as well, but later on
in his life, he does. I think its tongue in cheek, but everything’s going to be in heaven when we get there, but heaven is California, so we’re already here. [Laughter]

**White:** What’s interesting about Muir is that Muir’s bears occur in your book over and over again, and the most famous Muir bear quote is when Muir is coming up and sees Mono Indians coming over the Sierras. At first he thinks they’re bears and he says, “There’s nothing human in their form.” And he constantly describes how filthy they are and how dirty they are and how they have no rightful place in the landscape, so that’s another take on bears that also comes into Muir.

**Christensen:** I guess you’d better jump on that one right away.

**Worster:** Well, I quote actually a different passage. This passage appears in a journal that Muir writes in 1869, August, which finally appears in his book *First Summer in the Sierra*. He uses this anecdote for an article he writes ten years later, and it also goes into the book *The Mountains of California*. So it’s a moment that stays with him for a long time. He’s thinking about this moment for a long, long time. We don’t have the original journal from 1869, but the textual evidence I’ve seen suggests he didn’t do much revising of it, so I’m assuming that he’s up there in the upper country near Tuolumne Meadows when all this happens, and he’s writing again in his journal to himself. Now the full context of this is, I think, what we need to know. Richard will perhaps say I’m trying to defend him. I’m not a defense attorney here, but I think we need to understand the full context to understand this episode and Muir’s attitude toward Indians and toward all these moral principles. And by way of preliminary, I talked once to a professor in California (not this professor in California) who said, “I read that passage and I threw the book down. I cannot read Muir ever again.” That’s from a professor. Let’s see what Muir does in this. He sees these Indians and he says, “This is the first time I’ve ever seen Native Americans.” He’s alone on the trail hiking over towards Mono Lake when they come around a curve, and he’s freaked out. They get closer to him and they are caked with dirt and they circled him and began clutching at him and asking for tobacco or alcohol. He is desperate to get away, and he goes back to his campfire and he says, These people really repelled me, and they were not only dirty but, as Richard says, they have no rightful place in nature. If you turn the page in the journal, which is what Richard’s not doing here, Muir basically says, I’m ashamed of myself. He says, It’s really sad and unfortunate that I have this feeling – that I would feel about my fellow human beings in this way. Or it’s even sadder that I have such an unnatural … he calls it an unnatural feeling about people that he encounters that he might prefer the squirrels to these people. And then if you turn the page even further, he says, “I wish them Godspeed” (that’s his word), and then he quotes Robert Burns, his favorite Scottish poet, particularly the last lines of the poem “A Man’s a Man for A’ That.” I’m not going to do the Scottish brogue version of it, but basically what Burns says is that the Scottish culture that we’re in is divided up into the rich and the poor, and Burns is a deep egalitarian. He says, We are all brothers, and these class divisions and so forth are going to fade away one of these days. He’s influenced by the French Revolution, by all these new democratic ideas, and the poem ends, “That man to man, the world o’er, shall brothers be for a’ that.” That’s what Muir quotes to himself by the campfire after this first encounter
with Native Americans. I think he is ashamed of the feelings he had – his first response – and he is trying to get beyond them and to argue from what also is important to him in egalitarianism. And I think this works its way out later in his life, so I think we have to take this in the full context of a guy who is struggling with himself and his own feelings and his immediate prejudices on the trail. I’m not going to say that he never feels prejudice again in his life, but I am saying that it’s worth knowing that he is struggling with himself and he feels ashamed of some of his feelings. That’s the way I read it, at least.

Christensen: Many Californians venerate Muir and share in his nature religion. There are many who are also skeptical really for this very reason – feeling that he’s a misanthrope, his vision separated people from nature, and was tinged by what some might call this kind of green racism that only some people were good enough for the high cathedrals of nature. What do you think?

Worster: Well, he is a misanthrope at times. He admits it in the passage I just said: How could I prefer the squirrels to my fellow human beings? He is aware that he has these misanthropic qualities. Frankly, most of us at some point or other feel a certain disgust with our fellow human beings, and maybe Muir has a little higher dose than others. Frankly, again, I am not a defense attorney in this book for him. I find the man has a lot of weaknesses and foibles and so on, but I’m not a prosecuting attorney either. This misanthropy is an interesting question because it keeps coming up again and again and it comes up with environmentalists. What does it really mean in the case of Muir? That he wishes to be away from people throughout his life? That he wants to isolate himself from the human species? That he hopes that the human species will self-destruct at some point? That’s not in Muir. In some ways, some of the influences in his background would have led him in that direction. I think what Muir struggles with through most of his life is quite the opposite: to take a very optimistic and positive point of view of people. He is an intensely sociable guy. He makes friends everywhere he goes. When he’s up in the high country by himself day after day, he says in his journal repeatedly, I’m lonely. I need people, he’s basically saying to himself. And all of his life, he makes friends from all walks of life and all races, frankly. So I think we have to see in this man an intensely sociable personality in conflict with sometimes misanthropic elements, but also a guy who is so positive about nature that he also feels compelled to be, as others of his day were, positive about human beings as well, optimistic about what they’re capable of doing. In fact, I think at times, if I were judging him independently, I would say this guy is at times rather naïve about human possibilities – overly optimistic and hopeful that California will do the right thing, that Americans will do the right thing when it comes to nature, etcetera, etcetera. I think he’s a man who was part of his age of hopefulness, progress, faith in humanity. It’s not unadulterated, but it is a strong theme in his work, and I think it’s one that we have not appreciated.

Christensen: Let me just play this theme out a little bit further and quote Muir when he says, “If a war should break out between the beasts and Lord Man, I’d side with the bears.” This Muir does extend the concepts of rights to nature. He talks about the plant people. What does that mean? Is this Muir a prophet of animal rights?
**Worster:** Well, that passage you just read is from *The Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*. He’s been talking about…. He’s been out on a hunt with some guys who are killing bears, etcetera, blithely, and he’s appalled by their violence, particularly their assumption that bears are good for nothing but shooting. And I think you have to see this as Muir’s … he’s been on the trail alone for several months now. He’s trying to get away from society and humanity. He is at his misanthropic low, or high, or however you want to see that. He’s fed up with these people’s attitudes, particularly toward other forms of life. I think Walt Whitman says the same thing: I’d rather go and live with the animals for a while. So that’s there in Muir. But the rest of your question was…

**Christensen:** Animal rights.

**Worster:** … animal rights, of course. The idea of taking the word “people” and applying it to plants suggests that this is something that we have to do morally. These creatures – these things – make a moral claim on us in the same way that people do. I don’t think he believes, but he doesn’t go into this, that plants have equal rights with human beings. I mean, he’s cutting down trees. He cuts off branches from the spruce up in the mountains to make his bed for the night. He eats meat. Much of his life he’s a vegetarian subsisting on bread and fruit, but he also pigs out on meat from time to time. He rides a horse or a mule up into the mountains; he doesn’t ask its permission. So the guy has again complexities in here about how he’s going to sort these things out. Now, the easy way for a moral philosopher to address this is to say that these animals and plants have no moral standing whatsoever in our universe. But I think that’s untenable, and Muir accepts that as an untenable position. On the other hand, those who say they have equal rights with us in every way possible … this is probably also impractical, and Muir recognizes this, but he’s no moral philosopher and he doesn’t sort it out. I mean, John Rawls didn’t sort it out. How can you expect this botanist to figure these things out? I think he probably should have sat down on a rock and thought more fully and thoroughly about them if he’d been a better philosopher and a deeper thinker, he would have done. But we don’t go to John Muir to resolve these more complicated moral issues in our time. That’s his shortcoming, that’s his weakness. He’s not a profound thinker about many of these issues. He’s more interesting to me as a guy who reflects some of the broad cultural tensions that are out there in the American society of his era.

**Christensen:** In the class that you teach here at Stanford on nature and popular culture, you have the students read John Muir before watching Disney movies. Why?

**White:** If you’ve read *The Mountains of California*, there’s a part that everybody skips, and that’s the part where he talks about the Douglas Squirrel, the part where he talks about the water eagle, and the part where he talks about the mountain sheep. And in all of these, they are Disney animals. They are anthropomorphic animals. They are master foresters; they’re just like man. He says at one point, I think, about the Douglas Squirrel, “He works for a living.” And what you really have is this kind of way in which you’ll see it in Mark Twain, you’ll see it in John Burroughs, you’ll see it in Walt Disney: he prefigures animals not as moral beings here but as figures of popular culture that he really
anthropomorphizes – that he makes just like human beings. I think that’s another side of John Muir, which is one of the reasons why John Muir has had such an impact on popular culture because of the fact that he blends over to somebody like Disney quite easily.

I would argue with Don a little bit that I think Muir does think deeply about these things, but the way he resolves it is he resolves it…. John Muir, in my view, gave us modern California. What he does is he marks off part of his state: he hates cities, he hates San Francisco; those are outside of nature – they just don’t belong. He marks off another part where he spends most of his life, as Don points out in wonderful sections of the book, in Alhambra Valley, where he runs an orchard. He readily admits that at some point the Central Valley, the flower fields, are all going to be plowed up, and that it has to be that way. And when Muir is there, animals don’t have rights. Don has this wonderful section where he spends a whole lot of his life killing ground squirrels just because of the fact that they’re a pest in the orchard. And I don’t think there’s a contradiction from Muir because they don’t belong there. That’s become a human landscape. And then he marks off, in just the same way that we do, the high Sierras as “That’s nature.” When I teach environmental history classes, many of my students come in without ever having read Muir with the same mark. They think the animals in my neighborhood – and my neighborhood is full of animals; I mean, it’s full of coyotes, it’s full of deer, full of raccoons, full of hawks – but they don’t belong there. These are the suburbs. They’re wrecking the gardens, they’re killing each other, they’re tipping over garbage cans, they’re sort of animals on welfare. [Laughter] Why don’t they get back into the Sierras where they belong? And I think that a legacy of John Muir is that he marks morality by space. And I think that’s one of the real strengths of your book; you take Muir out of the Sierras and you look at Muir everyplace that he goes.

Worster: Thank you. But I don’t think that he declares that animals don’t belong anywhere except in the high mountain country … wild animals. I don’t know whether he poisoned ground squirrels. I assume he had to.

White: Don, you’ve given me the formula: it’s cyanide, strychnine …

Christensen: … honey and oats, or something like that.

Worster: Well, I’m very interested, more than most historians, in how he actually lived on this ranch in the Alhambra Valley, a couple of miles outside Martinez, where the John Muir National Historic Site sits. People hadn’t spent a lot of time looking into that farming experience because, well, Muir doesn’t write very much about it. No magazine wanted to hear about it, and that’s most of the writing he did – for magazines for pay. So he doesn’t write about it, he doesn’t write a journal about it except for one very short journal in the 1890s about the ranch and the ranch life. And he’s running this ranch for ten years almost. So I was very concerned about how he manages this place with all his ideas, not only about wildness but about agriculture. He doesn’t leave any records, for the most part; in a few letters he mentions things. So I went to manuals of the era to find out how people were managing vineyards and fruit orchards, and that’s where I get this stuff about killing ground squirrels. His wife does mention to Muir when he’s traveling,
“The ground squirrels are at it again,” so I know they felt hostility. I mean, if you’re in agriculture, you are by definition in some opposition to nature. So Muir has got to defend his crops against these ground squirrels, but he doesn’t kill everything on the property. I mean, the herons come in and nest, the birds come in, there are flowers blooming, he’d take walks up and down the hillsides, and so forth. I mean, he’s not just blasting this whole place. Everything outside of the high mountain country is now open to total and absolute ecological destruction. That’s not… I think he is trying to live and appreciate where he is. But how do you raise grapes and protect trees without doing something about ground squirrels is his problem. That puts him in a moral bind – a moral contradiction – and I think it’s a painful one for him.

But on this matter of designating some places to be used in this way and other places to be used in this way, who doesn’t do that? I mean, we all set up zones. You don’t allow a race track in the middle of the Stanford campus. There are uses here that are appropriate and inappropriate. And I think John Muir sees the California landscape, to some extent, in the same way. There are places where farming is going to go on. It’s inevitable; we need food. There are other places that we should set aside and preserve that are, if you want, sacred places. He divides the world into sacred and profane, but I don’t think he, in doing so, says the profane places don’t matter. I wish he wrote more about these other places, but part of the reason that he doesn’t do so is not because he’s not there or doesn’t have any affections attached to them. It’s because (1) he doesn’t like to write – he’s a very slow writer, and (2) nobody asks him to write about these places.

**Christensen:** What’s interesting is that you’d look at not just what he writes and what he says but what he did and how he lived and how he actually made a living. And one of the things he does is let the railroad come right through his front yard.

**Worster:** Have some of you been to the John Muir Historic Site? Good. Of course, what you see now is the John Muir Highway – the four-lane highway that goes right through the backyard of the house. That was something John Muir might have allowed, for all I know, because he did allow the Santa Fe Railroad to build a very visible and noisy and ugly railroad trestle right on the same place. Now, they might have done it anyway if they could have gotten eminent domain through there, but John Muir was approached by them and he said, “Sure, what will you give me in return?” They said, “We’ll give you free railroad passes all over the West to travel.” So he said, “Sure. For a dollar, I’ll give you the rights to this place.” So these trains begin coming right through the valley – right within sight of his windows. And he also gets out of it a little train station that’s sitting there called the Muir Station, from which he can ship his fruit down to San Francisco to the markets. Now, this is a shrewd, canny guy. He’s making money. He’s not opposed to technology. He’s not a Luddite. He loves railroads. So he makes his deal with the Santa Fe Railroad. I think we ought to sit there and think about this trestle and its meaning to him because, again, it makes him a little more complicated and interesting a person, I think.
White: He also made allies of what you call the “green men,” the big money men: railroad barons, capitalists like Edward Harriman. Why? Was this any kind of contradiction?

Worster: Well, the phrase I use, “green men,” is probably … I’m almost regretting it now. And there are women also involved. But most of the people he hangs out with are … I’m talking about the early conservationists, and they’re not, by and large, railroad barons or robber barons or capitalists. They are professors, they’re writers, they’re scientists, they’re government employees, foresters. That’s what I mean by this phase, the “green men”: this group of people who come together to reform land use in this country, forest conservation in particular. There are some very wealthy people who come into that movement and begin to take a part in it. And he makes friends with some of these people and feels that they can be of great use to promote these causes. Did you want me to talk about Harriman in this case?

White: What kind of position did that put him in? Maybe Harriman is a good case if we take the case of the Klamath while he was camped out up there and there were these big plans for transforming nature that Harriman was involved in and that Muir, as he did with some other of the important causes of his day, chose to ignore or not write about them or not speak about them.

Worster: The richest and most powerful friend he makes is Edward Harriman, who is the great railroad baron of the era, one of the richest men in American history. He meets him on a voyage along the coast of Alaska and they become good friends. And Harriman helps him on a number of occasions, but particularly helps him in the preservation of Yosemite Valley, or getting Yosemite Valley into the Yosemite National Park in the early twentieth century. It’s been left out of the original park. California agrees to give it back, but Congress is not yet ready to do so. So Muir calls Harriman, and Harriman basically uses his influence to get this rescission made. I think it’s a very tricky strategy that Muir is involved with. You can think of it as the little gingerbread man and the fox crossing the river. I mean, he gets on for a ride, but is he going to make it to the other shore before he’s snapped up himself? He ends up saying some things about Harriman that I wince to read today. He compares Harriman to a great plow or a glacier moving like a natural force – moving across the landscape. And he admires him for all the things he’s achieving and accomplishing. It’s a tricky strategy for Muir because Harriman is, of course, mainly interested in economic development. At some point there’s going to be a clash, and that clash for me occurred when I went up to the Klamath Lake area across the border into Oregon because Muir went up there in 1908-09, I think it’s ’09 in the summer, at Harriman’s command almost to come and write his boyhood story, his autobiography. So I went up there to see exactly what this place looked like. And the lodge that Harriman had, a hunting lodge, no longer exists. But as I was poking around in the area, it began to dawn on me why Harriman was there. The whole Klamath Lakes area – that part of Oregon – had just been declared a national reclamation area to be drained and turned into farmland. And Harriman is there to extend his railroad lines to carry all this farm produce to market. And it’s going to have a devastating effect on the Pacific flyway. It has had. I mean, 50 or 75 percent of the earlier birdlife that was
migrating up and down no longer comes through. It’s still an area of controversy. Muir is sitting on Harriman’s front porch thinking about his boyhood in Wisconsin and he’s writing a chapter called “A Paradise of Birds.” He talks about all the wonderful birds in the new world that he discovered when they arrived from Scotland. What an incredible abundance that he’d never seen as a boy in Scotland. He’s writing about this paradise of birds while across the lake Harriman is complicit, at least, in the beginnings of a destruction of waterfowl that’s one of the most serious in American history. And Muir says what about this? Not a word. Nowhere in his journals, not in…. He may have spoken something to Harriman, but we have no record of it. He doesn’t say anything in any private letter he writes to anybody. He’s completely silent about it. Now, he’s an old man. You can say that old men are forgetful or don’t see very far, but I think it suggests a certain blindness in John Muir to some of the consequences of what’s going on in the country that he’s overlooking, and there are many, many other examples one could give. There’s a certain blindness to his own friend and what he is involved in: the blindness of the strategy he has followed for getting these rich capitalists on his side to do good for nature. It’s a tricky strategy, and you can say in the end he may have lost more than he gained. I leave that up to you.

Christensen: Richard, is this another of Muir’s legacies for environmentalism?

White: I think sometimes environmentalism gets tagged as being pretty much connected with a privilege of some kind, an economic privilege, where the privilege is sometimes an economic privilege where in fact all kinds of other things happen which it ignores in order to preserve (it’s less true now) … in order to preserve wilderness, preserve wild space, or ignore many things going on underneath its nose. I don’t know if I blame all that on Muir. I agree with Don. This is a very tricky, very dangerous strategy, and very often you can point out all kinds of ways in which it didn’t work out. So I don’t think I disagree with Don on that.

Christensen: Let’s turn now to maybe the core of Muir’s legacy really for us. You’ve called Muir the founder of an American religion. Is that why Muir is still so important to us?

Worster: To us? To some people. I think he is a religious prophet, and a lot of people in this country have followed him or followed those ideas, and Muir is still important to them. I think he’s important for other reasons, but certainly that’s a crucial one. He’s important for the great work he did for getting our national parks and forests and wildlife refuges and wild places and beauty in our consciousness and concerned about saving them. I think he’s also important though for us today just as a kind of measuring stick for understanding where we were as a people and where we ought to be today or where we think we ought to be today. Muir doesn’t give us the answers to the kinds of issues we have today, but I think he provides us with an understanding of where those ideas began to come from, the problems he encountered in working them out practically, the unsolved, unsettled questions he left us. He gives us a chance to think about those issues that still have some relevance today.
Christensen: Does he give us any kind of path to follow?

Worster: I’m not following his path in any slavish way. He didn’t follow anybody else’s path in any slavish way. I think Muir would say to us today: This is the path I struck out on; you strike out on your path. There are a lot of things I think we would do differently today or we might diverge from John Muir’s direction. I think the worst thing to make him into would be an icon that we cannot criticize or we think he’s settled all these issues for us. He was a prophet but he was not a saint. There’s only in my environmental universe one saint: Rachel Carson. He’s a flawed man; many flaws and failures in his own time and much of his legacy I think needs to be critically examined.

Christensen: Where would you diverge?

Worster: On this last thing we just began to talk about. I think Muir needed to ask in his own time … we certainly need to be asking today … what are we going to do with capitalism? What are going to do with the cultural values and institutions of this capitalist economy? In the aftermath of Harriman’s death and in the aftermath of John Muir’s death, we can see where these economic values and institutions have led us, and it seems to me its emphasis on unlimited economic growth, unlimited acquisition of private capital and wealth, unlimited mass consumption, which is what is left us today, is responsible for the largest share of environmental problems on this planet. And we need to come to grips with that and think about those economic institutions and values. I’m not sure what we can do with it at this point. I’m not sure that anybody has a clear answer. But I think the environmental community ought to be asking both that kind of question in ways that John Muir didn’t come around to ask it. I think we ought to be asking about how we can build a culture that protects not only the natural world but people – vulnerable communities – from the effects of the market forces. We ought to be building a protective culture in a lot of ways. Muir started us in some sense on a trail of thinking about protection as an important activity in a society: protection by government, protection by citizens, of our heritage, of things that matter, of other species, of places of beauty. And I think he was in many ways sympathetic with some of the ideas about protecting groups of people, vulnerable people. But we haven’t gotten very far along that line, and I think we need to see how that protective culture has many dimensions. So there is a lot of unfinished business here for us to deal with.

Christensen: Muir wrote at one point about working six days and going to the mountains on the seventh, and “all the world seems a church and the mountains altars.” And that vision of California is one that we’ve lived with that has lasted a long time, and many of us go to the mountains for that worship and recreation. Richard, do you think that that vision is coming to an end now after 140 years, or changing?

White: I think that Muir’s view that you can protect the mountains while everything else is opened up to development … global warming has finished that. Anybody knows the situation in the Sierras. It’s all one world. The ability to simply have borders…. It’s not that I’m against wilderness areas, it’s not that I’m against national parks, but essentially we’ve now instituted (and I agree with Don) a system of change that is going to take over
– is taking over – the entire state, the entire planet. It’s not that I would even criticize Muir’s vision for the nineteenth century, but clearly it’s not going to be a vision for the twenty-first century. And I think the challenge is, if Don’s right, that if you want to have a conservationist and a democrat with a small “d,” then that’s what we need. And I think that is not something you can learn from John Muir because John Muir didn’t know our problems. But I think we really do have to re-envision what the California of this century is going to look like because if we just let things go, I think we have a pretty good idea of what it’s going to look like, and it’s not going to be that pretty.

**Christensen:** We’d like to open up the conversation to all of you. There are microphones in the aisles. Please come up to one and we’ll recognize you and you can join the conversation.

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**Audience Member:** I think you could certainly make a strong case for Muir being inspirational in this world where we have Al Gore and others trying to be politically astute and influential. How would you describe Muir as being influential?

**Worster:** Well, he had a tremendous contribution to our national parks. I don’t know how we can see their development without understanding…. He was the first interpreter. He wrote a book called *Our National Parks.* Almost all that we’ve done in the way of nature preservation owes something profound to him. Not that he was the only one working in that area; many, many others were. Teddy Roosevelt, others of his generation. But people even then, Roosevelt and others, were inspired by his writings along these lines. But also moral ideas about our relationships with other creatures: that’s still an influential part of his legacy.

**Audience Member (continued):** The editor or the publisher of *The Century Magazine* is calling him “a gentle hermit.” Do you think he was able to transcend that kind of predisposition – personal predisposition – and be more influential in a public sphere?

**Worster:** Well, he was no hermit. This is part of the public persona that Muir helped create and his audience wanted. It comes out of a very short period of his life when he is living pretty much alone – not completely, but in Yosemite Valley or spending a lot of time…. He was no hermit. He lives in a household filled with daughters and family coming and going. So this is the image the public wanted. You can’t have a religious prophet who comes down to breakfast every morning. [Laughter] His society created it. They wanted this guy coming down the trail in rough clothes with a walking stick with his long, flowing beard coming down from where he lived as a hermit now and then to share his good tidings with the people. Some of these letters from people go something like this: Oh, Mr. Muir, I imagine you up there in your mountain retreat so far from the lives of most of us, etcetera, etcetera. We love your writing, and so on. And Muir writes back: Oh, the mountains are grand. (I’m generalizing here.) And he’s sitting upstairs in his study in the Alhambra Valley with a nice desk and a fireplace and dinner down below.
Christensen: Watching the train go by on the trestle.

Worster: Watching the train go by. [Laughter]
So he perpetuates this kind of myth that the public had got, which comes out of a particular period of his life that is, for him, the defining moment, in some ways, but it’s quite a misleading one – the gentle hermit.

Christensen: In terms of his influence, I think we also have to mention the Sierra Club.

Worster: Sure. That’s certainly one of his important legacies. He was the founding president of the Sierra Club and continued until he died in 1914, so a period of almost 20 years. The Sierra Club, I think, would have existed without him, but they needed him as a kind of figurehead. He was the most popular figurehead. At the time, he was not a very active leader in the club. He missed a hell of a lot of meetings, including a meeting when John Wesley Powell came, the great explorer of the Colorado. I was hoping to find where those two had come together. Powell comes to give a speech at the Sierra Club and where is Muir? He’s home with a cold. Not a very effective leader, in some ways.

Audience Member: I have two questions. I’d like to know the influence of the Sierra Club’s loss of the Hetch Hetchy Dam controversy on John Muir. The second question is, what does a twentieth-century environmentalist such as David Brower or some of his contemporaries or even twenty-first century environmentalists such as Van Jones or Julia Butterfly Hill … what was Muir’s influence on them as well?

Worster: I can’t speak to all of those people you mentioned, but David Brower certainly comes right out of the Muir tradition and expands it into new directions, but he quotes John Muir repeatedly. I can’t imagine. He was born, I believe, two years before Muir died. Ansel Adams was alive when John Muir was still alive – a young guy. There’s another legacy of John Muir who read Muir and was influenced by him. You asked about the Hetch Hetchy defeat: how John Muir responded to that?

Audience Member (continued): I’ve heard that it actually really crushed him, and I didn’t know if that was really true or not.

Worster: Well, there is a story out that John Muir died of a heartache over Hetch Hetchy. He died of pneumonia. That’s pretty clear. Heartache sounds wonderfully apt in some ways. John Muir was certainly discouraged by that loss – deeply discouraged. People write to commiserate with him and he’s not only lost that battle after almost a decade of fighting but he’s also a widower, he’s sick much of the time, he has terrible problems with his lungs and infections. He’s hacking and coughing. And he’s alone. His daughter lives not too far away, but he’s living in that big house all alone, not with his daughters, in some ways estranged from them. So it’s more than just Hetch Hetchy, but all these things at the end when he’s in his seventies are coming down on him, and you would think the guy is staggered by all of this but he does say, “I’m hopeful. I think we will learn from this.” And again he comes back to his faith in the people of
California, in Americans that we will not let these sorts of things happen in the future, that we will grow and learn, we will learn to preserve things. I close the last chapter with a phrase from one of his letters that we are making “slow progress heavenward,” which suggests that he’s trying and perhaps succeeding to be optimistic at the end of his life. And who’s to say he was wrong? This country has gone on, expanded our ideas of what we should preserve, into all kinds of nooks and crannies of this country. And you could say that John Muir’s prophecy that Americans would learn and grow, and so on, has been carried out. And most of the things that John Muir saw and valued – the species he knew – are still out there. You can still go out and touch a redwood bark and a cowry tree in Australia and all of these other things. I think we sometimes get so gloomy about environmental issues that we forget how much we have saved and preserved that John Muir saw and knew. Very few people are going to go out and hike for forty miles a day and sleep on a hard rock with a bag of tea tied to their belt. We don’t do that anymore but we can, and partly because of John Muir.

Christensen: John Muir felt betrayed by some of his friends and allies at Hetch Hetchy, and I wonder if it’s just worth dwelling on Hetch Hetchy a little bit more because that’s where our water comes from.

Worster: Well, he felt betrayed by the City of San Francisco. A lot of other people in the country rallied to his cause. He should have felt betrayed by Teddy Roosevelt, who was his friend, he thought, and dithered through the whole issue and went out of office without making a decisive play on this issue. But he forgave Roosevelt. They had lunch together in Pasadena on one occasion and they were all lovey-dovey. The people he had hoped to count on or would have counted on for help had all died. Richard Harriman was dead. I think he was really buoyed up by the fact that so many people, newspapers across the country, people in southern California, had rallied to his cause. There were people all over this state who were opposed to Hetch Hetchy, and I think he was buoyed up by that fact, but I think he felt let down by the political process. He never had much faith in the political process, and in some ways it was a perfect example of how politics works. And when Wilson comes into office and appoints as his Secretary of the Interior the legal counsel for the City of San Francisco, who had been fighting to get the dam built, it’s all over. That’s, I suppose, a kind of betrayal.

Christensen: But these people who made this water possible, Richard, were also reformers – part of this reform tradition that Muir was in some ways part of.

White: That’s the hard part about this. You can’t just type this struggle as Muir and good against San Francisco and evil. This was an attempt to break up monopoly control of water systems in San Francisco, but a huge price was paid for it.

Audience Member: I enjoyed your book very much, Professor Worster, and when I was reading it, it seemed the book at times was obviously offering a balanced assessment of Muir. It did seem at times it was at least partly a defense of him and it seems, consequently, mainstream environmentalism, over which John Muir had such an influence. And I also wondered, how much at times in the book are you reacting to some
of the criticisms the environmental justice movement has launched at mainstream environmentalism, criticism such that the movement is too white, it’s been too interested in wilderness, and at times too elitist, which Richard mentioned in passing. So what is your response to that, particularly Muir’s role in this? If you were speaking to a group of environmental justice advocates who may not see Muir as somebody to be celebrated, how would you react to that?

**Worster:** Well, of course I’ve read those critiques and I don’t always disagree with them, but I think John Muir in some places is being demonized today, and I don’t think that’s fair or accurate. I don’t think it’s truthful. And again, it’s a matter of turning the page and reading the whole story. I would say to people in environmental justice: John Muir came out of some places that you, too, came out of, and there’s a side of John Muir that you haven’t understood – a man who supported women’s rights, who was an anti-imperialist, who did have concerns and sympathy for working-class people. He was one of them. He didn’t carry these ideas as far as you might want him to do or as I might want him to do, but don’t just categorize him as a man completely devoid of those ideas; quite the contrary. I think we have to understand the connections. And you have to understand the connections as well (I’m not speaking to you, but …) that environmental justice can include, ought to include, the welfare of all beings on this planet, saving places of extraordinary beauty and heritage for all the people. Let’s don’t just narrow justice to a concern about toxic waste, as important as that is, or about sharing the resources of the earth in a material way. There are others ways in which environmental justice can be conceived. So I would suggest that we try to build some bridges here rather than become divisive over this issue.

**Audience Member:** I once read a story of John Muir’s about a dog, and it’s a delightful account of the mind and experience and character of a pet dog, and of the character of wilderness. I wondered how important dogs were to Muir – if he had dogs and just how much were they in his life.

**Worster:** He loved dogs – all breeds, and so on. He loved animals, and he always had one around their house in Alhambra Valley. That story that you’re referring to, *Stickeen*, was his most popular story ever. He told it thousands of times, I suppose, around the campfire, at dinners, etcetera, etcetera. He did a lot of research into animal psychology to make it into a short book. Richard might call that anthropomorphizing the animal. I don’t think that was what he was doing. I think he was trying to understand how this dog in his moment of escape, and so forth, could feel joy and relief and fear – that these emotions are not unique to us as a species. The problem I have with the story is the one that nobody seems to have asked him around the dinner table when he told it: Why the hell were you out there with that little dog? Why would you set off all day long across this face of a glacier with all these fissures and let this poor little puppy with its tender feet follow you hour after hour out there to the point where you put its life in danger? How thoughtless! How stupid!

**Question from the Audience:** Since you’re an historian, I’ve always wondered about the concept of history coming from people versus social movements. If there hadn’t been
a John Muir, would there have been one – somebody else? Would the times have
brought someone else into that same kind of position, or do we really have people who
are so important by themselves that they actually change history?

White: Yes and no. I don’t ascribe to any “great man” theory of history – that without
John Muir nothing would have happened, that we would have had no parks, and so on.
Clearly, people were out there creating parks before Muir got onto the scene. Even
Yosemite was being created before he got there. He has an important influence to play, a
very big one. But to me, the ultimate question is not whether John Muir changed history
but what he reflects of his time, and to get into that period more deeply than I’ve been
able to do through other methods and ways, to see it through this kind of perspective. To
me, that’s much more interesting than this bigger question. I believe in the great social
forces, I believe that individuals can come along and divert things. If a rock had fallen on
John Muir in Yosemite one day as he was climbing, or if he had fallen off down the falls,
etcetera, things would have been different, of course. Those kinds of contingencies
happen and can have an important influence. But that’s not to say that we should set
John Muir up as one of these great towering figures who changes history. People are
always looking for that: the mineral that changed history; salt and how it changed the
world. We’ve gone through all the men, we’ve gone through all the women, and now
we’re down to salt. [Laughter]

Audience Member: I’m just wondering if you came across anything about his
friendship with William Keith, the Scotsman and California painter.

Worster: Yeah, and I probably didn’t do enough in the book about that friendship. But
they, of course, were both Scots, immigrants, and fell into each other’s arms when they
met in San Francisco and went into the mountains together. Muir bought some of Keith’s
paintings, at least one of them. After a while, they became too expensive for good old
John Muir, the thrifty Scotsman, to spend money on. One of the interesting things that I
discovered in looking into Muir was that although he was great friends with Keith, he
also didn’t like his paintings all that much. [Laughter] You know, I don’t want to give
any offense to any art critics or art enthusiasts, but they’re very gauzy and romantic in a
kind of late nineteenth-century fashion, and Muir much preferred photography. He
collected photographs by the thousands. And you can say those, too, were done and
conceived, taken in a gauzy way, and so on, but he felt somehow photography was a
medium closer to truth. And he was man of science, as he saw himself, and Keith was a
man of arts, so for Muir, the photography was where our relationship to nature in terms of
bringing images in, and so on, ought to go in the future.

Audience Member: You alluded to cultural influences in analyzing John Muir. I
haven’t read anything about John Muir. I know that he’s a big icon here in California and
in the world. I haven’t read any of his works or comments made by other people on his
life, but just listening to the conversation tonight, what was emerging for me was a
spiritual evolution of a person who, being out in nature, there was a rise in consciousness
and he was sort of on the cusp between just being involved in human tendencies and now
he’s sort of elevating and starting to feel that he’s actually part of this greater circle of life
or cycle. I was thinking that part of his charisma – why he was such a leader – was perhaps because of the same reason: that there was just so much that was evolving inside of him that people were just naturally drawn to him like a magnet. I don’t know if that comment makes sense.

**Worster:** Well, yes it does. I think it feeds into this theme that we should think about John Muir as the inventor of a new American religion. I don’t mean to put America in there exclusively because people all over the world have responded to him, but he was an inventor of an American religion. That’s something that we ought to acknowledge and also understand happens. People are always creating new religions. So one of the interesting questions to ask ourselves is what social function does this religion play in our lives today? What did we do before we had it? End of comment.

**Christensen:** I found that when I re-read your book that I found new things about Muir each time. And one of them was that I noticed that though Muir does talk about … he does say, “All the world seems a church and the mountains altars,” he also says that there are “visions of holiness, pure and abundant in vales as on mountains … only the holiness is of a less conspicuous palpable kind,” so there was this holiness that he saw everywhere.

I recommend this book to you all. I hope that we have shown here with you, with your help, why Muir is good to think with and argue with. We have not done the Western thing and really fought over water, but I promised Don as his reward a glass of whiskey for the book signing out in the lobby afterwards, and I know that he’ll be happy to do that and talk with you. Mark Gonnerman would like to say a few words before we disperse, but thank you very much Don and Richard for joining us this evening. [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** Thank you very much for a delightful evening.

Many of you have been asking me if, in view of university budget cuts, the Aurora Forum is safe. And I am sorry to report that no, it is not. Stanford Continuing Studies and the Office of Public Affairs, our on-campus co-sponsors, have decided not to fund the Aurora Forum in the coming fiscal year. So if you have enjoyed over the years these free and open public education programs that open Stanford’s doors and help make a connection between the university and the broader world, I ask you to write to me, markg@stanford.edu, or auroraforum@stanford.edu, and show your support for the Forum. And it’s not over yet. If you know some benefactors, individuals, or foundations, also please send that information because I hope we’ll have many more evenings like the one we’ve just had. So thank you very much for coming. Good night. [Applause]
* * *

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Richard White is widely regarded as one of the nation’s leading scholars in three related fields: the American West, Native American history and environmental history. He came to Stanford in 1998 and is the author of five books, including *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, which was named a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize. Among other honors, he is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

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Jon Christensen is currently working with Richard White on a Ph.D. in American History and the History of Science, Medicine and Technology. He is examining the history of conservation, the science of conservation biology, and measuring conservation. He has an extensive background in science writing and environmental journalism and, since 1996, has been a free-lance contributor to the *New York Times* and numerous other newspapers, journals and radio and television shows. He was a Knight Professional Journalism Fellow at Stanford in 2003.

Comments?

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu or via the feedback form on our website: auroraforum.org.

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