

The Hetch Hetchy Letters

If a Group of Intellectuals Argues in a Forest,
and then that Forest is Submerged Under Water,
Does Their Argument Matter?

by Jason L. Hanson

IN THE SUMMER OF 1904, A YOUNG PROFESSOR OF RELIGION from Berkeley named William Badé descended the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park with a small band of friends. For four days the adventurers followed the Tuolumne (pronounced “too-WAL-uh-me”) River as it plunged headlong out from its high Sierra source down through the tall gray granite walls of the valley, catapulting over waterfalls and around earthquake taluses, meandering through groves of pine and black oak and across meadows strewn with wildflowers, until it flowed calmly out of the valley’s narrow gate toward its junction with the San Joaquin River and, ultimately, into San Francisco Bay. As the group and the river emerged at the trail’s end, Badé later recalled in a magazine article, the scene stirred his spiritual sensibilities:

The evening light was weaving strange tapestries over the western mountain walls as we past thru the portals of the Hetch-Hetchy, next to Yosemite the greatest natural cathedral on the Pacific Coast. From richly carved choir galleries came the joyous music of many waters, and the deep organ tones of full-throated waterfalls pealed forth.¹

¹ William Frederic Badé, “Hetch-Hetchy Valley and the Tuolumne Canyon,” *The Independent* 64 (14 May 1908): 1084. To say that the river plunged does not seem an exaggeration – the terrain through the canyon drops roughly 5200 vertical feet in about twenty-five miles, and according to Badé, in addition to numerous cascades and waterfalls, at parts in the upper section the smooth-polished granite streambed inclined to a fifty-five degree angle.



The Hetch Hetchy Valley as it appeared before it was submerged. The peak of Kolana Rock rises on the right, and Tucculala Falls and Wapama Falls cascade down the opposite wall. Through the center of the valley flows the Tuolumne River. (Undated.)

A decade after Badé's journey, this Tuolumne chorus was drowned out by the rumble of steam shovels, the see-saw hum of saw blades, and the racket of men at work that heralded the beginning of construction on the O'Shaughnessy Dam. Upon its completion in 1923, the dam transformed the valley into a municipal reservoir for the growing city of San Francisco, more than 140 miles below.

The damming of the Hetch Hetchy was a long-sought triumph for the city, which had been trying to secure it as a water source since the turn of the century. But it was not dammed without a fight. Badé's lyrical reflections were part of an outpouring of articles, editorials, pamphlets, and letters that urged the preservation of the magnificent valley. Led by the great California naturalist John Muir and orchestrated by the Sierra Club and likeminded groups, these preservationists mounted a campaign that turned the fate of Hetch Hetchy into a national issue and divided erstwhile allies within the fledgling conservation movement. Much to the consternation of those who favored the dam, Hetch Hetchy became a showdown over the value of nature that continues to resonate in environmental debates today.

When Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act at the end of 1913, giving San Francisco the final go-ahead to begin building in Hetch Hetchy, Muir sought a silver lining in “this dark damn-dam-damnation” with the thought that “the conscience of the whole country has been aroused from sleep” by the controversy.² He was referring to the surge of public sentiment that had become a notable presence on the nation’s editorial pages and in the mailboxes of policymakers over the course of the debate. It was a level of popular interest unprecedented in previous environmental disputes, and historians often point to the Hetch Hetchy controversy as a turning point in the history of the American environmental movement. Those who have written on the topic have characterized the debate in a variety of ways, focusing variously on the protection of wilderness, the reliance on engineers and other experts, the desire for public power, the deployment of rhetoric, the definition of the public interest, and other aspects to explain its outcome and its significance.³

² Muir penned the phrases in separate letters written shortly after Wilson signed the Hetch Hetchy grant, cursing the “damn-dam-damnation” to his daughter Helen and seeking the solace of an awakened national consciousness in correspondence with his friend Robert Underwood Johnson. John Muir to Helen Muir, 12 Jan. 1914, John Muir Papers, reel 22, quoted in Robert W. Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America’s Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of the Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 133; Muir to Robert Underwood Johnson, 1 Jan. 1914, Johnson Papers, University of California–Berkeley, Box 7, quoted in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967; 3rd ed. 1982), 180.

³ A standard introduction to the Hetch Hetchy controversy and its relationship to environmental history more broadly can be found in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, chapter 10. Holway Jones focuses on the activities of the Sierra Club before and during the controversy in *John Muir and the Sierra Club: The Battle for Yosemite* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1965). Two recent books testify to Hetch Hetchy’s ongoing importance as a touchstone of the modern environmental movement. John Warfield Simpson, *Dam! Water, Power, Politics, and Preservation in Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite National Park* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005) analyzes the issue from an overtly preservationist viewpoint. The more balanced of the two is Robert Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, which reinforces the thesis that Hetch Hetchy was a turning point in the history of the environmental movement. Righter’s book directly engages several seminal environmental history texts, especially Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (New York: Athenum, 1975). Some particularly insightful article-length studies focus on different aspects of the controversy. Christine Oravec analyzes how two different conceptions of the public were deployed during the debate in “Conservationism vs. Preservationism: The ‘Public Interest’ in the Hetch Hetchy Controversy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 444-58. Michael B. Smith also examines the rhetoric employed to define what was at stake in the controversy in “The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot,” *Historian* 60, no. 4 (1998): 757-78. Kendrick A. Clements explores the ways in which to the Progressive Era emphasis on experts shaped the debate in “Engineers and Conservationists,” *California History* 58 (1979-80), 282-302. Clements chronicle’s the political history of the controversy in “Politics and the Park: San Francisco’s Fight for Hetch Hetchy, 1908-1913,” *Pacific Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (1979): 185-215. Another useful and concise overview is Elmo R. Richardson, “The Struggle for the Valley: California’s Hetch Hetchy Controversy, 1905-1913,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1959): 249-54. Richard Lowitt also examines the politics of the issue, but underscores the role of public power in the debate in “The Hetch Hetchy Controversy, Phase II: The 1913 Senate Debate,” *California History* 74, no. 2 (1995): 190-203. Roderick Nash also emphasizes the public power factor (with more detail than can be found in his book) by focusing on California Congressman William Kent, an ardent

While these characterizations are each useful and valid to a degree, I will argue that the Hetch Hetchy controversy is best understood as a clash of values, or, more accurately, a clash of two different notions of value. On one side were those who believed that the valley's greatest value lay in the development of its natural resources. To these Progressive Era conservationists, who espoused the utilitarian maxim of "the greatest good for the greatest number," the same features that made the valley so Edenic – its high glacially-carved granite walls, the single narrow opening into the valley, its pure snow-fed stream, and its remote location – also made it an ideal dam site, and they saw no reason not to utilize such a wonderful resource to benefit the residents of a major city.⁴ Opposing them, the preservationists believed that the greatest value of some natural places such as Hetch Hetchy was already manifest in the opportunity it afforded the nation's citizens for recreation, spiritual renewal, and tourist trade.

In examining the contested notions of environmental value at the heart of the Hetch Hetchy controversy, I also hope to address a conceptual problem in environmental history. Historians tend to trace the development of environmental thought through a progression of prominent and eloquent spokespersons, an approach which emphasizes canonical texts and entails a top-down orientation that may actually obscure popular sentiment as often as it reveals it.⁵ The controversy over Hetch Hetchy in particular is an episode cited for its revelation of the American public's shifting views toward the environment, yet no historian to my knowledge has

nature lover and friend of Muir's who nonetheless supported the dam proposal, in "John Muir, William Kent, and the Conservation Schism," *Pacific Historical Review* 36, no. 4 (1967): 423-33. With so many good histories of the events and key figures that precipitated the controversy, there is no need to repeat more than a basic outline of its early stages for this paper.

⁴ In a letter written on February 1, 1905, Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot famously outlined the philosophy of the young U.S. Forest Service and set the standard for Progressive Era conservation when he declared that "where conflicting interests must be reconciled the question will always be decided from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run." From *The Principal Laws Relating to the Establishment and Administration of the National Forests and Other Forest Service Activities*, quoted in Charles F. Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992), 128.

⁵ For notable examples of this style of environmental history, see Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985; second edition 1994) or Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Both profile luminaries like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold by way of tracing the development of environmental thought.

specifically examined the sources that might best document this change: the letters and other communications written by ordinary citizens⁶ to their representatives in Congress or to the editors of their local newspapers and favorite magazines. Examining their portrayals of what was at stake in the conflict provides a clearer picture of how the discourse among leading opinion shapers on this issue was inflected into popular thought. Ultimately, such a bottom-up approach holds the promise to provide a clearer picture of exactly whose conscience was aroused from sleep, and why.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1901, James D. Phelan, mayor of the fast-growing city of San Francisco, filed an application to build a municipal reservoir in the Hetch Hetchy Valley.⁷ The fact that it was within a national park at the time, a relatively new and somewhat ambiguous designation, seemed only to sweeten the deal by limiting the number of competing claims and providing protection against future pollution.⁸ However, in 1903 the city's application was denied by

⁶ I recognize that "ordinary citizens" is a troublesome term that raises problematic undertones of elitism and assumed norms, but by using it here I mean simply the people who were not among the small cadre of leading voices coordinating the campaigns for and against damming the Hetch Hetchy. In fact, many of the people who took the time to write were extraordinary individuals, including a rough and ready Army chaplain, several bank executives, a number of professors and school principals, a distinguished poet, the past grand president of the Native Sons of California, and other leaders from communities across the nation.

⁷ Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 47, 53. Phelan also filed a claim to small Lake Eleanor nearby, although Hetch Hetchy was clearly the centerpiece of the city's plan and the subsequent dispute. He filed the claims in his own name on behalf of the city, later explaining that there was no provision in law at the time for a municipality to file such claims. There is no reason to believe that he acted in anything but good faith, and before he left the governor's mansion in 1903 he signed over his "right, title, and interest" in both the Hetch Hetchy and Lake Eleanor to San Francisco.

⁸ Clements, "Politics and the Park," 187. Situated on a dry peninsula surrounded by salt water, San Francisco had reached beyond its borders for fresh water since the days of the Gold Rush. By the turn of the century it was purchasing all of its water from the private Spring Valley Water Company, which owned almost all of the available watershed and water sources in the immediate area. The city had unsuccessfully attempted to free itself from the monopoly as early as the 1870s, but in 1900 Phelan gave the divorce the impetus of law when he helped push through the state legislature a new progressive city charter that, among other things, required the city to own its utilities. Chronically unable to negotiate a purchase of the Spring Valley and certain that the city's growth would soon outstrip the company's capacity anyway, Phelan commissioned a survey of potential water sources. After considering a number of possibilities, from distant Lake Tahoe on the Nevada border to the closer (but already heavily appropriated) Sacramento River, they settled on the Hetch Hetchy for its ideal combination of a pure and constant water supply, excellent dam and reservoir site, and potential for hydropower generation.

Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock, citing the 1890 Yosemite National Park Act that required him to protect the integrity of the entire park in a natural state.⁹

With Hitchcock's decision, San Francisco lost the first round in the Hetch Hetchy fight, but it resiliently continued to promote its interest in Washington, certain that the setback for such a worthy proposal was only temporary. After the tremendous earthquake of April 1906 and the devastating fires that followed, the city cried of a critical water shortage and found a sympathetic audience among policymakers. Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt's influential chief forester and Muir's ally in many early conservation crusades, urged the city to resubmit its application.¹⁰

As the city maneuvered during these initial stages, John Muir and the preservationists paid little attention.¹¹ Secure in Hitchcock's decision, the preservationists did not perceive a serious threat to the Hetch Hetchy Valley until the new Secretary of the Interior, James A. Garfield, showed an interest in revisiting the issue. Garfield met with officials in San Francisco in July 1907 and subsequently reversed his predecessor's decision in May 1908, authorizing the

⁹ Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 53-4; and Clements, "Politics and the Park," 188, n8. Shortly before Phelan's filing, Congress passed the Right of Way Act in February 1901, authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to grant water development rights for beneficial purposes. It was on the basis of this legislation that San Francisco laid its application before Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock. Clements notes that "the origins of the Right of Way Act remain a tantalizing mystery." The bill's author, Representative Marion DeVries of Stockton, who had a record of promoting the exploitation of park resources, coupled with the fact that it applied only to California parks and passed only months before Phelan sited his claims, have led some to suggest collusion between the two. However, Clements concludes that without concrete evidence to support the speculation it is more likely that "DeVries may well have been more interested in irrigation water for his Central Valley constituents than in San Francisco's desires." In December 1903, in denying San Francisco's petition, Hitchcock ignored the Right of Way Act in favor of the preceding Yosemite National Park Act of 1890. In a ruling that would be regularly reprinted in preservationist literature throughout the life of the conflict, Hitchcock proclaimed that Lake Eleanor and Hetch Hetchy were integral parts of "the aggregation of such natural scenic features that makes the Yosemite Park a wonderland which the Congress of the United States sought by law to preserve for all coming time as... a worthy object of national pride and a source of healthful pleasure and rest for the thousands of people who may annually sojourn there during the heated months." (Among the many preservationist publications in which Hitchcock's ruling appeared was the pamphlet *Let Everyone Help to Save the Famous Hetch-Hetchy*, (Nov. 1909?): 17, available through the Library of Congress, American Memory Project, <http://memory.loc.gov>.)

¹⁰ Pinchot to Manson, May 28, 1906, in *Reports on the Water Supply of San Francisco, 1900-1908*, Board of Supervisors, 1908, qtd. in Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 60. In a letter to city engineer Marsdon Manson in May 1906, Pinchot wrote that he was glad to hear that the catastrophe "had damaged neither your activity nor courage" and that he hoped that the city would "be able to make provision for a water supply from the Yosemite National Park, which will be equal to any in the world. I will stand ready to render any assistance which lies in my power."

¹¹ Throughout these early stages, Muir and the Sierra Club were preoccupied with their efforts to return the Yosemite Valley to federal control and did little to counter the city's campaign for Hetch Hetchy. The valley itself had been transferred to the state in 1864, and although the national park was created around it in 1890, it remained separate until the Sierra Club campaign succeeded in 1906. The best account of the Yosemite Valley recession campaign can be found in chapter 3 of Holway Jones's *John Muir and the Sierra Club*.

city to begin taking steps toward the construction of a dam at Hetch Hetchy.¹² The Garfield permit galvanized the preservationists into action, and the battle was fully engaged as hearings on the matter opened before the House Committee on the Public Lands in December 1908.¹³

As the battle lines were drawn, the different methods employed by each side in presenting their case spoke to some of their basic assumptions about the nature of the issue. San Francisco assumed from the outset that there would not be significant opposition to using the Hetch Hetchy Valley, even if it was in a national park, for the high and noble purpose of providing water to one of the nation's great and growing metropolises, so their efforts in Washington, DC, were conducted discreetly. Prominent sponsors of the dam proposal, particularly (by then former) Mayor James Phelan and city engineer Marsdon Manson (and later his successor, Michael O'Shaughnessy), quietly lobbied key figures in the government, trusting that the appeal of municipal water and power would easily win supporters amid the prevailing progressive political climate.¹⁴

After the Garfield permit revealed the good reception San Francisco was getting in Washington, Muir and company quickly organized a countercampaign to preserve the valley. Undaunted by the fact that relatively few people had actually seen the remote Hetch Hetchy, Muir and the preservationists orchestrated a national strategy that relied on identifying the superior value of the valley in its natural state and rousing public opinion against the dam

¹² Clements, "Politics and the Park," 189-90. Hitchcock retired and was replaced by Garfield in March 1907. The permit issued by the new secretary also authorized a dam at Lake Eleanor, which San Francisco proposed to build before Hetch Hetchy, but not without a guarantee that the larger project could be developed in conjunction. Clements speculates on the timing of Garfield's decision, linking it to the White House Conference on the Conservation of Natural Resources that opened only two days afterward. The conference had been organized by Roosevelt's chief forester, Gifford Pinchot, to counter criticisms of the administration's conservation policy by highlighting the conservationist commitment to the development of natural resources for public use.

¹³ Robert Righter (*Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 78) argues that San Francisco made "a serious tactical error" when it allowed the debate to move to Congress. The city's lawyers had determined that the Secretary of the Interior had the power to make the Hetch Hetchy grant, but the city, not wanting to invest itself until its rights were fully secure, sought congressional confirmation with the Kahn Resolution (HJR 184).

¹⁴ Kendrick Clements provides the best discussions of the city's lobbying efforts in "Politics and the Park" and especially "Engineers and Conservationists."

proposal. In speeches, pamphlets, and articles, the leaders of the preservationist movement took their argument directly to the public. When the matter came up for discussion by Congress in December 1908 and January 1909, the scale and vociferousness of the protest caught the attention of legislators and took San Francisco by surprise.¹⁵ The city had to ask the committee for a delay while they reinforced their case with a battery of engineers and other experts called in from home to answer the preservationist charges. The House committee did eventually report the bill out favorably, but with momentum building for the preservationists, Manson asked that the bill be withdrawn to avoid an outright defeat from which recovery would have been difficult.¹⁶

THE PRESERVATIONIST TACTIC of arousing nationwide public interest had dashed San Francisco's hopes for a second time, but the determined city was far from defeated. Over the next five years, as consecutive secretaries deliberated inconclusively before returning the matter to Congress, San Francisco sponsored favorable engineering reports and continued to press its case in Washington.¹⁷ This time, however, Muir and company were fully awakened to the threat to Hetch Hetchy and did not rest upon their success. Despite internal dissent among Sierra Club members, the preservationists maintained a consistent countercampaign throughout this

¹⁵ See HCPL, Hearing, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 60th Cong., 2nd Sess. (9 and 12 Jan. 1909), 116-243 for an idea of the extent of the communications received by the committee. Although this is the largest block, more letters and telegrams are inserted throughout the published hearing.

¹⁶ Clements, "Engineers and Conservationists," 291; and Nash, *Wilderness*, 168-9.

¹⁷ Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 96-116. In the wake of San Francisco's legislative setback, on February 10, 1910, the new Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger ordered the city to "show cause" why Hetch Hetchy should not be excised from the Garfield permit. To satisfy the show cause order, San Francisco hired the one of the most renowned hydraulic engineers of the day, John Freeman, as a consultant to advance the Hetch Hetchy project. In 1912 he produced a lavishly illustrated 400-page report that attempted to show exactly why Hetch Hetchy should be granted to San Francisco and outlined an elaborate water system designed to supply the city's needs into the next century. The massive red leather-bound report was printed on thick glossy paper and opened with fifty-two pages of illustrations showing the beautiful scenes promised by a mountain lake at Hetch Hetchy. The Freeman Report, together with a subsequently issued Army Corps of Engineers opinion stating that California's growing population would eventually make "the use of Hetch Hetchy as a reservoir practically irresistible," amounted to an overwhelming blow to the preservationist campaign. However, before his order could be enforced, Ballinger, exhausted from political struggles with Pinchot, resigned and was replaced by Walter Fisher. Presented with the reports, Fisher deliberated until three days before he left office in 1913 (when Wilson assumed the presidency) before notifying San Francisco that the Secretary of the Interior did not have the statutory authority to grant the Hetch Hetchy permit. Only Congress could do so. The issue was sent back to Capitol Hill, setting the stage for the final showdown that would determine the fate of Hetch Hetchy.

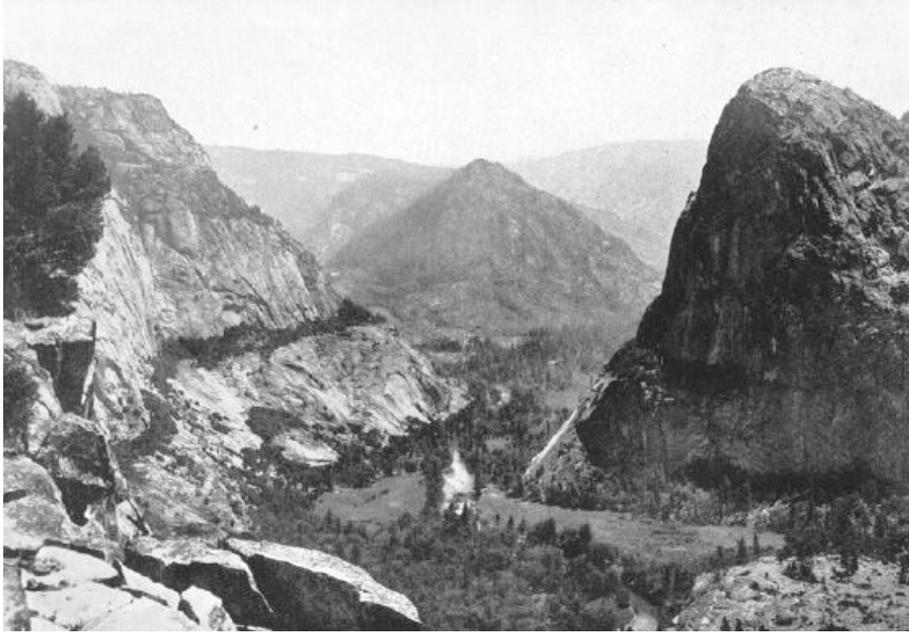
congressional interlude.¹⁸ Beginning in 1908 in response to the Garfield permit, and continuing through the final Senate debate in December 1913, they made their case by promoting preservation's many values generally and those gained by preserving Hetch Hetchy specifically.

The major tenets of the preservationist argument were all identified by 1909 and their platform was never significantly modified.¹⁹ They argued that Hetch Hetchy was a natural pleasure ground that should be open to recreational use for the people of the entire nation. Granting it to San Francisco would set a dangerous precedent of overriding the nation's interest in its parks for the benefit of the few. When proponents of the dam questioned the valley's recreational value – calling it (correctly) inaccessible during the long Sierra winter, and (more subjectively) prohibitively swampy and mosquito-infested during those summer months when the sun glaring off the granite walls did not make it inhospitably hot – preservationists offered some startling concessions to facilitate recreation, proposing not only a year-round road into the valley and a maintained trail through it, but the construction of a drainage system and the “liberal use of petroleum” to control the mosquitoes.²⁰

¹⁸ Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 82-5, 96-7, quote on 84. The Ballinger show cause order should have been a moment of triumph for the Sierra Club, but it too was feeling the fallout from its surprising victory. Several prominent figures in the club, including charter member and Stanford president David Starr Jordan, charter member Warren Olney, former California governor George Pardee, and (of course) city engineer Marsdon Manson, favored the dam and were unhappy with the club's efforts to defeat it. By December 1909, their opposition was substantial enough that club secretary William Colby felt compelled to poll the membership on the question. Of 750 club members who replied to the survey, 161 favored the dam. Though a minority, they continued to push the club and prevent it from effectively campaigning against San Francisco's plan. A week after Ballinger's order was issued, the Sierra Club leadership had to beat back an attempted censure from this faction of “Hetchy dammers” (as Muir referred to them). The censure meeting was held on February 18, 1910, in San Francisco. Muir and Colby had taken precautions against a successful putsch, Colby by securing proxy votes should they be necessary, and Muir by taking nearly 80 members out to dinner before the meeting to rally their spirits and confirm their loyalty. The meeting was so riotous that the chairperson was forced to call it prematurely to a close. Afterward, approximately 50 members, presumably among those in favor of the dam, resigned, and those that remained were a consistent thorn in the club's side throughout the rest of the controversy, often identifying themselves as members while making pro-dam statements to the press.

¹⁹ The consistency of the preservationist argument can be seen in publications such as the 1909 pamphlet *Let Everyone Help to Save the Famous Hetch-Hetchy Valley and Stop the Commercialism Which Threatens Our National Parks*, which reliably stressed several key themes. Many key arguments were reprinted verbatim from one pamphlet to the next. For example, *Let Everyone Help* is an updated version of *Let All the People Speak and Prevent the Destruction of the Yosemite Park*, which was issued by the Sierra Club earlier in 1909, and much of it reappeared in two later editions also entitled *Let Everyone Help to Save*, published by a spin-off of the Sierra Club known as the Society for the Preservation of National Parks.

²⁰ Badé, “Hetch-Hetchy Valley,” 1084; and *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 13. Incidentally, the valley's name supports the pastoral slant given by the preservationists. Robert Righter records two stories about the origins of the unusual but memorable name, which was probably bestowed by either the Ahwahneechee or Tuolumne Indians, both bands of Central Miwoks that lived in the



The valley as it appeared in 1911, with Kolana Rock on the right.

The valuable opportunity for recreation in nature was also closely linked to the intrinsic value of a healthy body and spirit, an antidote for the ills of modern society. Muir contended that “everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul.”²¹ On the other hand, for those who were unmoved by appeals to dubious healthful and spiritual values, the preservationists also stressed that recreational tourism represented quantifiable commercial value that could soothe the bottom line along with the body and soul. They pointed to the popular destinations of the European Alps to

area. In one account, Hetch Hetchy is an Anglo derivation of *hatch-atchie*, a special of grass with edible seeds that the tribes once harvested in the valley. A competing story traces the name’s origins to two yellow pines that once grew at the entrance to the meadow. According to this explanation, proffered by an Ahwahneechee chief named Tenya, *hetchy* means tree, and thus Hetch Hetchy refers to the “Valley of Two Trees” (Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 16).

²¹ *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 17. The deep needs that such beautiful natural places ministered to made it “impossible to overestimate the value of wild mountains and mountain temples,” and Muir often compared Hetch Hetchy to other, more traditional worship spaces. In one of his most famous statements, he exclaimed, “Dam Hetch-Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.” Yet Muir was not one to simply genuflect in nature – many of his articles extolled the strenuous life’s spiritual value as an antidote to the over-refinement of society (and the fear it bred). Muir’s close friend and staunch preservationist ally Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of the widely-read *Century Magazine*, augmented that tack by proclaiming that the appreciation of nature’s value beyond the “pseudo-‘practical’” stage gave evidence of American enlightenment and progress. (See, for example, John Muir, “Three Adventures in Yosemite,” *The Century Magazine* 83, no. 5 (Mar. 1912): 658; [Robert Underwood Johnson] (unsigned editorial), “A High Price to Pay for Water,” *The Century Magazine* 76, no. 4 (Aug. 1908): 633.)

suggest that, if developed properly, the tourist trade in Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite might easily outstrip any savings expected to come from damming the wonderful valley.²²

To make this argument, the preservationists had to mitigate the fact that very few people had seen Hetch Hetchy, and had to make the multitudes want to see it. They made endless comparisons between Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite, asserting that the lesser-known valley was indeed a national treasure that matched up favorably and in some ways exceeded its more famous counterpart. Far from being the remote, sun-scorched mosquito breeding ground portrayed by conservationists who favored the dam, the preservationists' Hetch Hetchy was a glorious landscape full of flowers, trees, and waterfalls already enjoyed by hundreds of hardy souls every year (including women, which suggested that it was not *that* remote or rugged).²³ When the conservationists proposed that a reservoir would enhance the area's beauty and recreational appeal, Muir scoffed that humans could not improve on – could barely appreciate – the care in nature's landscaping, and that only the very arrogant might presume to try.²⁴

To make their argument viable, the preservationists also had to convince the public that there were alternatives to damming the Hetch Hetchy. Citing “eminent engineers” and selectively quoting the many studies that had been made of San Francisco's water situation, the preservationists maintained that claims of a water crisis were overblown and that the city had more than a dozen practicable options for water besides the Hetch Hetchy. The valley was not the only source of water for San Francisco, nor was it even necessarily the best – it was merely the cheapest. The city claimed that developing an alternative source instead of Hetch Hetchy would cost at least \$20 million more. At this the preservationists howled with righteous

²² *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 12; and elsewhere.

²³ The Chicago poet Harriet Monroe wrote several narratives of her trips to Hetch Hetchy, including “Camping Above the Yosemite,” *Putnam's Magazine*, May 1909, 221-6; reprinted in the June 1909 issue of the *Sierra Club Bulletin*.

²⁴ Muir “Three Adventures in Yosemite,” 661. Apparently Muir differentiated between picturesque reservoirs and other “improvements” such as roads, trails, and drainage systems.

indignation that the city wanted to sacrifice a national treasure just to save a few dollars. Much of the value derived from beautiful natural places may be hard to quantify or even incalculable, they admitted, but certainly a place such as Hetch Hetchy was worth more than that.²⁵

Insofar as this was a question of economic value, contended the preservationists, it was one of water power. From the beginning they maintained that the real reason San Francisco was so intent on damming Hetch Hetchy was the opportunity it presented for hydropower.

Preservationist publications repeatedly cited the Army Corps of Engineers estimate that the power supplied by the project would be worth \$45 million to San Francisco, a “fat plum it asks of the nation as a free gift, to be attained only through the nation’s loss of a valley whose scenic assets are worth immensely more if preserved for future generations.”²⁶

Several policymakers who favored the dam readily agreed that the potential for public power was paramount. Senator George Norris of Nebraska, later the driving force behind the New Deal’s Tennessee Valley Authority legislation, proclaimed during the final Senate debate that harnessing the Tuolumne River would mean “cheaper power, cheaper light, cheaper heat, cheaper transportation, and an abundance of cheap water,” a package of public benefits that amounted to “the very highest possible act of conservation.”²⁷ During the House debate,

²⁵ *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 3-6; and Robert Underwood Johnson, “The Hetch Hetchy Scheme: Why It Should Not Be Rushed Through the Extra Session – An Open Letter to the American People,” (1 Aug. 1913): 4, available at the Library of Congress, “An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/pehome.html>. Muir’s friend and staunch preservationist ally Johnson satirically took aim at the San Francisco penny pinchers in his 1913 “Open Letter to the American People”:

Put up at auction, what would this wonderland bring? “What am I bid,” the auctioneer might say, “for one superb valley, twenty miles of unique cascades, half-a-dozen snow peaks, beautiful upland meadows, noble forests, etc., now owned by a gentleman named Uncle Sam, suspected of not being able to administer his own property? Do I hear \$20,000,000 to start the bidding? Remember that these natural features are priceless.”

²⁶ *More Light on the Destructive Hetch Hetchy Scheme* (San Francisco: Society for the Preservation of National Parks–California Branch, 1913?).

²⁷ See Nash, “John Muir, William Kent, and the Conservation Schism,” and Lowitt, “The Hetch Hetchy Controversy, Phase II,” for examples of how policymakers made no pretense about prioritizing public power above all other concerns involved in the Hetch Hetchy debate. Many congressmen are on record unabashedly espousing the public power position. For one memorable such example, see *CR*, 63rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 51 (6 Dec. 1913), 347. Despite complaining of a headache that left him barely able to stand, Norris held the floor longer than any other senator on the final day of debate. (For secondary commentary on Norris’s speech, see pages 339-52, and Lowitt, “The Hetch Hetchy Controversy, Phase II,” 200, 220 n17.)

California Representative William Kent, a friend of Muir who in 1908 had donated a tract of virgin redwood forest to the nation and named it Muir Woods, declared that his love of nature was “a matter of record,” but that in this case he felt that the opportunity to secure publicly owned water and power was too important to pass up.²⁸ The benefits of municipal water and power were so obvious to Norris, Kent, and other progressives that the preservationists’ opposition seemed suspicious if not downright sinister. A number of the city’s supporters were convinced that the preservationists were acting as fronts (or, in a somewhat more generous characterization, sincere and well-meaning dupes) for private power and water companies who wanted San Francisco’s business for themselves.²⁹

If the preservationists were aware that their arguments were tainted by suspicion, they made no attempt to answer the charge other than the routine disclaimer (which was perhaps all they could do) that they had no financial interest in the outcome. Rather than engage in a game of shadows, they focused on getting their message out and rallying support for the preservation of the valley. A crucial component of the preservation strategy was not only to publicize the issue but to demonstrate public opinion against the dam. In the era before public opinion polling, this meant using the press as a gauge.³⁰

²⁸ Nash, “John Muir, William Kent, and the Conservation Schism,” 430; and HR 7207, Section 6, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., passed by the U.S. House of Representatives 3 Sept. 1913, quoted in Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 169. Kent emphasized the importance of the municipal control by insisting on a provision inserted into the Raker Bill prohibiting San Francisco “from ever selling or letting” water or electricity “to any corporation or individual, except a municipality or municipal water district” under penalty of forfeiting the grant. In some sense, the foresight of Kent and the municipal power caucus was confirmed over the ensuing decades, as the power provided by the Moccasin and later Kirkwood Powerhouses downstream have proven to be one of the plan’s most important (and profitable) components.

²⁹ *CR* (5 Dec. 1913), 275; and *CR* (6 Dec. 1913), 346. Senator Marcus A. Smith of Arizona was persuaded that the Spring Valley Water Company and other “selfish interests have put up the money necessary for this wide advertisement of opposition,” and other key voices in the 1913 congressional debates cited this concern in voting for the grant. Although no one ever openly impugned Muir or his compatriots’ motives or declared them anything less than honorable, many agreed with Norris when he suggested that “Power corporations and other kinds of monopolistic corporations never come out in the open when they fight a proposition. They go around behind and, perhaps, get some nature lovers who are particularly honest to fight their battles.”

³⁰ *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 17. Several preservationist publications extensively cataloged editorial comments opposing the dam as evidence of the swelling support they claimed. In the pamphlet *Let Everyone Help to Save the Famous Hetch Hetchy Valley*, two pages were devoted to a survey of “What the Press Thinks.” Selectively excerpted editorials from newspapers such as the

The vital importance of the press to their strategy meant that the preservationists could not afford to be passive in the arena of public opinion. Preservationist groups such as the National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park, an especially zealous spin-off from the Sierra Club, actively courted the press, mailing out pamphlets and circulars to 1418 newspapers across the country during 1913.³¹ Their efforts paid dividends. That year the group circulated a bulletin entitled *The Hetch Hetchy "Grab"* in which they declared "The Press Overwhelmingly Against It." To support this claim they listed 105 "newspapers and other organs of public opinion" outside of San Francisco that were on record against the dam proposal.³² The organization's second bulletin, published during the crucial months at the end of 1913 as *Comments of the United States Press on the Invasion of the Yosemite National Park*, reprinted ninety-six editorial excerpts opposing the dam from more than seventy different newspapers and magazines nationwide. Although the excerpts were not dated, they do show clearly that by the eve of the final debate in the Senate most of the preservationist platform had filtered into the mainstream media.³³

In addition to the newspapers, the preservationists' national strategy relied on demonstrating public opinion against damming Hetch Hetchy directly from the source. Muir

New York *Post* and the Portland *Oregonian* and from popular magazines including the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Harper's Weekly* echoed the key preservationist arguments.

³¹ Richardson, "The Struggle for the Valley," 254.

³² *The Hetch Hetchy "Grab": Who Oppose It and Why*, Bulletin no. 1 (New York: National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park, 1913). Appended to the newspaper list were the names of twelve organizations that were also opposed, including "two-thirds of the Sierra Club of San Francisco."

³³ *Comments of the United States Press on the Invasion of the Yosemite National Park*, Bulletin no. 2 (New York: The National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park, 1913). It is difficult to pinpoint a publication date for the bulletin (and possible that it was updated and republished), but the excerpts refer both to the upcoming Senate debate as well as the President Wilson's consideration of the Raker Act, suggesting that it was published either shortly before or immediately after the final debate in the Senate.

urged people to write in hopes of generating “a country wide storm thick as snowflakes.”³⁴ That these personal letters and telegrams got the attention of legislators much more effectively than magazine articles or newspaper editorials is evidenced by the constant reference made to them throughout the debates in 1908-9 and 1913. The 1909 report of the House Committee on the Public Lands noted that “there has been exceedingly widespread, earnest, and vigorous protest voiced by scientists, naturalists, mountain climbers, travelers, and others in person, by letters, and telegrams, and in newspaper and magazine articles.”³⁵ Numerous members remarked on the volume of correspondence they had received on the matter, the vast majority of it urging them to deny San Francisco’s application, or at the very least to avoid making rash errors and delay any decision by creating a committee to study the matter properly.

The wave of letters crested ahead of the 1913 Senate debate as a massive publicity campaign by the preservationists paid impressive dividends. When debate opened in the Senate in November, several senators remarked on the volume of correspondence this small and remote patch of land had provoked. Some Western senators noted that they had tallied 3000, 4000, and in one case more than 5000 letters from all over the country against the dam proposal.³⁶ Meanwhile, only a relative few telegrams in favor of the dam were entered into the record, most from prominent Western businessmen or the representatives of irrigation districts.³⁷

³⁴ Muir to Johnson, Oct. 16, 1913, Johnson Papers, qtd. in Clements, “Engineers and Conservationists,” 299; and Johnson to Bernhard E. Fernow, Oct. 17, 1913, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 1, qtd. in Nash, *Wilderness*, 176. Johnson, less egalitarian, confided to a friend their plan “to flood the Senate with letters from influential people.”

³⁵ HCPL, *Granting the Use of Hetch Hetchy to City of San Francisco*, 60th Cong., 2d Sess., House Rpt. 2-85 (8 Feb. 1909), pp. 11-12.

³⁶ *CR* (25 Nov. 1913), 6012; and *CR* (5 Dec. 1913), 234. The preservationist publicity campaign was spearheaded by Robert Underwood Johnson’s “Open Letter to the American People” and sustained by volunteers who printed and distributed more than 20,000 pamphlets, booklets, leaflets, and circulars. Their efforts were validated when Senator Reed Smoot of Utah reckoned that he had received more than 5000 letters from all over the country against the dam proposal. Senator Henry Ashurst of Arizona, a strong proponent of the dam, later expressed his amazement that his office had tallied between 3500 and 4000 opposition letters. And a number of other senators announced that they too had received countless letters about Hetch Hetchy.

³⁷ See, for example, *CR* (5 Dec. 1913), 234-5, 250-1. Although earlier debates and hearings refer to letters received both for and against the Hetch Hetchy grant, it was not until 1913 that San Francisco’s supporters such as Senator Ashurst or Senator Smith felt compelled to introduce letters into the record.

The scarcity of correspondence in support of San Francisco, however, was less a barometer of opinion than a result of the city's strategy – their lobbying efforts had focused on building personal understandings with influential individuals in the debate, so they never initiated a large-scale effort to get the public involved. San Francisco did not ask the public for letters of support because they did not imagine they would need them. Their strategy was itself a reflection of their progressive ideology. City advocates made their pitch on behalf of the public interest, which they defined in majoritarian terms: the thirsty individuals of San Francisco far outnumbered the annual tally of visitors to Hetch Hetchy, and therefore the resident need represented the greatest good to which the water could be directed. Preservationists, on the other hand, defined the public in national terms and urged Americans to affirm the national interest in protecting places such as Hetch Hetchy from local schemes. While the city advocates and their allies worked *for* the people in the best progressive fashion of the day, preservationists clung to an older nationalism that styled their position as *of* the people.³⁸

The fact that San Francisco's Senatorial backers did eventually introduce supportive communiqués into the record (even if they were solicited from influential figures such as businessmen and water managers rather than from the people at large) suggests that the preservationist strategy had been effective enough to require direct counteraction. Yet the impact of the preservationist letter storm may have actually been diluted by its mass nature. During the hearings before the House Committee on the Public Lands in June 1913, committee chair Scott Ferris of Oklahoma noted that many of the telegrams from preservationists requesting a delay in

³⁸ See Christine Oravec, "Conservationism vs. Preservationism," for an insightful discussion of the different conceptions of the public interest that helped shape the controversy.

hearing the matter read alike. He lamented that “a telegram to a Congressman is getting to be a most unreliable means of the expression of public opinion.”³⁹

Inevitably, as preservationists employed strategies designed to generate a large quantity of letters to reinforce the veracity of their claims, many of the letters bore strong similarities or read as copies. The preservationists even circulated a sample letter to help facilitate writing, reprinting it verbatim in a number of publications from 1908 to 1913 with a consistency that illustrates the steadiness of the preservationists’ strategy.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the majority of the letters, especially early in the campaign, were unique. Rather than parrot the suggested language, the writers more often focused on certain key arguments identified in the preservationist platform and exhorted – frequently with great force and eloquence and a personal touch – the policymakers to uphold them.⁴¹

All of the major preservationist themes identified by the movement’s leadership – the primacy of national interest over local; the value of recreation for spirit, health, and economic opportunity; the dangerous precedent of violating a national park; and even the inherent value of preserving beauty – were represented in the letters. However, two of these natural values

³⁹ HCPL, Hearing, *Hetch Hetchy Dam Site*, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess. (25 June 1913), 128.

⁴⁰ The suggested letter read:

Sir:—Our national parks are already too few in number. We are vitally interested in preserving intact those now existing. We earnestly protest against the destruction of any of the wonderful scenery of the Yosemite National Park and urge you to oppose any bill which will permit San Francisco to use Hetch Hetchy as a municipal water tank. Strengthen our park laws instead of allowing them to be overridden. Very truly, ...

It was reprinted verbatim in several preservationist pamphlets throughout the entire period of the controversy, demonstrating the consistency of the preservationist strategy from beginning to end. See, for example, 1909’s *Let Everyone Help to Save*, 21, and *How to Help to Preserve the Hetch Hetchy Valley and the Yosemite Park* (San Francisco: Society for the Preservation of National Parks, 1913?).

⁴¹ The U.S. Forest Service kept extensive records on the Hetch Hetchy conflict, and hundreds of letters are preserved in the National Archives in a dozen boxes filed under the lackluster heading “Water Supply” (National Archives–College Park, Record Group 79: Records of the National Park Service, 1785 – 2003, Yosemite, Box 317-28). However, all of the letters reviewed for this paper can be found in the *Congressional Record* and published congressional hearings or as letters to the editor in popular periodicals of the day. Letters are much more prevalent in the congressional publications from the earlier stages of the debate, and as a result the majority of those cited herein are drawn from the first round of hearings in 1908 and 1909. Although not an ideal sample, the consistency of the preservationist platform throughout the duration of the debate is reflected in the correspondence, and the earlier letters may be seen with some confidence as fairly representative of the entire catalog.

appeared in the letters with notable regularity. The nationalist argument appears to have resonated most deeply among the letter writers. Numerous correspondents asserted that the national right to enjoy Hetch Hetchy should trump San Francisco's local interest; the three excerpted below typify the tenor of this preservationist argument, reversing the conservationist formulation of the public interest and casting San Francisco's supporters as the powerful few running roughshod over the rights of the many:

Mrs. H.P. Issacs of Portland, Oregon (succinctly): "Hetch Hetchy destruction unnecessary; country's needs more than San Francisco."⁴²

Cleaveland Forbes of San Francisco: "This park was created for all the people of the United States. I hope you can oppose this attempt to deprive the many of their rights for the advantage of a few."⁴³

E.J. Holden of Chicago: "I believe that we have too few natural parks now remaining that can be reserved for the people of the whole nation, and as such parks will be of inestimable value in the not far-distant future, it would certainly seem that they should not be sacrificed to any individual interest, or to the interest of any city or State even, as they are reserved for a national park for the benefit of the whole nation and the nation as a whole will certainly derive greater profit and pleasure from them many times over than they would furnish any one city."⁴⁴

Closely related to the nationalist line of argument, as Holden's letter suggests, was an emphasis on the Hetch Hetchy's value as a place of recreation and retreat. Writers, particularly those who had been there (and it seems that many of them, especially the Californians, had), consistently stressed the valley's great recreational opportunities – and the spiritual balm and economic potential that such tourism entailed – as a reason to preserve it. The following examples illustrate some of the various packages in which the recreation argument came:

⁴² Mrs. H.P. Isaacs to Chairman Frank Mondell, 2 Jan. 1909, HCPL, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 118.

⁴³ Cleaveland Forbes to Representative S.C. Smith, 26 Dec. 1908, HCPL, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 134.

⁴⁴ E.J. Holden to Chairman Frank Mondell, 11 Jan. 1909, HCPL, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 240.

Kasson Avery of Los Angeles: “If the Hetch Hetchy were dammed (and let me add damned) and converted into a tank, its entire floor would be rendered useless for camping purposes.”⁴⁵

Melville B. Anderson of Stanford University: “The need of the future for such places of escape from the crowd will be greater than the present need of San Francisco for more water.”⁴⁶

J.E. Gardner of Watsonville, California: “With this park intact there is no reason why hundreds of millions of dollars now spent in Europe should not be kept at home. Yosemite Park should be the mecca for thousands of pleasure-seeking, money-spending easterners who yearly set sail for foreign ports.”⁴⁷

Corollary to these points, many writers repeated the claim that numerous other suitable sources were available to San Francisco.⁴⁸ It may have been so – the contrasting reports on the issue left a pall of legitimate dispute hanging over such declarations – but the city was committed to getting its water from the Tuolumne at Hetch Hetchy, and in the end Muir’s six-year letter storm could not prevent them. Near midnight on December 6, 1913, senators cut off the debate over Hetch Hetchy with shouts of “Vote! Vote!” The Raker Bill passed with forty-three yeas, twenty-five nays, and twenty-seven absentees.⁴⁹ Any last desperate hope for the preservation of the valley was extinguished when President Wilson signed the bill on December 19, explaining that he had determined that the preservationists’ “fears and objections were not well founded” and that the bill was indeed “in the public interest.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Kasson Avery to Representative W.F. Englebright, 26 Dec. 1908, HCPL, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 143.

⁴⁶ Melville B. Anderson to Representative S.C. Smith, 26 Dec. 1908, HCPL, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 133

⁴⁷ J.E. Gardner to Senator W.E. Borah, 30 Nov. 1913, *CR* (5 Dec. 1913), 301. Portions of this letter, written by, in the author’s words, an “obscure country lawyer,” were read by Borah on the Senate floor. Although research limitations necessitated that the bulk of the letters cited for this paper were drawn from earlier sources, particularly the HPLC hearings of 1909, Gardner’s 1913 letter (which in full recites every key point in the preservationist platform) demonstrates the continuity of preservationist arguments throughout the debate.

⁴⁸ Letter writers commonly asserted that there were “at least a dozen” alternatives to damming Hetch Hetchy, although the exact source of this information – or its validity – is hard to pin down.

⁴⁹ Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 131.

⁵⁰ *CR* (19 Dec. 1913), 1189.

THE HETCH HETCHY CONTROVERSY MARKS a transition point in the history of American environmental thought. The conflict stirred up by San Francisco's proposal raised questions and forced conservation-minded people to reassess the value represented by places such as Hetch Hetchy. Progressive Era conservationists maintained that the greatest value of natural resources lay in development that would accrue concrete benefits to individual people. Gifford Pinchot, the early conservation movement's most famous spokesperson, framed the Hetch Hetchy debate within the utilitarian proposition that "the fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will serve the most people."⁵¹ For him, turning Hetch Hetchy into a reservoir was a clear application of this philosophy. Aligned against this attitude were preservationists who felt that the greatest value of some natural spots was inherent. John Muir, the leader of the preservationist faction, was adamant that undue development could only degrade such places.

These viewpoints represent real differences, but at the core of their beliefs both sides defined value anthropocentrically – for conservationists and preservationists alike, nature was for use. If the conservationists wanted to use the valley to slake the thirst and light the homes of San Franciscans, preservationists wanted to use it for recreation and the many ancillary benefits that time spent in nature provided. Muir dreamt of crowds, writing to a friend that with "a good wagon road into the Valley & a trail up the big Tuolumne canon the salvation of the glorious Hetch Hetchy will be made sure for then it will be *seen* & known by countless thousands making effective lying [by San Francisco] impossible."⁵² And virtually all of the letters written against the damming of Hetch Hetchy, no matter which line of argument they featured, founded their objections on a complaint that the reservoir would prohibit use of the valley. When the House

⁵¹ HCPL, *Hetch Hetchy Dam Site*, 25.

⁵² Muir to Theodore Lukens, 4 Nov. 1907, in John Muir Papers, reel 16, qtd. in Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 65.

Committee on the Public Lands noted in its 1909 report the “exceedingly widespread, earnest, and vigorous protest” against damming Hetch Hetchy, it went on to explain that the majority of objections were “on the ground that such use would deprive the public of the use of this beautiful valley for camping purposes, and would necessarily interfere with the use by the general public of the valley and drainage basin of the river above the reservoir.”⁵³

Wilderness was never an issue in the battle over Hetch Hetchy. Rather, the question was which use represented the greater value. Value is a slippery term, difficult to define, but in this case both sides might agree that the foundation of value is human life. That which enables or enhances human life is ascribed value accordingly. By this definition, the preservationists acknowledged that damming the Hetch Hetchy would have provided two valuable resources to the people of San Francisco: water and electric power, the first one of life’s basic necessities, and the second a requirement for the city’s further growth.

In the hierarchy of value, the preservationists were even willing to admit that such basic human needs ranked higher than the protection of nature.⁵⁴ However, although they recognized the legitimacy of developing natural resources and admitted the city’s right to do so for the benefit of its people, the preservationists qualified their acceptance with the condition that the water and power must be obtained from appropriate sources. The burden of proof was on the developer, and the preservationists contended that San Francisco’s claim on Hetch Hetchy did not pass muster on this count. They consistently dismissed the city’s cries of a water crisis as specious and characterized its preference for Hetch Hetchy as simple penny-pinching.⁵⁵

⁵³ HCPL, *Granting the Use of Hetch Hetchy to City of San Francisco*, 11-12.

⁵⁴ [Robert Underwood Johnson] (unsigned editorial), “A High Price to Pay for Water,” *The Century Magazine* 76, no. 4 (Aug. 1908): 633. Johnson felt compelled to clarify (with his usual dramatic flourish) that “we hold human life more sacred than scenery, than even great natural wonderlands... [and] if San Francisco could not otherwise obtain an abundant water supply, we should be willing to dedicate to that purpose not only Hetch-Hetchy, but even the incomparable Yosemite itself.”

⁵⁵ Preservationists maintained that San Francisco rejected other viable sources and demanded the right to make “a municipal water tank” out of one of the nation’s natural treasures “purely on the grounds of relative cheapness.” The common use of



Hetch Hetchy as it looks today from O'Shaughnessy Dam. Kolana Rock rises on the right, and Tucculala Falls and Wapama Falls still cascade down the opposite wall. (Photo by the author.)

Convinced that Hetch Hetchy was not the only source from which San Francisco might draw its water, the preservationists argued that the value of development was trumped by the value already present in the valley. They stressed the recreational value that Hetch Hetchy provided in its natural state, not only to area residents but to the people of the entire nation. Such spectacular scenery was an antidote for the ills of urban living, promoting communion with nature and suggesting the spiritual value of such places. And, more concretely, the recreational tourism had a commercial value that would only grow as urban congestion increased and the national parks became even more popular as repositories of refuge. A road to Hetch Hetchy, many preservationists argued, might be quickly paved in gold with the tourist revenue it generated.

catchphrases such as these promoted a consistent argument by borrowing and repeating many of the same catchphrases. I have cited specific sources here, but these characterizations can be found throughout the preservationist literature. The "municipal water tank" description was a favorite disparagement used in "San Francisco Against the Nation," *The Independent* (July 31, 1913), 238-9; San Francisco's claim of a water crisis is labeled specious in *More Light on the Destructive Hetch Hetchy Scheme*; the charge that Hetch Hetchy would be sacrificed for cheapness was widespread, including "Hetch-Hetchy," *The Independent* (Nov. 21, 1912): 1203; and an illustrative short primer for refuting the city's arguments point by point was published in *The Hetch Hetchy "Grab"*.

The preservationists' strong appeal to the quantifiable value of recreational tourism suggests that they recognized the weakness of their argument for the less tangible values of nature. It was difficult to combat concrete measures of value, such as dollars saved and numbers of people served by developing a reservoir at Hetch Hetchy, with assertions of the spiritually satisfying properties of a good hike. Pressing the conservationist advantage on this front, Gifford Pinchot boiled the controversy down to the single essential question of "whether the advantage of leaving this valley in a state of nature is greater than... using it for the benefit of the city of San Francisco." To him, and to many of the congressmen before whom he was testifying, the answer was clear: domestic use and the benefit it would provide to people was the more valuable function.⁵⁶

Pinchot was practical and calculating in his approach, but more than one supporter of the dam played on heartstrings to portray what they saw as the lopsided nature of the values conflict. Former Mayor James Phelan summoned his dramatic sensibilities for testimony before the Senate Committee on Public Lands in 1909: "these nature lovers are loafing round the Throne of Almighty God in the high Sierras, and we are pleading here for the little children in the streets of San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda. We are pleading for a reduction of the death rate. We are pleading for a supply of an absolutely essential necessity of life, for a water supply for these people."⁵⁷ Phelan's theme of selfish preservationists was later echoed by Senator Marcus A. Smith of Arizona during the 1913 debate: "We all love the sound of whispering winds amid the trees, but the wail of a hungry baby will make us forget it for the while as we try to minister to its wants." He went on to admonish, "You lovers of nature from scenes so remote

⁵⁶ HCPL, Hetch Hetchy Dam Site, 25.

⁵⁷ SCPL, Hearing, *Hetch Hetchy Reservoir Site*, 60th Cong., 2nd Sess. (12 Feb. 1909), 110.

from this Hetch Hetchy Canyon will do well to give less attention to nature's beauties and more sympathy to the wants of men."⁵⁸

The preservationists further weakened their position by failing to address the potential value of municipal ownership, an important Progressive Era ideal and one of the city's most effective arguments. Despite their own contention that the public's ownership of the park should take priority over the city interests, the preservationists utterly failed to appreciate the strength of San Francisco's appeal for municipal ownership of its water and power utilities. The chance to establish public ownership of these utilities resonated with policymakers like George Norris and William Kent who believed that private water and power interests lurked behind the nature lover's opposition, and the preservationists' inability to effectively counter these perceptions lost them crucial support in Congress. Ultimately, this combination of difficulties in making their case added up to the preservationist failure. Muir and company never came up with a unified overpowering argument, and they couldn't convince policymakers that the aggregation of values they represented outweighed the concrete values identified by San Francisco.

ON A SUNNY DAY AT THE END OF APRIL in Yosemite National Park, water is running everywhere one looks, seething, seeping, surging through every passage that it can find in the hard granite and spongy loam of the Sierra landscape. Even more can be heard than seen. The sound of water gurgling beneath the snow pack, dripping through the soil, bubbling in impromptu streams down the mountainsides, and roaring over the falls is omnipresent. It is searching out the two great rivers that run through the park: the Merced, which flows through the magnificent Yosemite Valley, and the Tuolumne, which winds down through the Hetch Hetchy Valley,

⁵⁸ CR (Dec. 5, 1913), 274.

Yosemite's cousin and one-time scenic rival just eighteen miles north over the ridge. In many ways, the water is a testament to the continuity and adaptability of the natural world – more than a century since Frederick Badé made his memorable descent through the Hetch Hetchy Valley, the landscape has been dramatically changed, but it still captivates visitors with its liquid concerto.

Instead of walking through the portal of the canyon, visitors now traverse it from the southern to the northern rim along the curved concrete top of the O'Shaughnessy Dam. Off the west side of the structure, the water gushes out of the floodgates, dropping white and furious into the Tuolumne River far below to continue its journey toward the coast. To the east, spectacular gray granite walls striped by pale waterfalls tower above a placid blue lake, hinting at the stunning topography of the submerged valley. The unattractive thick layer of bleached beige rocks that ring the shoreline testify to the water's onslaught. "It's dropping one-to-two feet a day" in anticipation of the spring runoff, a Hetch Hetchy Water and Power worker told me as he took a reading on the water level. "Which is an awful lot of water," he added, "when you think of how far back it goes."

From the dam, the reservoir goes back about seven miles, and its water is piped more than 140 miles west to provide San Francisco, now a great metropolis, with water and power. Stand at this nexus of this system and one stands at the physical center of the nation's first great environmental dispute. The Hetch Hetchy controversy marks the first time in American history that a large number of people in the general population engaged in a debate over the best way to value the natural environmental. Before John Muir pushed Hetch Hetchy into the national spotlight, others such as Henry David Thoreau, Dan DeQuille, and Dame Shirley had raised concerns about environmental degradation, but their protests fell largely upon deaf ears. Muir and the preservationists might easily have been part of this tradition of leaders without followers,



The O'Shaughnessy Dam from the north rim of Hetch Hetchy in April 2006. Note the ring along the shoreline illustrating how far the water has been drawn down in anticipation of the spring runoff. (Photo by the author.)

but the letters written by thousands of citizens between 1908 and 1913 made Hetch Hetchy matter and ultimately put the environment on the nation's political map.

These conservation protestants took cues from leaders like Muir, Robert Underwood Johnson, and Frederick Badé, but they repeated the arguments that resonated most deeply with their own experiences and perceptions. The views they expressed to policymakers signaled a shift in how the American people valued land. Their argument that the value of developing resources must be calculated and balanced against the significant inherent values they possess in their natural state heralded a new era in environmental policy. It is an argument that the modern environmental movement continues to employ and refine in places such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

A visitor today may sit, as I did, on a sunny rock drying out amidst a grove of oaks just past Wapama Falls, and contemplate such controversies and how notions of environmental value

have evolved over the past century. But Hetch Hetchy will not stand to be tuned out for long. There is no silence in this place, but there is a great deal of peace well suited to pondering such questions. The roar of the falls enhances tranquility rather than disrupts it. Kolana Rock, heralded as counterpart to Yosemite's El Capitan, bears down from across the narrow reservoir like the prow of a great ship. Muir envisioned a bustling valley here, a second Yosemite full of tourists and nature lovers, but beside the lake the scene is serene. I doubt it could be much enhanced if the falls continued to cascade down toward the oak-lined Tuolumne. Perhaps the only thing more arrogant than presuming to improve nature's landscaping is presuming that we can ruin it.

Key to Notes

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

CR: Congressional Record

HCPL: House Committee on the Public Lands

SCPL: Senate Committee on Public Lands