



SIERRA CLUB

TEHIPITE CHAPTER

Understanding the Sierra Club's History and Culture for Dangerous Times by Gary Lasky, Sierra Club Tehipite Chapter

The Sierra Club is the largest environmental organization in the nation, with more than 600,000 dues-paying members and a budget of \$120 million. It is a complex NGO, with one Club chapter in each state, plus one D.C. and Puerto Rico, with the exception of California, where the Club has 13 chapters. That's because, founded in 1892 to protect the Sierra Nevada range from logging, the Club's origins are in the Golden State. The first chapter was the San Francisco Bay Chapter, and the Club's national headquarters is in Oakland.

The history of the Club tracks closely with the growth in the U.S. of an environmental ethic, and an awareness and appreciation of the vulnerability of natural lands.

Soon after the Civil War, logging companies moved through the upper Midwest like locusts, logging the native forests of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota on a scale never before seen. They also clearcut the hardwood forests in the southeast, and by the 1880s, the redwood and Douglas fir forests of the Pacific Northwest. Giant sequoia trees, more than 10 feet in diameter, came crashing down, shattering, and making the wood unsalvageable for lumber. Forests were seen as commodities to be harvested and sold, but the vast Western landscape seemed inexhaustible. Railroads opened up more and more lands to be clearcut, and Congress encouraged this "progress" by granting them free land for miles, creating towns and cities with ready access to lumber. Redwood City, now an urbanized Silicon Valley city, served as a shipping point for old-growth redwood trees harvested from the Santa Cruz Mountains and sent downhill to sawmills.

Yosemite National Park was established in 1890, the second after Yellowstone (1878), and the Sierra Club was founded soon after. The first Sierra Club President was John Muir, a self-sufficient visionary who lived in what is now Yosemite. By the late 1800s, Muir foresaw how unrestrained corporate growth was inflicting wanton destruction on America's old-growth forests and the Native peoples who had occupied these lands. In 1905, Muir hosted President Theodore Roosevelt on a two-day camping trip to Yosemite, and persuaded him to set aside Yosemite Valley as an example of the wonders of the natural world. However, the following year, the U.S. Army went on a five-year campaign to forcibly remove the Native peoples from the Park, closing three villages in the Valley and burning a fourth to the ground.

Park administrators saw "progress" as incompatible with wilderness, and it took another half-century before the concept of habitat and human stewardship of natural landscapes became understood by the dominant culture and society. Unfortunately, we did not learn from the example of the indigenous tribes of the region of the importance of living in harmony with the ecosystem in order to protect both the natural and human world for future generations.

In the 1920s, caravans of Bay Area residents and their autos flocked to Yosemite Valley for weekends to participate in organized hikes. The Club explicitly designed these to bring more urban residents into nature so that they would return home with a zeal to protect it.

After World War II came the modern automobile culture, suburban sprawl and air conditioning. As middle-class Americans in their everyday lives grew more distant from natural cycles and interrelationships of the natural world, the Sierra Club's mission ("to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth") became embraced by more and more people. The growth of summer vacations and expansion of our National Park system tracked closely with the growth of Sierra Club membership. The GI bill for veterans led to an explosion of college educated Americans and to an awareness of the value of Nature as a refuge from our urban lives.

This awareness coincided with an expanded awareness of how the environment was being damaged through air and water pollution, and the first Earth Day in 1970, following on the heels of the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, was an inflection point for growth of the environmental movement, including passage of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act by 1975.

Gradually, however, Yosemite Valley was overrun by tourists. The Sierra Club adapted to the times, moving from a hiking organization to one more willing to educate members about how to exert political pressure on Congress and their state legislatures in order to regulate industrial production and corporations.

Today, Americans look to the Sierra Club to protect both of our natural resources and the legacy of environmental regulation from wanton destruction by the Trump Administration and Project 2025, which — attempting to "deconstruct" the "Deep State" — is an existential threat to progress made in the past half-century to protect the environment and our core Sierra Club values. Donald Trump last year promised oil and gas CEOs that he would eliminate government red tape for them if they contributed \$1 billion to his campaign. This administration can be seen as the endpoint of an increasingly corrupt "pay-to-play" D.C. culture. And our embarrassing Supreme Court does everything in its power to cater to the new billionaire class rather than America's residents.

Meanwhile, as climate change and global temperatures force us to recognize the terrifying impact of fossil fuel production and burning, we turn to the Sierra Club for answers, Congressional inaction becomes a glaring problem, with a majority of Democrats afraid to take a strong stand and Congressional Republicans in full cooperation with the administration. Meanwhile, the Club's top leadership has not quite caught up with our grassroots members and chapters, which recognize how dramatic political and legislative action must be taken immediately.

The future of the Earth as a habitable planet is now uncertain, but our Club's grassroots leadership is aware and taking action to protect both the environmental gifts we have been granted and the legacy government agencies, especially the National Park Service and the Environmental Protection Agency, from being demolished.

Keep watching this page for what is developing in the way of resistance in the San Joaquin Valley as we work our way through this political upheaval and, with hard work and bringing along a new generation of activists, the Club works together with our environmental justice and social justice partners and allies to restore a healthy and resilient climate, where our political system, economy and Nature can coexist.

Yosemite Valley
Credit: National Park Service, nps.gov

