



the reactor

by Paul Azevedo

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Every so often I need to visit Yosemite. It's not a luxury, but a necessity. Up until last week, I hadn't been there since 1972, and my batteries needed recharging.

Only the poetic John Muir had words to describe the Sierra. I won't even try. In the wrong hands (mine, for example,) words like "grandeur" and "magnificence" cloy.

As Carl McCarthy did Sweeney Ridge, John Muir took the Sierra Nevada ("the range of light") for his own, then shared it with all of us.

Because he was an eloquent man dealing with an eloquent subject, he made the nation aware of this irreplaceable treasure. He told us of the danger it faced from "hooved locusts" (sheep) and callous men who cared for nothing except short-term profit.

Muir lost one great battle, but perhaps it won him the war, at least for several decades. Hetch Hetchy Reservoir was built over his objections. Muir died soon after, but only three years after the law that dammed Hetch Hetchy, the National Park Service was formed, in 1916.

The founding policy talked about "preserving for all time," and "future generations." We committed ourselves to preserve and conserve the irreplaceable—Yosemite—Yellowstone—The Grand Canyon—Mesa Verde.

It is an illusion, of course, to imagine that the battle is over. Like Freedom, the preservation of our natural heritage must be paid for by each generation with continued vigilance.

Yosemite and the entire national park system is in trouble. The Golden Gate National Recreation Area is in trouble. Sweeney Ridge in Pacifica, which the Congress agrees belongs in GGNRA, is in trouble.

It's easy to blame James Watt. (How much power do you need to destroy the national parks? One Watt.) But that's too simplistic. Ronald Reagan appointed him. Ronald Reagan protects him. Ronald Reagan can fire him...in 10 seconds. When Reagan departs his office, irreparable damage will remain.

The scenery is still magnificent in Yosemite. I camped out in Tamarack Flat and listened to an hour-long coyote serenade. The owls repeated their mournful sound through the night.

My kids were thrilled to see bears come through camp. The "Bear Habitat" signs weren't kidding.

But Yosemite is running down. The human facilities are getting shabby. There are fewer rangers, and they are more harassed. Campgrounds are jammed, but some are closed off because road damage goes unrepaired. Some campground fees are not collected because there aren't enough rangers. In some camps drinking water must be boiled.

Park signs are masses of graffiti. Heavily used pathways on the edges of steep cliffs have had barriers destroyed and then left unrepaired and unprotected.

National Parks must be permanent. They are one of the most precious gifts we can leave our great-grandchildren, next to life itself. They must not be left to the mercies of Presidents, who can turn out to be Reagans, or Interior Secretaries, who might be Watts. Congresses can be shortsighted and changable.

We need a constitutional amendment to protect the National Parks forever. We need a National Treasure bill of rights. Let's put Yosemite, and Sweeney Ridge, into the constitution.