

The Hetch Hetchy Valley

by John Muir

(*Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. VI, No. 4, January, 1908)

Note: A revised version of the following essay, omitting the first three paragraphs, and edited to emphasize the similarities of Hetch-Hetchy to Yosemite Valley, was eventually included as [Chapter 16](#) of Muir's 1912 book, [The Yosemite](#).

This article begins on page 211 with the Isaiah West Taber photo "[Looking Up Hetch-Hetchy Valley from Sunrise Point](#);" the article proper begins on page 212. The last page of the particle is on page 220, followed on Page 221 and 222 with Extracts from the State Geologist's Yosemite Guidebook on the Hetch Hetchy Valley.

It is impossible to overestimate the value of wild mountains and mountain temples as places for people to grow in, recreation grounds for soul and body. They are the greatest of our natural resources, God's best gifts, but none, however high and holy, is beyond reach of the spoiler. In these ravaging money-mad days monopolizing San Francisco capitalists are now doing their best to destroy the Yosemite Park, the most wonderful of all our great mountain national parks. Beginning on the Tuolumne side, they are trying with a lot of sinful ingenuity to get the Government's permission to dam and destroy the Hetch-Hetchy Valley for a reservoir, simply that comparatively private gain may be made out of universal public loss, while of course the Sierra Club is doing all it can to save the valley. The Honorable Secretary of the Interior has not yet announced his decision in the case, but in all that has come and gone nothing discouraging is yet in sight on our side of the fight.

As long as the busy public in general knew little or nothing about the Hetch-Hetchy Valley, the few cunning drivers of the damming scheme, working in darkness like moles in a low-lying meadow, seemed confident of success; but when light was turned on and the truth became manifest that next to Yosemite, Hetch-Hetchy is the most wonderful and most important feature of the great park, that damming it would destroy it, render it inaccessible, and block the way through the wonderful Tuolumne Cañon to the grand central campground in the upper Tuolumne Valley, thousands from near and far came to our help, -- mountaineers, nature-lovers, naturalists. Most of our thousand club members wrote to the President or Secretary protesting against the destructive reservoir scheme while other sources of city water as pure or purer than the Hetch-Hetchy were available; so also did the Oregon and Washington mountaineering clubs and the Appalachian of Boston and public-spirited citizens everywhere. And the President, recognizing the need of beauty as well as bread and water in the life of the nation, far from favoring the destruction of any of our country's natural wonder parks and temples, is trying amid a host of other cares to save them all. Within a very short time he has saved the petrified forests of Arizona and the Grand Cañon, and in our own State the jagged peaks of San Benito county known as "The Pinnacles," making them national monuments or parks to be preserved for the people forever. None, therefore, need doubt that everything possible will be done to save Hetch-Hetchy.

After my first visit, in the autumn of 1871, I have always called it the Tuolumne Yosemite, for it is a

wonderfully exact counterpart of the great Yosemite, not only in its crystal river and sublime rocks and waterfalls, but in the gardens, groves, and meadows of its flower park-like floor. The floor of Yosemite is about 4,000 feet above the sea, the Hetch -Hetchy floor about 3,700; the walls of both are of gray granite, rise abruptly out of the flowery grass and groves are sculptured in the same style, and in both every rock is a glacial monument.

Standing boldly out from the south wall is a strikingly picturesque rock called "Kolana" by the Indians, the outermost of a group 2300 feet high, corresponding with the Cathedral Rocks of Yosemite both in relative position and form. On the opposite side of the Valley, facing Kolana, there is a counterpart of the El Capitan of Yosemite rising sheer and plain to a height of 1800 feet, and over its massive brow flows a stream which makes the most graceful fall I have ever seen. From the edge of the cliff it is perfectly free in the air for a thousand feet, then breaks up into a ragged sheet of cascades among the boulders of an earthquake talus. It is in all its glory in June, when the snow is melting fast, but fades and vanishes toward the end of summer. The only fall I know with which it may fairly be compared is the Yosemite Bridal Veil; but it excels even that favorite fall both in height and fineness of fairy-airy beauty and behavior. Lowlanders are apt to suppose that mountain streams in their wild career over cliffs lose control of themselves and tumble in a noisy chaos of mist and spray. On the contrary, on no part of their travels are they more harmonious and self-controlled. Imagine yourself in Hetch Hetchy on a sunny day in June, standing waist-deep in grass and flowers (as I have oftentimes stood), while the great pines sway dreamily with scarce perceptible motion. Looking northward across the Valley you see a plain, gray granite cliff rising abruptly out of the gardens and groves to a height of 1800 feet, and in front of it Tueeulala's silvery scarf burning with irised sun-fire in every fiber. In the first white outburst of the stream at the head of the fall there is abundance of visible energy, but it is speedily hushed and concealed in divine repose, and its tranquil progress to the base of the cliff is like that of downy feathers in a still room. Now observe the fineness and marvelous distinctness of the various sun-illuminated fabrics into which the water is woven; they sift and float from form to form down the face of that grand gray rock in so leisurely and unconfused a manner that you can examine their texture, and patterns and tones of color as you would a piece of embroidery held in the hand. Near the head of the fall you see groups of booming, comet-like masses, their solid, white heads separate, their tails like combed silk interlacing among delicate shadows, ever forming and dissolving, worn out by friction in their rush through the air. Most of these vanish a few hundred feet below the summit, changing to the varied forms of cloud-like drapery. Near the bottom the width of the fall has increased from about twenty-five to a hundred feet. Here it is composed of yet finer tissues, and is still without a trace of disorder -- air, water and sunlight woven into stuff that spirits might wear.

So fine a fall might well seem sufficient to glorify any valley; but here, as in Yosemite, Nature seems in nowise moderate, for a short distance to the eastward of Tueeulala booms and thunders the great Hetch Hetchy Fall, Wapama, so near that you have both of them in full view from the same standpoint. It is the counterpart of the Yosemite Fall, but has a much greater volume of water, is about 1700 feet in height, and appears to be nearly vertical, though considerably inclined, and is dashed into huge outbounding bosses of foam on the projecting shelves and knobs of its jagged gorge. No two falls could be more unlike -- Tueeulala out in the open sunshine descending like thistledown; Wapama in a jagged, shadowy gorge roaring and plundering, pounding its way with the weight and energy of an avalanche. Besides this glorious pair there is a broad, massive fall on the main river a short distance above the head of the Valley. Its position is something like that of the Vernal in Yosemite, and its roar as it plunges into a surging trout-pool may be heard a long way, though it is only about twenty feet high. There is also a chain of magnificent cascades at the head of the valley on a stream that comes in from the northeast, mostly silvery plumes, like the one between the Vernal and Nevada falls of Yosemite, half-sliding, half-leaping on bare glacier polished granite, covered with crisp

clashing spray into which the sunbeams pour with glorious effect. And besides all these a few small streams come over the walls here and there, leaping from ledge to ledge with birdlike song and watering many a hidden cliff-garden and fernery, but they are too unshowy to be noticed in so grand a place.

The correspondence between the Hetch Hetchy walls in their trends, sculpture, physical structure, and general arrangement of the main rock-masses [and those of the Yosemite Valley] has excited the wondering admiration of every observer. We have seen that the El Capitan and Cathedral rocks occupy the same relative positions in both valleys; so also do their Yosemite Points and North Domes. Again that part of the Yosemite north wall immediately to the east of the Yosemite Fall has two horizontal benches timbered with golden-cup oak about 500 and 1500 feet above the floor. Two benches similarly situated and timbered occur on the same relative portion of the Hetch Hetchy north wall, to the east of Wapama Fall, and on no other. The Yosemite is bounded at the head by the great Half Dome. Hetch Hetchy is bounded in the same way though its head rock is far less wonderful and sublime in form.

The floor of the Valley is about three and a half miles long and from a fourth to half a mile wide. The lower portion is mostly a level meadow about a mile long, with the trees restricted to the sides, and partially separated from the upper forested portion by a low bar of glacier-polished granite across which the river breaks in rapids.

The principal trees are the yellow and sugar pines, Sabine pine, incense cedar, Douglas spruce, silver fir, the California and gold-cup oaks, balm of Gilead poplar, Nuttall's flowering dogwood, alder, maple, laurel, tunion, etc. The most abundant and influential are the great yellow pines, the tallest over two hundred feet in height, and the oaks with massive rugged trunks four to six or seven feet in diameter, and broad arching heads, assembled in magnificent groves. The shrubs forming conspicuous flowery clumps and tangles are manzanita, azalea, spiraea, brier-rose, ceanothus, calycanthus, philadelphus, wild cherry, etc.; with abundance of showy and fragrant herbaceous plants growing about them or out in the open in beds by themselves -- lilies, Mariposa tulips, brodiaeas, orchids -- several species of each,-- iris, spraguea, draperia, collomia, collinsia, castilleia, nemophila, larkspur, columbine, goldenrods, sunflowers, and mints of many species, honeysuckle, etc. etc. Many fine ferns dwell here also, especially the beautiful and interesting rock-ferns -- pellaea, and cheilanthes of several species -- fringing and rosetting dry rock-piles and ledges; woodwardia and asplenium on damp spots with fronds six or seven feet high; the delicate maidenhair in mossy nooks by the falls, and the sturdy, broad-shouldered pteris beneath the oaks and pines.

It appears therefore that Hetch-Hetchy Valley, far from being a plain, common, rock-bound meadow, as many who have not seen it seem to suppose, is a grand landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain mansions. As in Yosemite, the sublime rocks of its walls seem to the nature-lover to glow with life, whether leaning back in repose or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes, giving welcome to storms and calms alike. And how softly these mountain rocks are adorned, and how fine and reassuring the company they keep -- their brows in the sky, their feet set in groves and gay emerald meadows, a thousand flowers leaning confidently against their adamantine bosses, while birds, bees, and butterflies help the river and waterfalls to stir all the air into music -- things frail and fleeting and types of permanence meeting here and blending, as if into this glorious mountain temple Nature had gathered here choice treasures, whether great or small, to draw her lovers into close confiding communion with her.

Strange to say, this is the mountain temple that is now in danger of being dammed and made into a reservoir to help supply San Francisco with water and light. This use of the valley, so destructive and foreign to its proper park use, has long been planned and prayed for, and is still being prayed for by the San Francisco board of supervisors, not because water as pure and abundant cannot be got from adjacent sources outside the

park - for it can, -- but seemingly only because of the comparative cheapness of the dam required.

Garden- and park-making goes on everywhere with civilization, for 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. This natural beauty-hunger is displayed in poor folks' window-gardens made up of a few geranium slips in broken cups, as well as in the costly lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks -- the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. -- Nature's own wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world. Nevertheless, like everything else worth while, however sacred and precious and well-guarded, they have always been subject to attack, mostly by despoiling gainseekers, -- mischief-makers of every degree from Satan to supervisors, lumbermen, cattlemen, farmers, etc., eagerly trying to make everything dollarable, often thinly disguised in smiling philanthropy, calling pocket-filling plunder "Utilization of beneficent natural resources, that man and beast may be fed and the dear Nation grow great." Thus long ago a lot of enterprising merchants made part of the Jerusalem temple into a place of business instead of a place of prayer, changing money, buying and selling cattle and sheep and doves. And earlier still, the Lord's garden in Eden, and the first forest reservation, including only one tree, was spoiled. And so to some extent have all our reservations and parks. Ever since the establishment of the Yosemite National Park by act of Congress, October 8, 1890, constant strife has been going on around its borders and I suppose this will go on as part of the universal battle between right and wrong, however its boundaries may be shorn or its wild beauty destroyed. The first application to the Government by the San Francisco Supervisors for the use of Lake Eleanor and the Hetch Hetchy Valley was made in 1903, and denied December 22nd of that year by the Secretary of the Interior. In his report on this case he well says: "Presumably the Yosemite National Park was created such by law because of the natural objects, of varying degrees of scenic importance, located within its boundaries, inclusive alike of its beautiful small lakes, like Eleanor, and its majestic wonders, like Hetch-Hetchy and Yosemite Valley. It is 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 nearly as practicable in the condition fashioned by the hand of the Creator -- 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."

The most delightful and wonderful campgrounds in the Park are the three great valleys -- Yosemite, Hetch-Hetchy, and Upper Tuolumne; and they are also the most important places with reference to their positions relative to the other great features -- the Merced and Tuolumne Cañons, and the High Sierra peaks and glaciers, etc., at the head of the rivers. The main part of the Tuolumne Valley is a beautiful spacious flowery lawn four or five miles long, surrounded by magnificent snowy mountains. It is about 8500 feet above the sea, and forms the grand central High Sierra camp ground from which excursions are made to the noble mountains, domes, glaciers, etc.; across the Range to the Mono Lake and volcanoes and down the Tuolumne Cañon to Hetch Hetchy. But should Hetch Hetchy be submerged, as pro-posed, not only would it be made utterly inaccessible, but the sublime cañon way to the heart of the High Sierra would be hopelessly blocked. None, as far as I have learned, of all the thousands who have seen the park is in favor of this destructive water scheme.

My last visit to the Valley was made in the autumn of last year [1907], with William Keith, the artist. The leaf-colors were then ripe, and the great godlike rocks in repose seemed to glow with life. The artist, under their spell, wandered day after day along the beautiful river and through the groves and gardens, studying the wonderful scenery; and, after making about forty sketches, declared with enthusiasm that in picturesque beauty and charm Hetch Hetchy surpassed even Yosemite.

That any one would try to destroy such a place seemed impossible; but sad experience shows that there are

people good enough and bad enough for anything. The proponents of the dam scheme bring forward a lot of bad arguments to prove that the only righteous thing for Hetch-Hetchy is its destruction. These arguments are curiously like those of the devil devised for the destruction of the first garden -- so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water. Very few of their statements are even partly true, and all are misleading. Thus, Hetch Hetchy, they say, is a "low-lying meadow."

On the contrary, it is a high-lying natural landscape garden.

"It is a common minor feature, like thousands of others."

On the contrary, it is a very uncommon feature; after Yosemite, the rarest and in many ways the most important in the park.

"Damming and submerging it 175 feet deep would enhance its beauty by forming a crystal-clear lake."

Landscape gardens, places of recreation and worship, are never made beautiful by destroying and burying them. The beautiful lake, forsooth, should be only an eyesore, a dismal blot on the landscape, like many others to be seen in the Sierra. For, instead of keeping it at the same level all the year, allowing Nature to make new shores, it would, of course, be full only a month or two in the spring, when the snow is melting fast; then it would be gradually drained, exposing the slimy sides of the basin and shallower parts of the bottom, with the gathered drift and waste, death and decay of the upper basins, caught here instead of being swept on to decent natural burial along the banks of the river or in the sea. Thus the Hetch Hetchy dam-lake would be only a rough imitation of a natural lake for a few of the spring months, an open mountain sepulcher for the others.

"Hetch Hetchy water is the purest, wholly unpolluted, and forever unpollutable."

On the contrary, excepting that of the Merced below Yosemite, it is less pure than that of most of the other Sierra streams, because of the sewerage of camp grounds draining into it, especially of the Big Tuolumne Meadows campgrounds, where hundreds of tourists and mountaineers, with their animals, are encamped for months every summer, soon to be followed by thousands of travelers from all the world.

These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the mountains, lift them to dams and town skyscrapers.

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.

Other John Muir essays about Hetch Hetchy:

- [John Muir's First Essay about Hetch-Hetchy in the Boston Weekly Transcript, 1873.](#)
- [Chapter 16](#) of Muir's 1912 book, [The Yosemite](#).

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