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# McClintock erroneously invokes John Muir

Elk Grove congressman has enormous potential to influence what happens on public lands

He wants to log trees to generate revenue to fund firefighting and fire prevention

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McClintock has shown willingness to misrepresent facts and Muir's thoughts on conservation



Rep. Tom McClintock, who chairs the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands, has considerable clout over the fate of the Sierra. He opened a hearing by suggesting that John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, would not want the National Park Service to remove amenities like ice-skating rinks, swimming pools and convenience stores from the park. Muir, of course, argued differently. **Paul Kitagaki Jr.** Sacramento Bee file

BY MATT WEISER

*Special to The Bee*

It requires a certain arrogance for a Republican these days to conjure John Muir as a rhetorical ally. Especially when Muir's words are used to support legislation allowing more development in Yosemite National Park.

Yet that is exactly what Rep. Tom McClintock did on Oct. 28 at a hearing in Washington, D.C., of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands.

McClintock, who chairs the subcommittee, opened the hearing by suggesting that John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and savior of Yosemite, would not want the National Park Service to remove amenities like ice-skating rinks, swimming pools and convenience stores from the park.

“On the contrary,” McClintock said, “Muir wanted people to come to our public lands knowing they would go away with fond memories, happy experiences ... and resolve to preserve them so that their children and their children’s children could share their experience.”

Muir, of course, argued that people don’t need amusements to benefit from nature. What they need is simply trees, mountains, free-flowing streams – and quiet.

For much of his time in D.C. and all of his time as a state legislator in Sacramento, McClintock was in the minority. That gave him the freedom to happily lob verbal bombs at Democrats. Now that Republicans control Congress and McClintock wields a chairman’s gavel, we can see more clearly his vision for his district and our nation’s most precious treasures.

“If there is a theme that you will hear from me over and over, it’s that the congressman is a truth abuser,” John Buckley, executive director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, said of McClintock. “He abuses the facts to somehow portray this dark, sinister threat that he is the champion of protecting the public from.”

McClintock, R-Elk Grove, represents 10 counties at the heart of the Sierra Nevada. This includes Yosemite National Park, Lake Tahoe and a host of national forests, wilderness areas and wildlife refuges. It includes California’s most important watershed, where snowmelt provides half of the state’s fresh water in an average year.

The congressman, as chairman of the Federal Lands Subcommittee, has enormous potential to influence what happens on millions of acres of public lands that provide water, wood, recreation, habitat and clean air in California. Enormous problems need fixing, including explosive fire risk, degraded meadows and water pollution.

Yet McClintock chooses to waste this potential.

Over the next two hours at that October hearing, McClintock called on a series of hand-picked witnesses to support his claims that federal agencies are “forcing people off the public lands,” that Yosemite attendance is declining because it doesn’t offer enough resort-like amenities, and that concessionaires are going out of business because they don’t have free rein in the parks.

None of this is true.

“It’s a classic example of fabricating facts,” Buckley said, “and then using the fear he generates to justify actions that side with industry or some other resource use.”

McClintock has never lived in the Sierra and does not even reside in his own congressional district. For 26 years, he represented three Southern California districts in the state Legislature. In 2008, he was elected to represent the heart of the Sierra in Congress, even though he lived in Thousand Oaks at the time. Today he claims Elk Grove as his residence, also not in his district. McClintock’s staff did not respond to an interview request.

McClintock’s victories as a lawmaker, objectively, can be described as few and small. During his seven years in Washington, McClintock introduced only three bills that became law: One reserved 40 acres of federal land in El Dorado County for the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians; and two others renamed post offices.

While undoubtedly important to some constituents, these are not exactly pivotal issues facing the Sierra today.

In Washington, McClintock conducts his subcommittee in a businesslike manner. He is punctual and sticks to the agenda. There are moments of jocularity – usually with fellow Republicans – although they are few.

And he is fair to Democrats on his committee. At a Sept. 29 hearing, McClintock reprimanded a senior Republican, Rep. Don Young of Alaska, after Young interrupted Democrat Niki Tsongas of Massachusetts: Young asserted Tsongas had no right to comment on national forests because there are none in her district. McClintock directed Young to halt his attack and turned attention back to the witnesses.

Those witnesses were again carefully chosen, this time to support McClintock's desire to give away national forest lands to local and state governments. McClintock believes they can do a better job managing forests: They can process logging permits faster, he claims, make more money doing it and use the profits to fund their own firefighters.

To open the hearing, McClintock said all the nation's forest problems could be solved simply by logging more trees – big trees, not just the little ones that create fire risk. This, he claimed, would easily turn a profit to fund other forest programs.

“Adequately funding our Forest Service would not be a problem if we could merely harvest trees before they burn,” McClintock said. “We have within the forests all the revenue to take care of the forests. And yet we simply turn up our noses at it.”

It was another case where ideology overcame facts. Logging has been a notorious money-loser for the federal government for decades. This is partly because of competition from imported lumber, but also because Congress has never adequately funded the Forest Service to process logging permits in a timely manner.

Dan Gibbs, a county commissioner from Summit County, Colo., was among the hand-picked witnesses that day. He agreed more logging is needed to manage fire risk. But when asked if local government can manage forests better, his answer didn't follow McClintock's script.

“If you all decided to give federal lands to Summit County tomorrow,” Gibbs said, “and we had a major catastrophic fire, it would bankrupt our county in a week. So I would say, ‘No thank you, federal government.’ ”

He added that many counties don't have the expertise to analyze how wildfires affect the community.

This was echoed by Bob Johnston, professor emeritus of environmental policy at UC Davis and board member of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. He's spent decades studying land management by Sierra counties.

“Local governments, most of them, don't have the technical competency to manage natural resources,” Johnston said in an interview. “I have considerable

experience with them as regulators of local land-use permitting, and all of them do a crappy job. Their management of land use is just absurdly bad.”

What’s needed, Johnston said, is a major program of controlled burns and forest thinning (removing small trees and brush) that would leave the largest trees alone. This would mimic the natural state of forests as we found them 150 years ago. Studies have shown that mature forests in this “undeveloped” state are optimal for sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This would help rein in climate change, thereby preventing our present cycle of catastrophic wildfires.

This would require strategic changes in federal law and significant spending for a short period – perhaps 20 years – until forest health is restored. It is where McClintock could put his Federal Lands Subcommittee to good use.

To begin, he might try consulting John Muir once again.

“Any fool can destroy trees,” Muir wrote in his book “Our National Parks” in 1901. “They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed – chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones. Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries ... God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools – only Uncle Sam can do that.”

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