A Brief History of the Sierra Club

Before the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892, many of its charter members were exploring the mountains of California. John Muir, among them, lent his prestige and enthusiasm to the Sierra Club. His reverence for wild places and his advocacy to protect them, his dreams and the labor of his life to preserve wilderness and natural beauty, crystallized in the Sierra Club. He was the unanimous choice for president, a position he held until his death in 1914.

The Sierra Club promotes the conservation of the natural environment by influencing public policy decisions and is committed “to explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the Earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the Earth’s resources and ecosystems; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives.”

In the 1890s, the Sierra Club pursued the scientific exploration of the Sierra. Among the Club’s first publications were Joseph Nisbet LeConte’s maps of the Sierra. The Sierra Club Bulletin, first published in 1893, included reports on the exploration of the Sierra, guides to geography, and scientific papers on natural history that included the study of forestry and the flora of the Sierra. In 1898, a public reading room and information center was established by the Sierra Club in Yosemite Valley at Sinning’s Cottage, located across from the Sentinel Hotel and near the Cedar Cottage, on the south side of the Valley, on the south side of the Merced River. Galen Clark, a member of the Sierra Club and the “Guardian of Yosemite,” a member of the first Yosemite Commission with Olmsted, was the second caretaker of the Sierra Club’s “Reading Room.” In 1903, LeConte Memorial Lodge was the first of many lodges the Sierra Club built as information centers and trailside shelters. LML was the first permanent visitor center constructed in Yosemite Valley. Funded by the Sierra Club and friends from the University of California (Berkeley) and Stanford University, as well as by members of the LeConte Family, essentially it was a gift to Yosemite Valley, at a time when the Valley was a State Park.

In 1901, the first of the annual Sierra Club “Outings” was organized to encourage interest in the preservation of the Sierra and to create a spirit of fellowship among members. Outings, known at the time as “High Trips,” were run nearly every summer for the next 50 years. In 1902, Muir led a group to the summit of Mt. Whitney. In 1905, the first annual outing outside California climbed Mt. Rainier. This 1905 trip included Stephen Mather, a Sierra Club member who would become the first director of the National Park Service in 1916. Through the assistance of the Sierra club, legislation was passed in 1916 that established the National Park Service.

As the guardian organization of Yosemite National Park and the Sierra, the Sierra Club found itself in the role of active defender. In 1914 the Club conducted its last outing to Hetch Hetchy Valley. Though the Club’s first conservation campaign in 1892 defeated
the proposal to reduce the size of the newly established Yosemite National Park, and, in 1906 succeeded in the unification of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove, and, Yosemite National Park into one Park, the Sierra Club lost the campaign to prevent the flooding of Hetch Hetchy Valley for a reservoir.

In the late 1930s, outings included base camp, burro, and knapsack trips. By the 1950s “Outings” were geared to minimize impact on wilderness areas. Today hundreds of national and international outing programs are held annually—through Sierra Club Headquarters and through individual Chapters and Groups.

The Sierra Club advocates grass roots activism, public education, lobbying, and expert testimony on major conservation campaigns. With over 1.4 million members and donors, the Sierra Club is divided into 63 Chapters (approximately 13 in California), which are further divided into 390 local groups that work on regional as well as national conservation issues, publish newsletters, and sponsor local outings and activities. Sierra Club “Books,” has published over 700 titles and distributed over 14 million books and calendars. Sierra, an award winning magazine publishes articles on environmental issues and analysis, outdoor adventure, health, and travel.

The Sierra Club has been active in advocating for the integrity of the environment, participating in the creation of laws effecting policy making at all levels of government.

The Sierra Club has played a key role in the following legislation:

- 1964 – Wilderness Act
- 1968 – Wild and Scenic Rivers Act
- 1970 – National Environmental Policy Act that established the EPA
- 1970 – Clean Air Act
- 1972 – Clean Water Act
- 1972 – Marine Mammal Protection Act
- 1973 – Endangered Species Act
- 1976 – California Coastal Commission
- 1980 – Superfund Act
- 2001 – National Forest Roadless Rule
- 2005 – Blocks logging on Grand Canyon North Rim
- 2006 – Protects Giant Sequoia National Monument from commercial logging
- 2009 – Protection of 2 million acres of natural spaces and passage of new clean-car standards
- 2014 – San Gabriel Mountains National Monument

Today, environmental concerns and conservation campaigns on behalf of which the Sierra Club advocates include:

**Clean Water**

**Energy**
- Beyond Coal
- Beyond Oil

**Stopping Sprawl**

**Wildlands Protection and Restoration of Federal, Public, and Private Lands**

**Outings/Inspiring Connections Outdoors**

**Mission Outdoors**

**Our Wild America**

**Protecting National Forests**

**Responsible Trade**

**Global Warming/Climate Change**

**Military Families and Veterans**

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