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FILM

## New documentary reveals environmental wisdom of John Muir

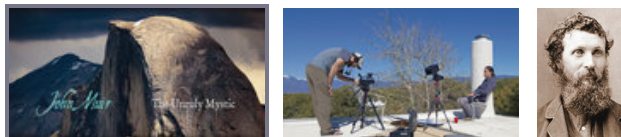
New film explores 'John of the Mountains'



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A frame from the documentary shows El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

COURTESY IMAGE



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**By Dena Miller**  
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'Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God," said John Muir, the Scottish-American who founded the Sierra Club and was affectionately known as "John of the Mountains" while widely hailed as the "Father of the National Parks."

For those of us who live at the foot of the southern Sangre de Cristos, who would disagree with Muir when each morning we're greeted by Pueblo Peak towering over us in its wintry magnificence? Who would disagree with him after an exhilarating day on the slopes of Taos Ski Valley? Our mountains are indeed woven into the fabric of our lives, perhaps more than we even realize.

Independent filmmaker Michael Conti will be in town with his latest documentary, which stands as both an affirmation of our good fortune and a reminder for us to heed our connectivity to the bounty of nature surrounding us.

"The Unruly Mystic: John Muir" will be screened Saturday (Jan. 26), 7 p.m., at the Taos Community Auditorium, 145 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. It will be followed by a discussion with the filmmaker during which he will encourage audience members to share their reactions.

"This is an experiential event and an antidote of goodness, not a focus on despair," Conti said. "If you're open, it's meant to trigger positivity and hope, and I appreciate hearing how people relate to what they see."

Against a backdrop of some of North America's most exquisite scenery, the documentary delves into the many ways in which being outside in nature proves to be remarkably transformative to our psyches and our souls. To make its case, the film is generously peppered with an array of commentary from the communities of the divine, the Zen and the Native American. World-class psychiatrists, therapists, theologians, writers and everyday people discuss their personal relationship with nature and its metamorphic effect in their lives.

"There is a spiritual path when you live in the mountains," said Shelton Johnson, park ranger at Yosemite National Park, which Muir helped lobby to create in 1890. "The closest things to heaven are the mountaintops."

President Barack Obama said in a June 2016 visit to the park, "It changes you by being here [in Yosemite]. There's something sacred about this place."

Those who have had the privilege of visiting Yosemite can't help but leave the park moved by the experience. With the shadows of El Capitan and Half Dome stretching across Yosemite Valley, and with baptism by the mist of Yosemite Falls, one realizes that we are of the earth, and the earth is of us.

Addressing this communion and among the film's commentators is Jim Lengerich, Spiritual Care Counselor at Golden Willow Retreat here in Taos. His training with indigenous elders, shamans and medicine people from North, Central and South America has afforded him the opportunity to assist his clients in awakening to a deeper sense of connection to themselves, nature and the world at large.

Sit in silence in the wilderness, he recommends in the film, with nothing but the clothes you wear. Allow the currents of nature to pass through you. You will, he assures, return to your life in a better place.

Cody Mirabal speaks in the film of the Native spiritual connections that surrounded him as he grew up at Taos Pueblo. Ancient environmental wisdom and an abiding belief in the Great Spirit of Mother Earth are inexorably woven into him and his family.

"We pray at the river; we pray to trees, rocks, the mountain: everything on the land," Mirabal said.

The Colorado-based Conti, who wrote, directed and produced the documentary, has felt a lifelong connection to the mountains, which he said made him Zen with himself. Of his childhood spent largely in the state, he noted, "I'm fortunate that nature's been my constant companion."

Conti spent over three decades in the Hollywood mainstream and, according to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), is "known internationally and has been screened at the eighth International Hildegard Congress 2014, The Emerging Filmmakers Project, Moondance International Film Festival, Trigger Street, ManiaTV!, Amazon/Tribeca Online Film Festival, The Red Reel, Loveland's Independent Filmmakers Showcase, Colorado Chautauqua Association Forum Series and at Denver's Starz FilmCenter through Group101 Films Colorado."

Despite the acclaim, his spiritually inspiring documentaries are where he now seems to be most at home. He wrote "The Unruly Mystic: John Muir" for the IMAX theater but decided instead its personal content was better told in his independent format.

"I felt that John Muir was calling me and I wanted to explore that," he said. In his film, then, free of commercial constraints, Conti was able to explore "the remarkable life and influential works of a patron saint of environmental activism [and] discuss the connection of nature and spirituality, using his life and wisdom."

Having previously produced "The Unruly Mystic: Saint Hildegard," he is busy working on the third installment of the series.

"There is an enormous connection between spirituality and curiosity where, in science, the question is always more fascinating than the answer," Conti said. His next unruly mystic will be Albert Einstein.

In celebration of Muir and his predilection for the glorious national park, Conti has arranged a private screening in April for those who are struggling to maintain the integrity of Yosemite under its present difficulties. "Thank you for representing the work we do so well," said park ranger Johnson to the filmmaker.

As for Saturday's screening, enjoy the journey on which we're poised on the precipice. "Going to the mountains is going home," said John Muir.

Tickets are \$10 at the door. Advance may be purchased at the office of Taos Center for the Arts, 133 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, or by calling (575) 758-2052.

For more information about Michael Conti and "The Unruly Mystic" series, visit [crazywisdomfilms.com](http://crazywisdomfilms.com).

CORRECTION: Incorrect information was provided to Tempo regarding Cody Mirabal's parentage. We have corrected the error in this story.