

Hetch Hetchy: Congress and the Environment

Hetch Hetchy Environmental Debates Overview

Between 1908 and 1913, Congress debated whether to make a water resource available or preserve a wilderness when the growing city of San Francisco, California proposed building a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley to provide a steady water supply. The Hetch Hetchy Valley was within Yosemite National Park and protected by the Federal Government, leaving it up to Congress to decide the valley's fate. National opinion divided between giving San Francisco the right to dam the valley and preserving the valley from development.

At the heart of the debate was the conflict between conservationists, who held that the environment should be used in a conscientious manner to benefit society, and preservationists, who believed that nature should be protected, saved from human interference. Siding with the conservationists, San Francisco citizens argued that the reservoir was necessary for the health of their city. On the other side, preservationists, led by John Muir, argued that Congress should protect the Hetch Hetchy Valley from destruction. Muir and his allies believed that nature should be enjoyed for its beauty, and not merely used for its resources.

Hundreds of individuals and organizations from across the country submitted petitions to Congress regarding the valley. These petitions, some of which are included below, bear witness to the birth of environmental activism as citizens weighed in, expressing multiple opinions about the proper use of National Park land and the relationship between local interests and national values.

In the end, Congress passed legislation that enabled the creation of a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley. President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill into law on December 19, 1913. Although the preservationists lost this battle, the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley raised public awareness about the importance of preserving nature, and helped justify the creation of the National Park Service in 1916.

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Worksheet

1. Identifying key evidence in the text:
 - a. Facts about the authors – Where are they from? Is this document from one writer or a group?

 - b. To what group within Congress are they writing, and what stage in the legislative process do they seek to influence?

2. Identifying the logic of the author's(s') argument(s):
 - a. Should the dam be built or not be built?

 - b. Why should Congress listen to them?

3. Understand how a text presents information:
 - a. How is the information in this document organized to persuade its reader?

 - b. How much of the information presents facts about a situation and how much is intended to persuade the reader to act?

4. Identify point of view:
 - a. How strongly does (do) the author(s) feel about the issue?

 - b. How is this demonstrated?

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5. Integrate visual information: In addition to the text of its message, does this document contain any additional features that affect its impact?

6. Distinguish fact from opinion by making a two-column list, containing:
 - a. Three points made in the document that are factual.

 - b. Three points made in the document that are opinion.

7. Which of the four statements on the environment listed in the instructions does your document most closely match?
 - a. The valley belongs to all the people as a public playground.
 - b. The valley is a water resource that San Francisco has a legal right to develop.
 - c. The valley should be dammed as a source of pure drinking water essential to public health in San Francisco.
 - d. The valley is a scenic resource to the nation as an unspoiled wonder.