Event honors legacy of naturalist John Muir

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Last night, Concordia's Center for Public Policy (CPP) hosted an event in remembrance of the 1800s wilderness preservation advocate John Muir, who passed away 100 years ago. The event was held at Newport Beach Public Library and featured Dr. Glen MacDonald, John Muir Memorial Chair of Geography and UCLA Professor, to discuss the legacy of Muir amidst the changes in today's environmental landscape.

For anyone who has ever enjoyed a stroll through a national park, thankful that their natural beauties have been preserved, Muir is the man to thank. "John Muir, along with Teddy Roosevelt, established the National Parks and the preservation of natural space, which all of us today enjoy," said Keith Curry, Director of the CPP. Without the combined efforts of Roosevelt and Muir, Curry said, the open space we enjoy today would likely have been swept up in the industrialization of the era.

In conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Muir's passing, the event intended to honor the naturalist, as well as inspire attendees to continue the legacy left in his passing. "I hope the lesson that people come away with is that one person can make a difference that can last generations," Curry said. "You can have the same vision today and make the same decisions that will have long-standing consequences."

The Irvine Company, a privately-owned real estate firm, exemplifies what it means to live up to this legacy. One of its most well-known efforts is the stewardship over the Irvine Ranch, which contains 50,000 acres of permanently protected wildlands and parks in Orange County.

"The Irvine Company has recently dedicated 20,000 acres, and just additionally another 2,500 more to open space," Curry said. "While we (Orange County) are one of the most urban counties in America, we are also one that has more open space in proximity to population than almost any place in America, and that will be a legacy for future generations. And that I think is the legacy of John Muir."

The conversation of nature preservation, in the wake of global warming and sea level rise, is often a global one, but it doesn't always have to be. Preservation can be meaningful on a smaller scale as well. "One of the great values of this open space is the relief it provides to the urban communities it surrounds," said Robert Elliot, Senior Advisor of the Irvine Company, in an introductory video on the company's website. "It defines and enriches the communities. It also preserves natural habitats and provides incredible recreation opportunities for the residents who live here."

The global scale of environmental protection is important, but action on the communal scale can be just as valuable. It motivates younger generations to embrace legacies like Muir's because it provides them the opportunity to see for themselves why the environment is worth protecting. As MacDonald wrote in an article for the San Francisco Chronicle, "What easier way is there to expose people to nature than right in their own backyards?"

"What we (the CPP) want to do is raise the profile of the university as a resource in the community," Curry said. "The second thing we want to do is to create an opportunity for our Concordia students to better understand the issues of policy and government here in California and specifically Orange County."

For those interested in future opportunities to learn more about California policy and government, environmental or otherwise, the CPP anticipates additional programs, such as the annual Orange County Report luncheon in the fall and the Sacramento Seminar, which is scheduled for next February.

In the meantime, students looking to be a resource in the community are encouraged to care for the local land through the on-campus preservation efforts of our very own Heritage Garden Club. For upcoming events, contact club president Lacey Henry, senior. Other options include exploring the volunteer opportunities enjoyed at the Irvine Ranch listed on their official site Irconservancy.org.