This dissertation is a study of the history of arguments concerning the preservation of American wilderness. In particular, I focus on the Sierra Club’s rhetoric, from its earliest 19th century travel narratives to its modern advocacy work. The analysis explores the communication tactics club members used in making arguments against proposed dams in Hetch Hetchy Valley and Dinosaur National Monument. Using these sites as case studies, I examine the introduction of the rhetorical sublime—defined here as the citation of the physically dramatic or unique aesthetic qualities of places as foundation for argument—as a means of wilderness preservation. In tracking its instigation and evolution, this study seeks to demonstrate the complex deployment of the rhetorical sublime through such tactics as bathos, place-making, and deixis found throughout 120 years of club communications.

In performing the first in-depth study of the Sierra Club’s communications history, I find evidence that John Muir and other club members were among the earliest to evoke sublimity to promote preservation in America, and that the club was the first to utilize film and coffee table books in order to advocate for preservation. Furthermore, in contradistinction to claims made in other scholarship, this study suggests that club members continue to use the sublime rhetorically into the present. I argue that the use of mixed media in advocacy campaigns in tandem with a rhetoric of the sublime provided preservationists with an entirely novel means of communicating about the environment. Ultimately, this project seeks to begin to demonstrate how the traditions inherited from European Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetics formed the basis of modern rhetorical arguments made in favor of the preservation of American wilderness.