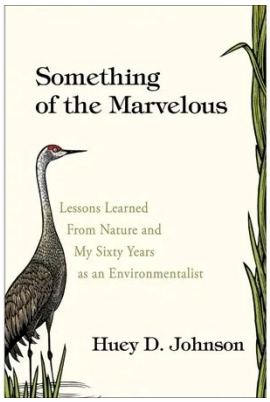
Book Review

By Peggy Lauer

Human Services program director and administrator, Marisla Foundation, United States of America

Something of the Marvelous: Lessons learned from nature and my sixty years as an environmentalist

By Huey D. Johnson
Fulcrum Group
284 pages



> There was no way down.
> I was alone on a boulder, out of rifle shells, and surrounded by ice. Paralyzed by fear, soaked in sweat, I thought this must be what it feels like to face a firing squad (xvii).

This is how Huey D. Johnson begins his memoir. His predicament as a young man of 24 foretells how he lived the rest of his life. He often took big risks. Presented with few options, he would listen to his inner voice, and the way through would invariably present itself.

Something of the Marvelous covers much of the ground and ideas Johnson nurtured over his 60 years as a conservationist, saving millions of acres of land and water habitat in the United States, and expanding environmental policy to address California's limited resources and the world's climate crisis. A first draft of the manuscript was completed a few days before he suffered a fall that led to his death at 87, on July 12, 2020.

Johnson was a biologist by training and believed in Western scientific reasoning. But he found that many scientists, who he would say know a lot about very little, were part of the problem. "As a confirmed generalist, I have seen time and again the disastrous consequences of specialization and the blinders it imposed on even the most brilliant minds". Johnson thought wholistically and attempted to manage the environment more as Mother Nature does. He was by his nature a savvy promoter, and he used the capitalist economic system to the environment's advantage.

He also never completely shut the door on a good idea. He mulled over big ideas, sometimes for years, before finding alternative strategies for reaching his goal, which often led to positive changes for environmental policy. A case in point: late in his life he reconstituted one of his early projects for saving ocean fish by raising forage fish in rice fields, much as the method in Asian cultures fed communities for centuries. A couple of years ago he and his team discovered this method could play a major role in mitigating methane and thereby climate change.

This book could seem inflated if not flat-out invented to a reader unfamiliar with Huey Johnson, his style, his devotions, and his achievements. Deborah Moskowitz, who worked with Johnson for eight years, and is president of Resource Renewal Institute, wrote in the Acknowledgements that his "accomplishments are so vast, they are difficult to enumerate. It's harder still to comprehend how he got it all done" (xiii). Like other highly motivated leaders, Johnson's mind was always at work, whether he was actually at his desk, or reading, fishing, hunting, or walking his dogs. He had an uncanny way of connecting problems and people in his mind and realizing solutions over time.

It is this quality, and the way he simply describes his lessons learned, that makes me believe there is something here for readers of *Ekistics and the New Habitat* to marvel at, beyond good storytelling in vivid, full color.

In his mid-twenties, Johnson had already become a highly paid "organization man," selling a new innovation for hotdog casings to the manufacturing industry. But the relentless pace and callous culture left him visibly shaken. In 1960, he decided the corporate world was not a good life for him and stepped off the ladder to success. For two and a half years, he travelled the world with little money, but with skills he considered crucial—salesmanship and the ability to tie a good knot among them. He picked up work here and there, like in New Zealand, where he went up on that icy mountain in pursuit of a thar, an invasive species that the Ministry of Environment wanted culled.

Once he returned to the States, he had jobs tagging salmon in Alaska and teaching debate at a secondary school in Idaho. He spent much of his free time fishing and hunting in those environments as he had done growing up in rural Michigan.

Johnson found his footing and his future when someone handed him a book of essays by Aldo Leopold, whose writing in the 1920s and '30s caused a shift in the field of game management toward wildlife conservation. Leopold wrote about the importance of a land ethic, which he defined with eloquence and clarity: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." The book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) was published a year after Leopold died from a heart attack while fighting a fire near his home. Leopold's land ethic became Johnson's holy grail. Johnson included in his memoir a photograph of his copy of the book, which he sent to his fiancée in 1962, announcing his epiphany: "Sue, Huzzah! This book may be the drum" (41). What struck him to his core was that this forester, a fellow Midwesterner, "urged us all to 'think like a mountain'. Leopold saw the natural world —including human beings—as inextricable parts of a single whole…[he] integrated environmentalism with philosophy, ethics, and pragmatism" (39).

With his new-found purpose, Johnson sought work with a number of conservation organizations. And then enrolled at the University of Michigan when he got no bites. Soon after, he saw a job listing on a bulletin board at UM and convinced someone at the 3-year old organization, The Nature Conservancy, to meet with him, although the job had already been offered to someone else. "Using all the sales skills I could muster, I somehow convinced him to hire me instead" (56). In a matter of 24 hours, he went from being a PhD candidate to TNC's Western Regional director responsible for the thirteen states west of the Mississippi River, and based in San Francisco, 3,000 kilometers away from TNC headquarters in Washington, DC. Johnson became the Conservancy's 8th employee, and began his career acquiring private land and protecting it as a public trust.

Johnson's means were often unusual for the era—any era--and the cast of collaborators he describes in this section of the book are particularly animated. They are passionate and driven. Two of the roundest characters we meet were driven by a sense of guilt and responsibility, and Johnson relays their stories with compassion. It is here that one of Johnson's underlying motivations described in the first chapter about his childhood comes up as a chord for indefatigable commitment. Tragedy.

Huey Denier Johnson was born in rural Michigan on January 6, 1933, during the Great Depression and he was shaped by the war effort at home. He was also shaped by the death of his brother who was killed by a car one year before Huey was born. Johnson recalls how:

> Duane's death and my parents' grief could have cast a long shadow over my childhood, but for some reason it only helped me thrive. My parents made it clear that I was expected to live for both myself and my brother, and to always try harder in my endeavors…. It was a tough way to motivate a child, but I knew my parents loved me, and the responsibility they put on my shoulders benefited me in my growth. I always wanted to fulfill their dream, and I think I did (3)

Within three years at The Nature Conservancy, Johnson found himself invested in a wild (certainly in the telling), complex effort to keep undivided and protected the land that includes the Pools of 'Ohe'o on the windward side of Maui, at the base of the indigenous Hawai'ians sacred Haleakala mountain.

Johnson's episodic style of storytelling is at its height here. And he is quite revealing of how American philanthropy worked related to real estate, land saving, and self-interest. But it was his political intuition and synchronous timing that had a major role in his success. In 1966, US Congress passed the Endangered Species Preservation Act and added protections in 1969 of those species in danger of "worldwide extinction". "I knew that twenty-eight species of birds—all lovely little honeycreepers-- were listed as extinct on Maui" (**72**). Hawaii's honeycreepers were unique to the islands. He brought over an ornithologist and his friend Dr. Martin Griffin, with whom he saved open space for bird habitat along the Pacific coast in Marin County, California. Johnson bought a couple a weeks' worth of food and arranged for Hawaiian guides to help Griffin and his team cut through the verdant and nearly impenetrable mountainside.

When the birders came down with photographs proving the existence of at least one honeycreeper, Johnson was ecstatic and relieved. He cared about birds—he had a deep commitment to Greater Sandhill cranes and revered Western bluebirds, among others—but he reveals in the book his main motive:

> Why did I care so much about extinct honeycreepers? Because I knew that bird-watchers were—and continue to be—the largest and most passionate group of nature lovers in the country. And it didn't hurt that many of the board members of TNC were avid bird-watchers too. Some were authors of ornithological books and manuals. I was convinced that if we could galvanize the interest of bird-watchers, we would raise the million dollars to buy the land in Hana (**72-73**).

Soon after the seven pools were saved from development, it took little selling by Johnson for the government of Hawaii to extend the protection to include the canyon and valley nearby, which meant protection of Haleakala from the summit to the sea.

What he learned in helping save grand and sacred places with TNC, he revised to save open space in cities with an organization he named the Trust for Public Land (TPL). With Leopold's philosophy as his own, Johnson and a couple of attorneys started TPL with an initial donation from a wealthy friend living on Maui, and a Ford Foundation grant. He opened an office in downtown San Francisco.

> We came up with a creative way to bring more open space to some of the poorest neighborhoods in Oakland [on the east side of San Francisco Bay]…. I talked to one of my duck-hunting friends—the president of Bank of America—and showed him how it could work to everyone's advantage if the bank gave us the dilapidated buildings they owned through foreclosure. Using the land trust construct, we would turn them into gardens, playgrounds and parks. And BofA would get a tax advantage for 'selling' to us (135).

He collaborated with the Black Panther Party in saving parcels of land and buildings in the areas of Oakland with the least access to open space. He knew the group's leaders and what the Panthers were working toward. "Portrayed one-dimensionally by government and media as gun-toting anarchists, the Panthers actually believed strongly in the interconnectedness of all people, with one another, and with nature. And they were among the first advocates for environmental justice" (140).

A large section of the book focuses on his experience using his knack as a generalist ("and a general") as the head of California's Resources Agency. He was in charge of managing the environment of the large and diverse state of then-23 million people (1978) with 1350 kilometers of ocean coastline. Johnson took the challenge to show that government could be a leader in managing the public trust, and to institute the land ethic. He invested his time integrating the work and goals of the competing and contentious departments in his agency who managed water, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, air quality, parks, wilderness, and habitats on land and in the sea. And he created a program to have the department cover the cost of graduate programs for candidates from any agency in state government who wanted to work on his 100-year investment plan in the environment of California.

He hired a good number of women and minorities, which was unusual for the time. Something he says he did simply because he judged people as individuals. He quickly became a threat to extractors and politicians of all stripes—and a target. But he somehow could steel himself and bear the brunt of harsh, serious opposition and keep his job in an amazingly innovative time in California and the nation, turning against nuclear power to invest in alternative energy, among other things. Of course, it helped that his boss, Governor Jerry Brown, believed in him. He praises Brown's acumen in the book: "I attribute much of whatever success I had on the job to his confidence and support. I rarely saw him during my time in his cabinet, yet I knew I could always count on him, even in the most difficult times."

After Governor Brown's tenure ended in 1982, Johnson traded a staffed department of 14,000 in the state capital for an office of one in a small fort of World War II barracks tucked beyond the headlands west of the Golden Gate Bridge. Fort Cronkhite was a precious piece of the contiguous park system Johnson had been instrumental in creating. Within five years, he and a handful of others working with him at the Resource Renewal Institute [including this reviewer] learned that what he and the Resources Agency had accomplished for California's sustainable future was happening on an international scale. Most nations committed to Agenda 21 plans to be signed at the UN Environment Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Institute beat the drum for the US involvement through the "Green Planning" program, which embodied much of what Greek architect and town planner Constantinos Doxiadis had launched with thought leaders decades earlier through Ekistics. For those new to the term, Ekistics is a single, adaptable framework for applying a multi-disciplined approach to improving human settlements.

Always the salesman, Johnson wrote consistently in his monthly newspaper column in the San Francisco Examiner that Green Planning was the key to solving the climate crisis because of the grand scope and its logic. "Green Planning follows the simple principle that to solve anything you have to solve everything. Not only that, solving everything is actually much easier to achieve than solving one thing" **(234)**. In all his writings, including this memoir, he praised the visionary planners of the Netherlands, New Zealand, and initially Canada for just this pragmatic approach.

This book is an honest reflection of the time and effort this accomplished leader put into the work, and also the short cuts he took—including sending his complete but loose manuscript to a potential publisher before a final edit. Johnson knew the details, was undeterred by setbacks, but was openly irritated with any process he couldn't speed up. He was motivated to get his stories out in the world before his body's processes slowed any further, not to assure his place in history, but simply to thank his family and friends, praise everyone he could remember he had worked with, and to show young environmentalists how to avoid some rookie mistakes.

In the Introduction, Johnson summarizes his points in one succinct lesson that I hope he can sell posthumously as more populations search for resilience in the face of peril:

> Sixty years ago on that icy mountain, I had learned a lot. Choose life over fear. Use whatever tools you have to survive, especially your own mind. Remember that you are more resourceful than you think. And never again forget to prepare ahead for the awesome power of nature (xix).