

Book Review

Conservation and Politics



A New Conservation Politics: Power, Organization Building, and Effectiveness. Johns, D. 2009. Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, United Kingdom. 408 pp. US\$49.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4051-9014-5.

A constituent once said to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Mr. President, why don't you do this and that?" To which the President replied, "I want to Madam, but you have to make me do it."

In his book, *A New Conservation Politics: Power, Organization Building, and Effectiveness*, David Johns tell us how to do just that—how to prompt elected officials and other decision makers to act favorably on behalf of wild, self-willed nature. Johns' book is timely and stands as a comprehensive primer for successfully advocating on behalf of wild things and wild places.

The book is well organized but dense. The author leaves no stone unturned as he offers instruction. Sometimes I lost rhythm of the book in its detail. Properly reading the book took time and attention.

I was entertained by his writing: "With enough resources symbols can be stripped of their moorings and put to use as doublespeak." Elsewhere, I was frustrated by his writing: "The ritual aspects of action and ritual per se—an invariant sequence of behaviors encoded with meaning the performance of which signifies acceptance of the meaning encoded—deserve more detailed review." Ouch.

The book's density arises from its wide intellectual drift as Johns draws examples from disparate sources to

reinforce points. When writing of the pervasive and perverse effects of propaganda and the need for conservationists to toil even when the job seems endless, he reminds us that the "Vatican took 300 years to apologize for its persecution of Galileo."

Why read the book? Johns provides a good answer. "An old proverb provides useful direction to conservationists: good does not triumph over evil because it is good but because it is strong. That is the reason for this book."

My conclusion after reading the book: reading the book will make you a stronger conservationist. As the weight of our charge to protect nature grows heavy, as it becomes increasingly difficult to successfully fight for wild things and wild places and ensure the persistence of the security they provide us all, more strength will be needed.

Johns' book is an important reading if you believe a peaceful and prosperous future depends on the presence of healthy and robust ecosystems worldwide.

Johns' book is an important reading if you believe the behavior of contemporary societies is determined by politicians and political processes.

Johns' book is an important reading if you believe conservationists must redouble efforts on behalf of wild things and wild places.

Johns' book is an important reading if you believe day after day, month after month, year after year, conservationists must be better prepared than those bent on marginalizing or completely discounting the importance of self-willed nature.

Throughout the book Johns emphasizes the importance of the political forces confronted by conservationists and points out that those forces all too often "work against the conservation movement as a whole." I mention this to highlight the book's principal shortcoming. Nowhere does Johns argue for conservationists to gain election to public office to work from the inside to turn those negatives forces into positive ones.

Given Johns' extensive work and research that frames his book, this shortcoming is puzzling. Clearly he knows the importance of politicians to nature, and yet in his book he does not advocate for conservationists to so serve (at local, county, state, or federal levels). This is unfortunate because elected officials are ideally positioned to work on behalf of wild things and wild places. I am so convinced of this that I challenge Johns' and everyone reading this review to put their name on a ballot and win elected office and then do so again and again and again.

The world is run by those who show up. It is time for those of us who believe in self-willed nature and are troubled by the extinction crisis to show up by earning a seat at the decision making table and then cajoling, arguing, lobbying, and ultimately voting on behalf of nature, again and again and again.

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