

Remembered: John Livingston

John Livingston, renowned Canadian naturalist, broadcaster, award-winning author and professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, died in January 2006 at the age of 82.

The diverse worlds of living creatures and the protection of their natural communities are on shakier ground with the passing of John Livingston from our world. It's as if there is a rip in the fabric of nature, or in "The Nature of Things," as John called his CBC show. I already miss John's huge presence, his radio-honed baritone voice talking in uncompromising ways about the wild and its biological conservation. I miss the way he would unabashedly celebrate the first skunk cabbages we saw and smelled in the spring, as we wandered through a wetland; or how he would pause, cocking his head, to listen and recognize the creator of any birdsong. I miss how outraged he would be when a television segment would show colourful images of one bird while using the lovely voice of a completely different species; he'd bellow about stealing identities, and the sheer stupidity of underestimating your audience.

I will miss John's passionate engagement with ideas and his attentive precision to meaning. Once on Saltspring Island he *screeched* his old truck to a stop on a steep narrow road, and roared at me because I was getting sloppy with my language about the more-than-human world. The point was driven home especially because he was almost blind at this point and still insisted on driving! Perhaps one of his greatest gifts was his emotional and visceral, life-long commitment to all things living. He was very very smart, he wrote the most elegant essays *and* his whole heart was involved in his intellectual pursuits.

In the *Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* (1981), John emphasized the importance of opening to experience:

To open is to make yourself consciously and deliberately vulnerable. It is an act of acceptance, an act of compliance. Opening may take a modicum of courage, but so did your very first public speech, your first dive off the high board, your first driving lesson, your first parachute jump, your first acceptance of mortality, your first serious doubt. Opening is conscious and deliberate compliance with what is ... Thus experience of wild nature becomes experience of our selves. (pp. 110-111)

He was appalled when someone called him a misanthrope. How could a man who went home every day and loved his wife and children, who was a great friend, and a dedicated teacher, be called a misanthrope? Such vicious name-calling tells us something about the plight of those who unapologetically defend the wild, inside and outside of us. John's candour was legendary, evidenced by this quote about misanthropy:

As every wildlife preservationist knows to his cost, the simple minded among us are wont to interpret our anger as misanthropy. I try to tell them that we are honest folk: if we were misanthropists, we would say so. Still, it is often charged that we “care more for animals than for people”- again an unwitting emphasis of the “man/nature” problem. This, as I perceive it, is cultural constipation at its fullest. (1981, p. 116)

Fortunately, John’s sense of humour could surmount these mortal obstacles. John loved his smokes and his scotch, and he and his wife Ursula’s actions fascinated my then four-year old son, who had never seen anyone smoke, let alone with Ursula’s elegant red nails. Unbeknownst to any of us, he had apparently been studying them, hence at breakfast one morning he enacted a careful mime of them smoking, detail by laborious detail. I froze, worried about such a disrespectful imitation of a tender topic. John laughed hard and long about it, marveling at Josh’s powers of imitation, and they became good companions.

Even being indoors with John, he would summon the wild in, and tell stories and adventures. Being a more introverted person than John, when I had to do presentations he would strengthen and distract me from my nervousness by telling me umpteen anecdotes about this frog or that otter. He was such a bigger-than life character. For everything he loved there were other things he could not tolerate. For example, after his work in the Galapagos he fervently despised feral goats and the damage they were doing to the islands. He detested the inherent contradictions of “sustainable development” and loudly proclaimed his disgust with the term right at the peak of its popularity. Later, he came to dislike the term “environmentalist,” as he and Neil Evernden, his long-time companion in environmental thought and scholarship, thought it had become an empty word co-opted by corporate suits. But John Livingston knew what he loved, and living by that covenant kept him vibrant and thriving.

In his award-winning book *Rogue Primate* (1994), John mused about the collective participating consciousness of biospheric selves, as he wrote:

Very likely, freely willing immersion in both group and community self is a prerequisite for the individual experience of the whole. Awareness of whole self is emotional, not rational. ... It is experienced, not known. It is lived, not abstracted. It is received, not perceived. It is a gift, not an accomplishment. (p. 117)

John, Jake, Livingston was an immense gift to my life. I am lonelier without his great big Being on this earth. The worlds of other living creatures will dearly miss his intimate, experiential knowing of them, and his sheer gutsy defence of their right to flourish. Our challenge at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, and beyond these walls into wilder places, is to ensure that we honour, continue to nourish, and struggle for the intellectual space that John carved out for all of us.

Leesa Fawcett is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto.

The first time I met John Livingston, he was perched on a picnic table by Shadow Lake, a camp northeast of Toronto where incoming York MES students convened for orientation. There he was, happily smoking and listening to birdsong. Another faculty member had advised me to seek him out given my interest in wildlife conservation, so I tentatively approached. In his wonderful gravelly voice (which I later realized was familiar to me from my childhood love of the *Hinterland Who's Who* spots on television), he asked me why I had come to FES. Suffering from a serious case of imposter syndrome, I managed to squeak out my love of other animals and my commitment to conservation, and briefly mentioned my undergraduate research on orangutans at the Toronto Zoo. Immediately, John put me at ease with his sincere interest, peppering me with questions about orangutans and the goings-on at the zoo. He then told me a bit about his own work and about a study on visitor behaviour that his wife, Ursula, had done at the zoo. And then we began to swap animal stories, an enduring practice we both delighted in over the years.

Oh, his tales. Of snorkeling off of Baja and looking down to see hammerhead sharks circling underneath. Of coming round a bend to meet a bull elephant, then frantically reversing. Of popping out of an ice-hole after a long dive to find polar bear paw prints around the hole. And the less exotic but just as meaningful stories, like the updates on the beavers at Sunderland or the bear at Carp, or which songbirds had returned as winter loosened its hold on the land. Or the many tales about the dogs and cats, or the other creatures John loved.

Hearing these stories, I could easily imagine John as a young boy, lying face down in the mucky marsh in the ravine behind his Toronto home, falling in love with the newts, toads and frogs. And I resonated with a profound recognition when I read this passage in the still brilliant *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*,

Plans were revealed for the construction of a storm sewer through “my” ravine. Shock, dismay, and all the rest of it were mine early. The ten-year old mind is not subtle: how can I warn the frogs and toads and newts? Can I get them out of there, take them away somewhere? (1981, p. 101)

John loved deeply, mourned deeply, and became passionately committed to conservation.

I am not exaggerating when I state that reading *Fallacy* in my first weeks at FES changed my life. I had not heard of John prior to entering FES, had not heard of “environmental thought,” did not know that there were terms to describe some of what I had been feeling all my life. Reading John’s eloquent prose moved me, and opened up new worlds of possibility.

John was a powerful and highly intelligent writer. An English major as an undergraduate, he reveled in good writing, and could be counted on for an enthusiastic discussion of whatever book was tickling his fancy at the time.

(I smile recalling a conversation in the kitchen in Carp when we found we were reading the same book at the time, *Of Tigers and Men*, and our hoots of delight when we realized that we had both come to the same suspicious conclusion about one of the characters.) John read widely and deeply, and this love of writing, of language, shone through in his own work. I remain awed by the sheer force of his words, as in this passage,

Entirely out of control, the human technomachine guzzles and lurches and vomits and rips its random crazy course over the face of the once-blue planet, as though some filthy barbaric fist were drunkenly swiping with a gigantic paint roller across an ancient tapestry. (1981, p. 20)

Obviously John was not one to mince his words.

John was also very funny. It did not take too much to make him guffaw, given his eye and ear for the absurdities of life. I still giggle when I read this passage,

Remember the classic accusation that is leveled against wildlife preservationists. We are emotional. When confrontation with our opponents reaches the abusive stage – which it can do – the ultimate crushing charge, designed to wholly discredit us, is that we are emotional. Emotion is unmanageable, unclassifiable, unreasonable, untrustworthy. It is illogical. A terribly prominent and respectable elderly gentleman thus castigated me many years ago; flushed purple, sweating, trembling, he brought his elegantly manicured fist crashing to the table: “You naturalists are nothing but starry-eyed idealists – you’re nothing but emotional!” he panted. That should have put me in my place for keeps. (1981, p. 105)

In addition to reminding me that emotion was nothing to be ashamed of but was the heart of conservation work, John taught me many things. He taught me the importance of slowing down—“keep your pants on!”—and engaging in critical analysis. He taught me to be suspicious of the rush to solutions, to quick fixes, in the face of complex problems. He taught me to be wary of “plastic words” (1994, p. 213). He reminded me of the importance of childhood experiences of nature, and the dangers of what he called “experiential undernutrition” (1994, p. 119):

For some of us, the experience of non-human Nature is the most vivid recollection of young childhood. Not the cognitive, but the affective experience. And certainly not the ‘wilderness’ experience, because wilderness is a human abstraction only. I mean the dissolution of the ego-centred self, as when one was drawn close, ever closer and at last into the gold-flecked eye of a toad, or when one melted into black earthy humus, laced with wintergreen, on a cool forest floor. Or when one’s cry of joy was transposed into gull clamour by a sea wind pungent with the scent of rotting kelp. When one sought, and found; when one relinquished, and was free. (1994, p. 197)

John taught me these things through discussions in the classroom, through

his writing, through conversation, and through his actions.

And John always encouraged me. To follow my passions. To be tenacious. To see academic work as one form of activism. To write. (Indeed, the last time I saw him at his home on Saltspring Island, he was so determined that I write a book on ecotourism that he suggested I go on an extended writer's retreat –to his guest cabin, so that he could be of regular assistance. One of my regrets is that I did not have time to do this before he died.)

In rereading this tribute, I note that I have used the word “love” regularly. This is no coincidence. While some may have experienced John as gruff, and others unfairly characterized him as a misanthrope, I experienced John as a kind man who loved deeply and widely. He loved Ursula, his family, his friends, the many dogs and cats with whom he shared his home, the frogs in the pond, the birds at the feeder outside the kitchen window, and the myriad creatures and lands he encountered in his long life. I loved him in return, and I will miss him.

Connie Russell is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay.

References

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