



## 2025 EBJ LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

As part of our annual Business Achievement Awards, Environmental Business Journal honored six executives for their lifelong service to the environmental industry. EBJ's 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award recipients are:

- ◇ Jan Walstrom, former Executive Vice President (retired), Jacobs
- ◇ Michael McKibben, Senior Vice President Director of Environment, U.S., WSP
- ◇ Gale Hoffnagle, Senior Vice President & Technical Director, TRC Environmental
- ◇ Al Spiers, Founder & Chief Executive Officer 2020 Environmental Group
- ◇ Michael Gialketsis, former President & CEO (retired), Rincon Consultants
- ◇ Dan Johnson, Vice President (retired) SCS Engineers

With this award, we express to Jan Walstrom, Mike McKibben, Gale Hoffnagle, Al Spiers, Mike Gialketsis and Dan Johnson our profound admiration and heartfelt gratitude for everything they have done for the environment and the environmental industry. We honor them for their vision, dedication, persistence, generosity to colleagues, and love of the environment, and we thank them for inspiring a new generation of environmental industry leaders. In this edition of EBJ, Dan Johnson, reflects on his life and career in the environmental industry. Our Q&A interview with Jan Walstrom appeared in the January/February EBJ edition. Gale Hoffnagle, Mike McKibben, Al Spiers, and Mike Gialketsis will be featured in upcoming editions.

# DAN JOHNSON

## VICE PRESIDENT (RETIRED)

### SCS ENGINEERS

EBJ Lifetime Achievement Award, 2025



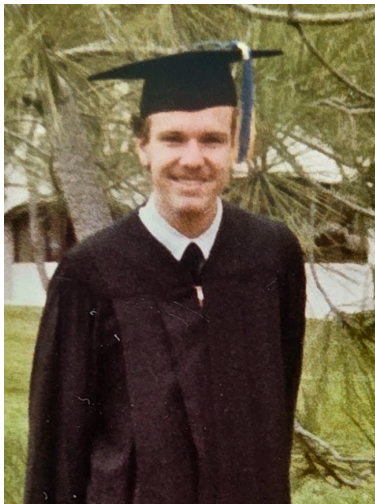
**D**aniel E. Johnson, MS, is a distinguished environmental professional with over four decades of experience, specializing in real estate risk management and environmental site assessments. He has worked on real estate transactions and projects with a total value in excess of \$5 billion. Throughout his career, he has managed thousands of site assessments, ranging from Phase I ESAs to complex subsurface investigations and large-scale remediation projects. His expertise spans a broad spectrum, including leaking underground storage tanks, chlorinated solvent remediation, and groundwater monitoring, often involving direct negotiations with regulatory agencies.

Dan is perhaps best known for his work on hundreds of brownfield redevelopment projects, ranging from simple gas station sites to complex multi-block projects like Petco Park and IQHQ, the former Navy Broadway Complex. Four of Dan's projects (Petco Park, IQHQ, Comm 22, and Marina Gateway) earned Phoenix Awards, the premier national recognition in the United States for excellence in brownfields redevelopment. The Phoenix Award recognizes transformation projects in land recycling, urban revitalization, and environmental cleanup that have resulted in productive community assets.

Dan was the Principal Strategist behind SCS Secure, a pioneering risk-transfer program for environmentally impaired assets. His career trajectory includes significant contributions to state and U.S. EPA programs, as well as international research fellowships with the UN Environment Programme. A dedicated advocate for sustainable redevelopment, his work has consistently focused on transforming contaminated or underutilized properties into productive community assets. By prioritizing infill development over greenfield expansion, his efforts have been instrumental in protecting public health, reducing urban blight, and stimulating local economies.

EBJ: Can you tell us a little about how you grew up, and how that influenced the path you chose?

Dan Johnson: I grew up in Palos Verdes, a suburb of Los Angeles, as the youngest of four brothers. In the 1960s and 70s, I was a massive basketball fan—I lived for the LA Lakers, Jerry West, and Wilt Chamberlain. I played every chance I could, but the air pollution in Los Angeles was so severe back then that you could only stay outside for an hour before your lungs literally started to hurt. That experience was catalytic; it drove me toward environmentalism and a desire to help fix the problem. I eventually joined the Sierra Club, trained as a leader, and found solace in nature that I still seek today.



College graduation, 1982

blew away during the Dust Bowl, forcing them to move west with nothing. My dad worked tirelessly to succeed in banking, and he taught us the absolute value of an honest day's hard work.

EBJ: Tell us a little about your student days. What did you study at college?

My family also heavily influenced my path. I watched my parents and brothers—each of them successful entrepreneurs or executives at companies like AMEX and ITT Rayonier—build their careers through an incredible work ethic. My father's family lived the real-life Grapes of Wrath: Their farm in Dodge City, Kansas,



Dan, age 22, at the UNEP office in Nairobi, Kenya, little realizing he was about to get caught up in an attempted coup.

Johnson: I attended Earl Warren College at the University of California San Diego and majored in Economics. At the time, environmental science degrees didn't really exist; there was a bias that it wasn't a "hard science." As a freshman, I participated in a bridge program modeled after Outward Bound. We spent 10 days in Baja hiking, rock climbing, and going solo without food before ascending Picacho Del Diablo, the highest point in Baja. It was like boot camp in the great outdoors, and the bond I formed with the 10 friends who went through that battle with me made all the difference. I still remember shaking a scorpion out of my boot in the morning!

The real turning point was a class I took through Muir College called Wilderness and Human Values, which is still taught today. It was a multidisciplinary look at history, pollution, population growth, and biodiversity, taught by an all-star cast of guest lecturers. I was so inspired that I convinced the Provost, John Stewart, to let a sophomore serve as a teaching assistant (TA). That experience set the stage for my career. As a TA until graduation, I worked with legends like Roger Revelle, Peter Matthiessen, John McPhee, and David Brower, the first Executive Director of the Sierra Club and father of modern environmentalism. I remember David Brower telling me in 1982 that the world would eventually realize the importance of environmental systems—his words proved incredibly prescient.

One of my most formative experiences came after graduation, when Roger Revelle helped me secure an internship with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi. In the summer of 1982, I set off around the world at 22. I worked on an early mainframe computer answering environmental queries

from member countries. However, I got more than I bargained for: The Kenya Air Force attempted a coup, and the city became unsafe. A BBC correspondent and I mistakenly drove past an armed checkpoint, and warning shots were fired. We managed to talk our way out of it and hunkered down until the dust settled. Since there were no texts or emails then, my parents were terrified when they read about it in the news—I ended up coming home a bit early!

*EBJ: Did you have any mentors who especially encouraged you or fostered your interests?*

Johnson: So many people. Roger Revelle and John Stewart were instrumental; I still keep the recommendation letters they wrote for me. Professionally, during my first consulting job, Mark Cousineau and Jon Lovegreen took me under their wing; they were, and still are, extraordinary consultants.

*EBJ: What was your first job in the environmental industry?*

Johnson: I originally thought I wanted to work in air quality, so my first job was with the Coalition for Clean Air in Los Angeles. It was a small NGO, which meant I was thrown right



Dan at an SCS open house with San Diego mayor Todd Gloria and STEM non profit ODI to present SCS donation.

*EBJ: What did you do before joining SCS Engineers?*

Johnson: I spent time with the U.S. EPA in Washington, D.C., working on environmental quality metrics, which culminated in a briefing for then-Administrator Lee Thomas. This was a key pivot for me—I shifted my focus from air quality to solid waste and hydrogeology.

This interest was further sparked by a personal experience in 1985 while helping my dad move. I found his garage full of household hazardous waste (HHW). Having studied the regs, I knew it shouldn't go in the trash, but L.A. County didn't have a program yet. After a frustrating experience in which a collection program in El Segundo rejected me because I wasn't a resident, I eventually found a local resident working in his yard who helped me drop it off. I wrote an Op-Ed about it for the Los Angeles Times. Following radio interviews and the Times interest, Supervisor Dana drafted an ordinance to develop the HHW collection program that exists to this day. I like to think of myself as the proud uncle of that program.

After finishing graduate school, I joined Applied Geosciences before leaving in 1992 to form Environmental Business Solutions (EBS) with just \$40,000 in seed capital. The first few years were grueling—70- to



Petco Park before (above) and after (right).

in, working on transportation demand management and testifying at hearings before Los Angeles City Council and County Supervisors.





*Biking Crested Butte, 2022; Hiking with Lisa at Hanalei overlook, Kauai, 2024*

80-hour weeks. Our big break was a downtown San Diego project that we thought was a single block but turned out to be a 40-city-block “secret siting project” (Petco Park) that generated over \$6 million in revenue. Petco Park and the ancillary development represented around \$2 billion in total costs. By 2000, I decided to sell EBS. We chose SCS Engineers because of their excellent employee-ownership model. I stayed on as a Vice President until my retirement, embracing their culture of servant leadership.

*EBJ: How have you seen the requirements for site assessments change over the years? How has the practice evolved, and what are the biggest challenges today?*

Johnson: The changes are hard to overstate. When I started, there were no standards or even nomenclature like “Phase I.” We did reviews by hand before GIS digitized regulatory sites. I eventually sat on early ASTM committees to hammer out the first standards for soil and groundwater sampling. Today, the challenges come from AI—which will streamline reporting but can’t replace physical data collection—and the corruption of science in regulatory decisions. I have seen instances where desired policy outcomes seek science to support them, rather than following the weight of the evidence. The current vapor intrusion guidance is a clear example of “underground rulemaking” that impacts our ability to redevelop brownfields cost-effectively.

*EBJ: As an expert in brownfields redevelopment, how have you seen this field develop? What are the biggest challenges?*

Johnson: In 1995, the term brownfields barely existed. Today, it has evolved into a market-driven risk management ecosystem. However, the 2012 dissolution of Redevelopment Agencies (RDAs) in California was a massive blow. RDAs had the heavy artillery of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to pay for upfront remediation. Successors like EIFDs are ‘RDA-Lite’ and cannot access school tax portions, creating a massive fiscal gap for mid-market projects. In 2026, we see an incentive paradox. While we have strong liability shields, such as the CLRRRA (extended through 2037), California is an incentive desert compared to states like New York or Florida. High-revenue uses, such as data centers, are outbidding housing developers for these sites because they can afford the remediation costs. We have the tools to clean the dirt, but we have lost some of the collective political will to fund the gap between a blighted lot and a productive one. In California and other states, there is a shift away from regulatory-driven brownfield cleanups toward voluntary cleanups in response to concerns about the process and timing of regulatory oversight. And, of course, vapor intrusion is a major issue affecting almost all urban infill projects.

*EBJ: Looking back, which projects stand out for you in terms of complexity, challenge or most rewarding outcome?*

Johnson: While massive projects like Petco Park were significant, the affordable housing projects have been the most meaningful. I remember the opening of Comm 22, a brightly colored Bridge Housing project in Barrio Logan, San Diego. A resident spoke about what it meant to finally have a home after being unhoused—it brought me to tears. Knowing our role was critical in getting that built was truly gratifying.

*EBJ: Do you serve on any boards? What has been your role as board member?*

Johnson: I currently sit on the SDSU Advisory Board for their Certificate in Brownfields Management Program. After years of gentle prodding, SDSU recently won a grant that I hope will help the program grow into a full major in brownfields studies. Historically, I’ve served on many boards, including the California Regional Water Quality Control Board (appointed by the Governor), the Urban Land Institute, Goodwill of San Diego, UCSD Programs



Mt. Kilimanjaro honeymoon, 1992, at 19,340 ft. The guide got waylaid by altitude sickness, but Dan and Lisa made it to the summit!

in Hazardous Materials Management and Site Assessment, and the Maritime Alliance.

*EBJ: Which professional organizations and charities have given you the most satisfaction?*

Johnson: My time on the Water Board was both technically challenging and rewarding. Forming the San Diego Environmental Professionals (SDEP) 40 years ago is something I am proud of. And my work with Goodwill of San Diego, where I helped them secure over \$10 million in tax credits, earned me Volunteer of the Year, a special honor.

*EBJ: What do you consider your greatest achievements in work and life?*

Johnson: It would be easy to focus on building a company or big flagship projects. Or helping to improve the environment. But honestly, it's about the people. It's seeing residents move into affordable housing and mentoring staff and students at UC San Diego to help them grow and succeed in their careers.

*EBJ: Do you have hobbies or special interests?*

Johnson: In retirement—or “reirement”—my wife Lisa and I hope to spend more time outdoors. We love hiking, mountain biking, and volleyball. We've traveled to amazing places, including climbing Kilimanjaro in Africa, and we plan to visit many more National Parks. I also enjoy playing the guitar, listening to music, and reading.

*EBJ: Where does the spirit of nature speak most powerfully to you?*

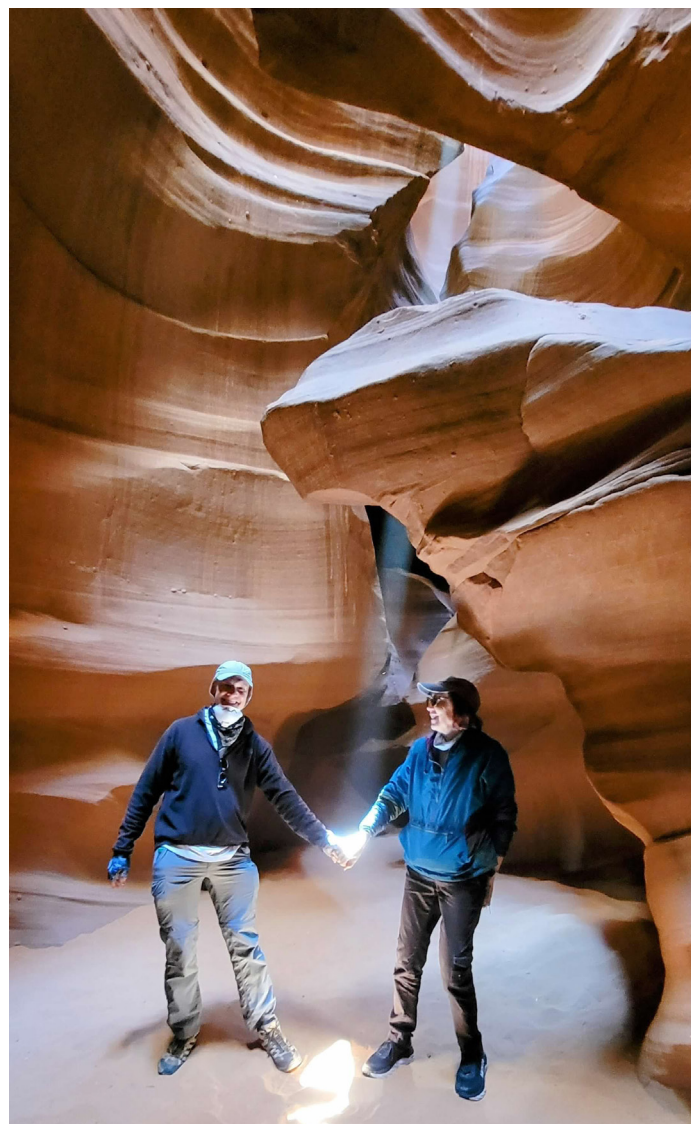
Johnson: When I am among the big trees—the giant Sequoias or Redwoods. There is something about the power and beauty of a living thing that has seen 2,000 years of life; there is a special wisdom in sharing its space.

*EBJ: What advice do you have for someone just getting started in the environmental industry?*

Johnson: Figure out where hiring decision-makers hang out and relentlessly network at industry or trade association events.

*EBJ: Do you have a favorite work-related story that still makes you laugh?*

Johnson: In the EBS days, we had stress balls shaped like the Earth with our logo on them. One day, about 10 boxes of them showed up, and a full-fledged “squish ball fight” broke out. For 15 minutes, balls were flying across the office, and nobody was safe!



Dan and Lisa exploring Antelope Canyon, Arizona, 2024