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David Suzuki: Voice of the Environment

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ABSTRACT

Consuming endlessly, accumulating waste and ignoring the fragile environment are common trends in today's world. A speaker for the environment, Dr. David Suzuki is aware of the environmental crisis. Suzuki, with honours in Biology and a Ph.D. in Zoology, has been active in promoting environmental conservation through his show *The Nature of Things*, his work as a professor, his public speaking around the world, and his charity, the David Suzuki Foundation. The foundation deals with environmental issues, including climate change, health, oceans, wildlife, habitat preservation, and freshwater conservation. The foundation has created programs and projects to challenge the everyday life of individuals. One project, the Nature Challenge, encourages individuals to be greener in their everyday life. Another project is a mission to achieve sustainability in Canada by 2030, called SWAG – Sustainability Within a Generation. Demanding immediate action on the environmental issues of today, Suzuki uses science and facts when he speaks for the Earth. Suzuki provides Canadians with easy ways to help save the environment, showing that environmental conservation can be practiced by all.

A common trend in today's fast-paced society is to consume endlessly and accumulate waste without acknowledging the impact of these reckless actions on the fragile environment. In the face of constant, human-made destruction, who speaks for the earth, our home and resource, which allows us to continue our consumerist lifestyles?

Dr. David Suzuki recognizes the environmental crisis and has taken the following position: “Nature is the ultimate source of our water and electricity, and nature absorbs our waste. But in our globalized world, we believe the economy takes precedence over nature... but the economy is a human invention, while nature is what all life depends on” (Suzuki & Moola, 2008, para. 8). Environmentalist, geneticist, broadcaster, and all-around conservationist, Dr. David Suzuki is a Canadian born nature enthusiast, directing the world’s attention to the environment and the damage incurred by the world’s population that now exceeds seven billion humans.

Born in 1936 in Vancouver, Canada, Suzuki, a Japanese Canadian, was only six when his family was forced to move into an internment camp during the Second World War. Having lost everything following the war, his family relocated to Kaslo, a small town on Kootenay Lake. Suzuki spent most of his time in the Kootenay valley exploring and learning about different plant species (Suzuki, 2006, p. 22). After much movement, the family finally settled in London, Ontario. In his book, *David Suzuki: the Autobiography*, Suzuki (2006) used the word “nerdiness” to describe himself, stating that his “main solace was a large swamp” close to his house: “Any marsh or wetland is a magical place, filled with mystery and an incredible variety of plant and animal life. I was an animal guy and insects were my fascination” (p. 31). His compassion and ability to influence and inspire others became quickly evident when he was voted school president in his final year of high school. Suzuki’s childhood influenced him to speak up: “being considered less than worthy of being considered a Canadian shaped the way I am, it left me with a lifelong need to do things to prove to Canadians that they made a mistake, that we are worthwhile people” (p. 22).

Expanding on his childhood love of nature and biology, Suzuki graduated from Amherst College in 1958 with an Honours BA in Biology, which soon followed with a Ph.D. in Zoology from the University of Chicago in 1961. Suzuki began his professional career as an Assistant Professor in genetics at the University of Alberta in 1962, shortly before becoming a faculty member of the University of British Columbia in 1963 where he has remained ever since (Suzuki, 2006, p. 47).

Early into his career, Suzuki demonstrated a gift for public speaking, and he soon began speaking to audiences and appearing on television shows. In *Forces of Nature: The David Suzuki Movie*, Suzuki admitted he “always felt that television was a fantastic medium whereby the area of science could be explained to the public on a very large scale.... science is too important to be left in the hands of scientists or industrialists or politicians” (2010). In 1969 Suzuki broadcasted his first television series called *Suzuki on Science*. With his “unique ability to talk about science in lay terms” (Corcelli, 2005, para.

1), Suzuki excelled at expanding on the topics covered in his show and attracted great popularity as a result. A radio show, *Quirks and Quarks*, and another television series, *Science Magazine*, preceded his commitment to the show *The Nature of Things* (Corcelli, 2005, para. 1). From AIDS and global warming to entomology and zoology, *The Nature of Things* explores it all and touches on a vast variety of highly controversial subjects, helping to educate and inform Canadians about science and the environment (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d., paras. 6-7). His motivation to continue speaking for the earth has changed over time and having grandchildren has made Suzuki strive for a healthier environment and a better world: “I’m really compelled by my grandchildren. When I look at my youngest grandchild and see the enormous potential in his life, but realize the constraints that the environmental decline will impinge on him, I grieve for that” (Martin, 2010, para. 4).

Suzuki has won numerous awards, including the Distinguished Canadian Award, Companion to the Order of Canada, Global Citizen United Nations Association of Canada, and 5th spot as the Greatest Canadian. Along with his professional work, Suzuki has written many blogs, published over 300 articles, authored 52 books, and spoken at numerous conferences and interviews (“Dr. David Suzuki: Detailed CV,” n.d., pp. 2-17).

Notably one of Suzuki’s largest achievements is the creation of the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF), which was founded on September 14, 1990. The foundation came from the ideas of Suzuki and his wife, Dr. Tera Cullis, after they were faced with questions and pleas for help from all over the globe. People wanted a “solutions-based organization,” one that could deal with current environmental issues (Cullis, 2011, para. 2). The scope of many of these issues was too great for the two of them alone, so after discussing their ideas with other environmentalists, the foundation was established as an environmental group that would “be based on the best scientific information... to get to the root causes of destructiveness to seek real alternatives and solutions” in the hopes to get onto a truly sustainable path” (TckTckTck, 2011, para. 4).

The foundation was set up to be a credible organization that governments and corporations could seek for advice, a tool for educating on environmental issues, and a source of information on ways to help save the environment. To maintain credibility, the foundation decided “not to accept government grants or support” (Suzuki, 2006, p. 221); governments often change their priorities and the foundation did not want to compromise its beliefs and values (Suzuki, 2006, p. 221). In 1992, Suzuki and Cullis attended the Rio Earth Summit, using the work of others around the world to develop the “Declaration of interdependence,” a guiding principle to steer the foundation (Suzuki, 2006, pp. 274-277; David Suzuki Foundation, 1992, para. 1).

Since its creation, the foundation has been challenged with many detrimental issues relating to the environment such as climate change, human health, oceans, wildlife and habitat, and freshwater conservation. Initial projects were international, because money could go much further overseas. The foundation worked with the Ainu of Japan to protect salmon, indigenous people of Columbia, and the Kayapo people of Brazil. Projects took Suzuki and other foundation members to Australia for research on a dam project and to Vancouver Island where they worked with the Hesquiat people to restore a clam fishery. Partnering with local people during projects encouraged alternative models of development for economies and communities and allowed the foundation not only to educate and solve issues, as well as to continue to conserve resources (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.c, para. 4).

Foundation sponsorship and donors enabled DSF to begin work in Canada. Publishing books and partnering with groups to work on projects, the foundation worked on a Musqueam Watershed Restoration project and restored health to the last salmon stream in Vancouver with the Pacific Salmon Forests Project. The foundation published landmark guidelines for logging and annual report cards on Canadian rain forests and pushed for clean air, publishing energy solutions and successfully lobbying Canada to sign the Kyoto Accord. DSF has worked with the government to support renewable energy and carbon tax while protecting species at risk, fighting for pesticide bans, helping chefs switch to sustainable seafood, and educating businesses on how they can decrease their environmental impact by reassessing current methods and techniques in the agriculture and business sectors (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.c, para. 4-11; Suzuki, 2011, pp. 205, 232-237, 246).

Two outstanding projects of the DSF have challenged the everyday life of individuals. The Nature Challenge was created to encourage individuals to make a difference in their everyday life by following seven easy-to-follow guidelines: 1) reduce home energy use by 10 percent; 2) choose energy efficient home appliances; 3) replace pesticide use with clean alternatives; 4) buy locally grown and produced food; 5) choose a fuel efficient vehicle; 6) use green transportation (walk, bike, carpool, bus) once a week; and 7) learn and share information with others (Suzuki, 2006, p. 262; Pazderka, Rowan, & Tamm, 2003, pp. 6-16).

The mandate and mission of Sustainability Within a Generation (SWAG) are to achieve sustainability in Canada by 2030. To determine how to achieve sustainability, DSF divided society's needs into nine areas: generating genuine wealth; improving energy efficiency and resource use; shifting to clean energy; reducing waste and pollution; protecting and conserving water; producing healthy food; conserving,

protecting and restoring Canadian nature; building sustainable cities; and promoting global sustainability (Suzuki, 2006, p. 264; Boyd, 2004, p. 2). Not only are these goals realistic, but the DSF website provides ways that each of the points can be met efficiently and effectively (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.e, para. 1).

Suzuki has inspired the hearts and minds of thousands of people across the nation, worked with large corporations and governments on large-scale environmental initiatives, and instilled in people a sense of responsibility for nature. Although there is a multitude of support sent Suzuki's way and despite the evident impact that he has made in the scientific community, he continues to be critiqued by others. Chairman of the Natural Resources Stewardship Project, Ball (2007) referred to Suzuki as "a bully intolerant of scientists who don't see things his way" (para. 1). Others have stated that he "lies in public" (MacRae, 2000, para. 49).

While individuals have stated opinions and disagreed with his work, Suzuki has explained that he has "been attacked by the forest industry, the chemical industry, the fossil fuel industry, and the pharmaceutical industry because [he] was always raising issues that the industries [didn't] like having discussed". Suzuki faced much criticism from the public when he praised the Ontario Premier's green initiatives in a video that was placed on the Liberal Party website. Gregory Thomas of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation expressed concern about Suzuki's close ties to DSF and his endorsement of Premier McGuinty: "If David Suzuki wants to be a political activist, that's what he should do, and not call himself a charity" (Davidson, 2011, para. 10). As the credibility of DSF deteriorated, Suzuki defended the foundation by announcing "[his] personal opinion has nothing to do with [his] foundation.... I try very, very hard not to be partisan, but I still will criticize government for policy. I think that's the right of all people" (Alter, 2007, para. 5). Despite criticism, Suzuki remains focused on his values: "We have to reflect on how we arrived at this moment, search for the root causes of the problems so we can find ways to avoid danger and discover new solutions that are truly sustainable" (*Forces of Nature: The David Suzuki Movie*, 2010).

Although Suzuki deals with everything to do with the environment, one of his most active roles is in the area of climate change. The DSF described climate change as the result of alterations to long-term weather patterns through human activity. Global warming is a rise in the average global temperature and is just one of the conditions of climate change. As carbon dioxide increases due to the combustion of fossil fuels, carbon gets trapped increasing the density of the atmosphere, causing a 32 percent rise of carbon dioxide since the Industrial Revolution (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.d, para. 3-6).

One of the most serious impacts of climate change is its effect on water resources around the world. The World Water Council (2010) stated in a report that currently more than one out of every six people in the world lack access to safe drinking water (para. 2). Water is already in short supply as a resource and “tied to many other resources and social issues such as food supply, health, industry, transportation and ecosystem integrity” (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.b, para. 3). There has been an increase in precipitation that can prevent crops from germinating on time, which can lead to a worldwide food shortage. Suzuki argued that things will not get better on their own:

I feel, in many ways, that the scientific community is failing miserably, when you think that over 20 years ago the leading scientists in the USA were saying global warming is real, human beings are a major part of it, we have to act now.... the issues are dealt with in too superficial a way and we are not taking science seriously.

As a majority of the world starts to realize the validity of his concerns, Suzuki has made plans urging people to be more energy conscious and calling for Canada to develop a national energy plan. Technological advances put green energy sources to the test, and wind and solar energy are the fastest growing renewable energy sources in the world. Clean, sustainable energy does more than just reduce the risk of climate change; it also brings jobs, investment income, and competitive edge (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.a, para. 3).

Even though he has been a forceful speaker on climate change and sustainable energy resources, Suzuki suggested that many people remain unconvinced:

The issue of climate change is still controversial, even though the vast majority of climatologists are saying climate change is occurring and we have to do something about it, there is handful of people, most paid for by the fossil fuel industry that are saying no, but in the name of balance we take one rep from the huge group saying yes and one from the tiny group saying no and act that it is a controversy, but really it isn't.

There are three different categories of feelings towards climate change: 1) the people who believe it exists and want to change; 2) those who believe it exists but do not consider it serious; and 3) those who believe climate change is just due to “natural cycles” (Ball, 2007, para. 1).

Suzuki speaks to science and facts when he speaks for the earth. He speaks without ageism, sexism or racial biases; he speaks simply to educate and provide ideas to create a sustainable and healthy world. Through children's books and school presentations, he finds ways to communicate with even small children to teach and inspire: "adults don't want to change, children haven't invested time or effort into the status quo. They're completely open" (Bradley-St-Cyr, 1995, para. 11-12).

Suzuki uses realistic goals and provides realistic means of achieving these goals—simple everyday tasks that could make a large difference in the environment (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.e, para. 1). His foundation outlines idea after idea of practical ways that individuals can change in their own lives, as well as ways that businesses and even nations can decrease their impact on the environment, benefiting the health of the environment and human populations.

Environmental problems are here, they are real, and it is time for humans to take action. Suzuki provides us with easy ways to help save our environment. He is influential, honest, and his knowledge about science has sparked in Canadians an interest in the environment: "I have no illusions that I am so important that I can turn everything around, I have no illusions that my foundation is going to make that huge difference, but I believe if millions of people like me and thousands of organizations like mine are all doing their small part we can become an irresistible force" (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d). Dr. David Suzuki speaks for our earth; will you?

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