

## Suzuki, Canada's science guru : How to save this planet

PHOTO: DAVID DEVEAU



by Lynne Sampson

The planet is headed for catastrophe unless human beings redefine our ideas of progress, said Dr. David Suzuki on Thursday night.

Suzuki's lecture, sponsored by the Dalhousie Science Society, received a standing ovation from a capacity audience. In it he attacked as myths a number of "sacred truths" that are leading to the massive destruction of the planet.

The most dangerous of these myths is that we have to do everything we can to ensure steady growth. "Growth and development are at the very heart of what our society defines as progress. Progress is continued increase in consumption and material wealth." Continued growth puts great pressure on the environment, and will only ensure that we use up our resources more quickly. In order to reverse our current trend of pollution, overpopulation, deforestation and massive species extinction, we have to aim for negative growth.

This does not mean returning to the days of the horse and buggy. "One of the consequences of our free enterprise system," says Suzuki, "is that we have

control the impact of new technologies by doing environmental assessments. "The problem with new technology is that the benefits are always immediate and obvious. The costs are almost always hidden and imperceptible." It took years for the negative effects of pesticide spraying to come to light. Pesticides have come up through the food chain to humans, and they have damaged the ecosystem by destroying one of its most vital components, insects. Environmental assessments could not have predicted this because they study tiny samples for at most two years. "We extrapolate greatly from these statistically meaningless bits of data. Environmental assessments are too limited in scale, in scope, and in duration. If we are going to do them, they must be ongoing and cumulative."

Suzuki recommends we make a number of changes in our attitudes. The first is that we educate ourselves about science. "We are being affected by science more than any other human activity. I believe you cannot call yourself a responsible citizen today if you are scientifically illiterate." Scientific literacy means having a basic knowledge of scientific terms

and concepts. Suzuki believes universities have aggravated society's problems by splitting the science and arts faculties. Education must be broad and well-rounded. He says it is as important for scientists to be informed about history and current affairs as it is for English majors to know about science.

We also need to elect scientifically literate politicians. In today's cabinet, twenty-two of the thirty-eight ministers come from the fields of business or law. This skews government's priorities towards economic and jurisdictional matters. "It is no accident that we are obsessed with issues like Meech Lake and free trade," says Suzuki. Our politicians have to make decisions about whether to buy nuclear submarines and whether to become involved in the space research programs with the United States. They must decide issue like biotechnology, medical care, deforestation, and pollution. Yet they score rock bottom in their knowledge of basic scientific terms and concepts. We can no longer accept this in our leaders, says Suzuki. "We must become a society that takes science seriously."

Neither should we accept the practice of only funding research that will provide immediate payoffs. Government grants are given to researchers who claim their work may lead to a cure for baldness, or a Canadian superconductor. "The main motivation for scientists today is money," says Suzuki. Many scientists dedicate themselves to applied science, rather than ecology and conservation, because that is where the money is. The public must rid itself of the desire for new technology to make life more leisurely.

We must also reexamine the notion that we are a well-informed society. We tend to think of ourselves as such because we receive such high exposure to information from the media. Yet Suzuki says "the

media do not reflect reality. They create reality." Constraints of time and space in the media distort the picture of what is being reported. People must be more critical about the information they receive. They must analyze it and decide on its validity themselves.

Finally, we must educate our children differently. "We cannot afford to raise children like us. We can no longer clone ourselves every generation." Suzuki says parents teach their children that nature is dirty or dangerous simply by swatting flies or running from a bee. Nature is something to be fought and conquered. Yet if our children continue to act as we do, we will destroy fifty per cent of the species on the planet in one hundred and fifty years, and eighty per cent in two hundred years. We must change our idea of progress to mean achieving a balance and harmony with nature, rather than an adversarial relationship with it.

Suzuki points to Canada's native people as an example of this harmony and balance. "Their identity comes from their relationship to the land," he says. "When they talk about 'our brothers, the whales and the fish,' they really mean it." He says the land claims of native people are crucial to Canada, because our solution to them will define our values as a society. Suzuki has become deeply involved in native issues in the last few years, and is donating the proceeds from the sale of books he brought with him to native and environmental issues.

Suzuki believes our activities are threatening every other form of life on earth. "Today the greatest, deadliest predator ever known in the history of life on earth is us. We need a new perspective on our place in the scheme of things." This new perspective must be adopted now, he says, while we still have a choice.

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