

living earth

As a Companion of the Order of Canada, United Nations award winning scientist, television host and author, and adopted son of three tribes within Canada's First Nations, **Dr. David Suzuki** has been the voice of Canada's environmental conscience for almost 40 years.



Long recognized for his ability to make science accessible to the average Canadian, Dr. Suzuki has displayed an incredible ability to drum up public support for a host of issues from the dangers of genetically modified foods to the needs for sustainable fishing policies. In 1990 he set up the David Suzuki Foundation, a non-profit organization dedication to finding innovative solutions to conserve the natural world.

These days, Dr. Suzuki is embarking on the toughest fight of his career as he seeks to educate the masses on the perils of climate change and the dire need for individuals to get responsible and take up the cause to preserve the Earth for future generations.

COLLECTIONS' Jeremy Finkelstein contacted Dr. Suzuki at his offices in Vancouver for a candid conversation about climate change, the Kyoto Protocol, and Ontario's efforts in global conservation.

COLLECTIONS: Is there still room for debate about global warming?

Dr. David Suzuki: If so, it is not a scientific debate. The data are in and totally compelling. Indeed, climate scientists meeting in Toronto in 1988 were so alarmed by the data that they called for a 20% reduction in greenhouse gases in 15 years. Think how much easier and cheaper it would have been had we taken the scientific evidence seriously and started then.

C: In that case, who are the climate change “skeptics”?

DS: For the background on the so-called climate skeptics, check out the great information available at 'DeSmogBlog.com'. In short, however, the skeptics are a small group known for their support of corporations like the fossil fuel industry. In fact, many are receiving money directly from the industry.

C: Al Gore calls the fight against climate change a 'moral' decision. Are North America's business and political leaders taking the moral approach?

DS: It's not possible to make a blanket statement. Business people and politicians are varied and I have no idea what motivates them. I am sure some do have moral positions on many issues. The problem is that the primary job of any corporate executive is to maximize profit for shareholders. Ethics and morality do not enter into the picture. Politicians must, of necessity, put their priorities into getting re-elected and to do that, they must satisfy voters. Children don't vote. Future generations don't vote. For that matter, trees don't vote, nor do oceans, the atmosphere, or the animals. Yet decisions being made by politicians and business-people have enormous ramifications for future generations and all the rest of life on earth.





C: The David Suzuki Foundation is on record as saying 'Ontario's plans to build new nuclear power plants represent a huge step backward'. Why are you against this energy source?

DS: I do not categorically reject nuclear energy but believe that any large investment like this should be able to answer some critical questions: First is the cost. Show me any nuclear plant that has come in under budget. Most of the power debt Ontarians are paying now is for nuclear investments already made. This is an extremely expensive technology. Second is reliability. These plants are plagued by breakdowns which take them off the grid and cost huge sums to fix. So cost and reliability alone suggest this is a really bad investment. Third, after 9/11 we live in a different world. We know any committed terrorist could blow up our nuclear plants or steal radioactive material. How secure is this technology? Finally, there's waste. What do we do with radioactive waste that will last for tens of thousands of years?

It seems to me there are no satisfactory answers to these questions and so why would anyone seriously propose nuclear energy at this time?

C: Which sources of energy do you endorse as a substitute?

DS: Right now we have enormous opportunities. We cannot go on living with the idea that energy demand will simply continue to rise so we have to keep meeting those increases. We live in a finite world and it is ludicrous to think we can have steady growth forever. The rolling brownouts over California were followed by a massive decrease in demand. Consumers showed they could bring their demand down so we have a chance to educate people to be much more efficient and to reduce their needs. Switching from an SUV to an energy efficient car can triple the distance one can travel on a litre of gas. On the other side, we can go ahead with opportunities in non-polluting renewables like wind, solar, geothermal, and microhydro. Then there are stopgap technologies like biofuels, while further down the line is the great hope of hydrogen. We need to maximize exploitation of renewables while getting more out of every unit of energy we do use.

C: Northern Europe has been a leader in adopting wind farm technologies. What have been the results?

DS: Spectacular! Denmark, Germany, and Spain are leading the way in exploiting wind and are creating thousands of jobs and exporting the technology. You'd have to ask the experts, like Jose Etcheverry at the University of Toronto for the exact numbers.

C: Why is Ontario slow to adopt these sustainable technologies?

DS: Ask the politicians and bureaucrats.

C: In a province which claims to be Canada's most innovative, are we seeing any real innovation in Ontario's energy sector and how do we fare against other provinces?

DS: I'm not an energy specialist so, while I look at the big picture, when it comes to this kind of detail I defer to those working on the ground. I can say, however, that ironically, Alberta, the province with the highest greenhouse gas emissions, has some very innovative programs. It has the largest wind-farm near Pincher Creek and has created good jobs in that area. Calgary's innovative light rail runs on wind-power and is free in the downtown area. I also understand that PEI is trying to become fossil-fuel free, although the current federal government has spiked a program to allow PEI to put excess energy on the inter-provincial grid.

Toronto has a very successful Better Buildings Partnership whereby loans are given to retrofit buildings for energy efficiency and the loans are paid back by the savings in the energy bills. Toronto also has a large heat exchange system built into Lake Ontario. There are all kinds of success stories across the country. Some of them are small, like Powerpipe in Waterloo that captures heat from wastewater in homes and businesses. Others are old established places like Viessmann in Kitchener that builds hot water tanks that are partially heated by solar energy. There's potential for jobs and businesses in renewable energy and efficiency, but they need incentives to encourage them to flourish.

C: Engrained in the Canadian social fabric is an affinity for nature and the environment. Is our perception of ourselves consistent with our actions?

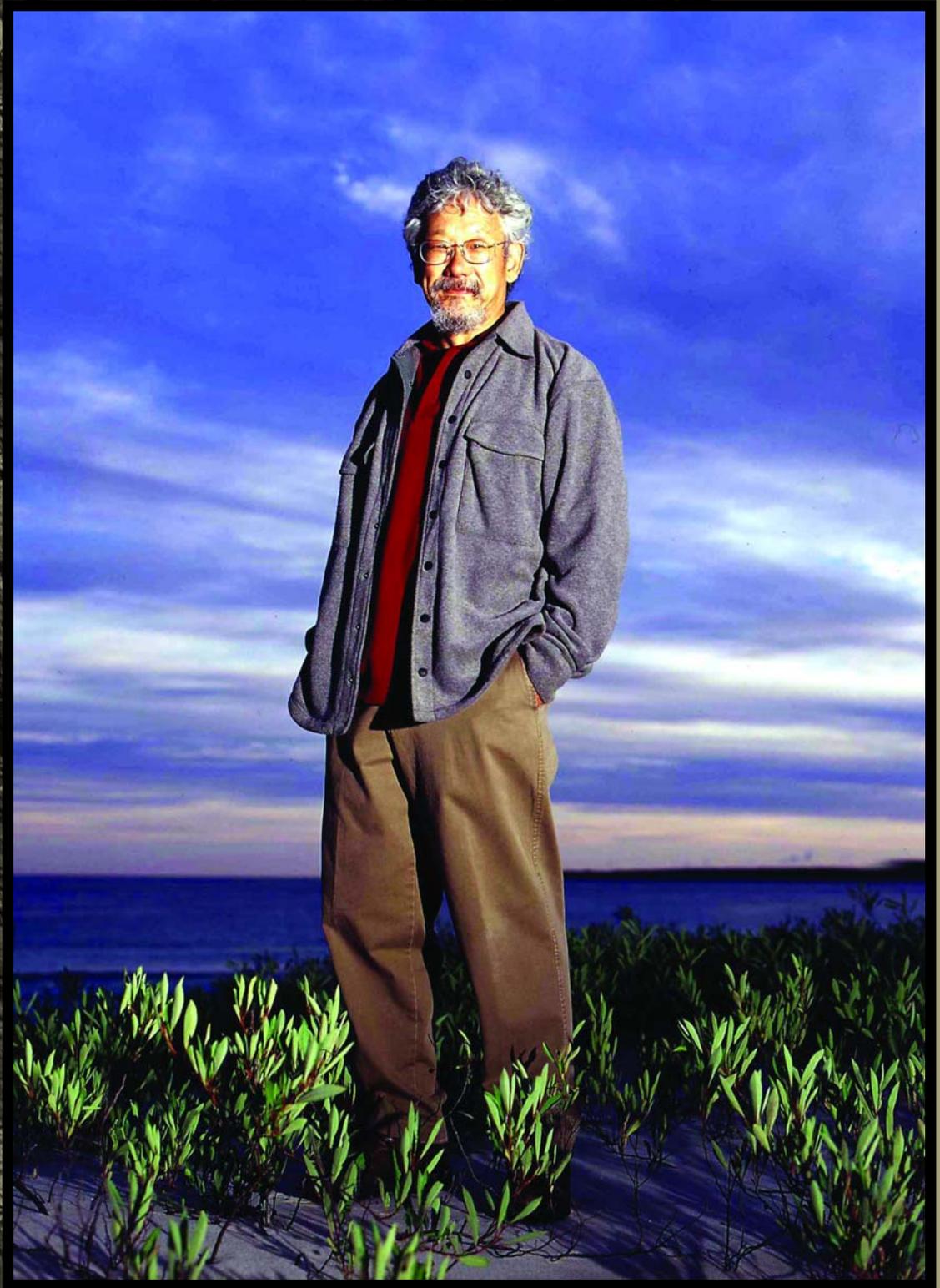
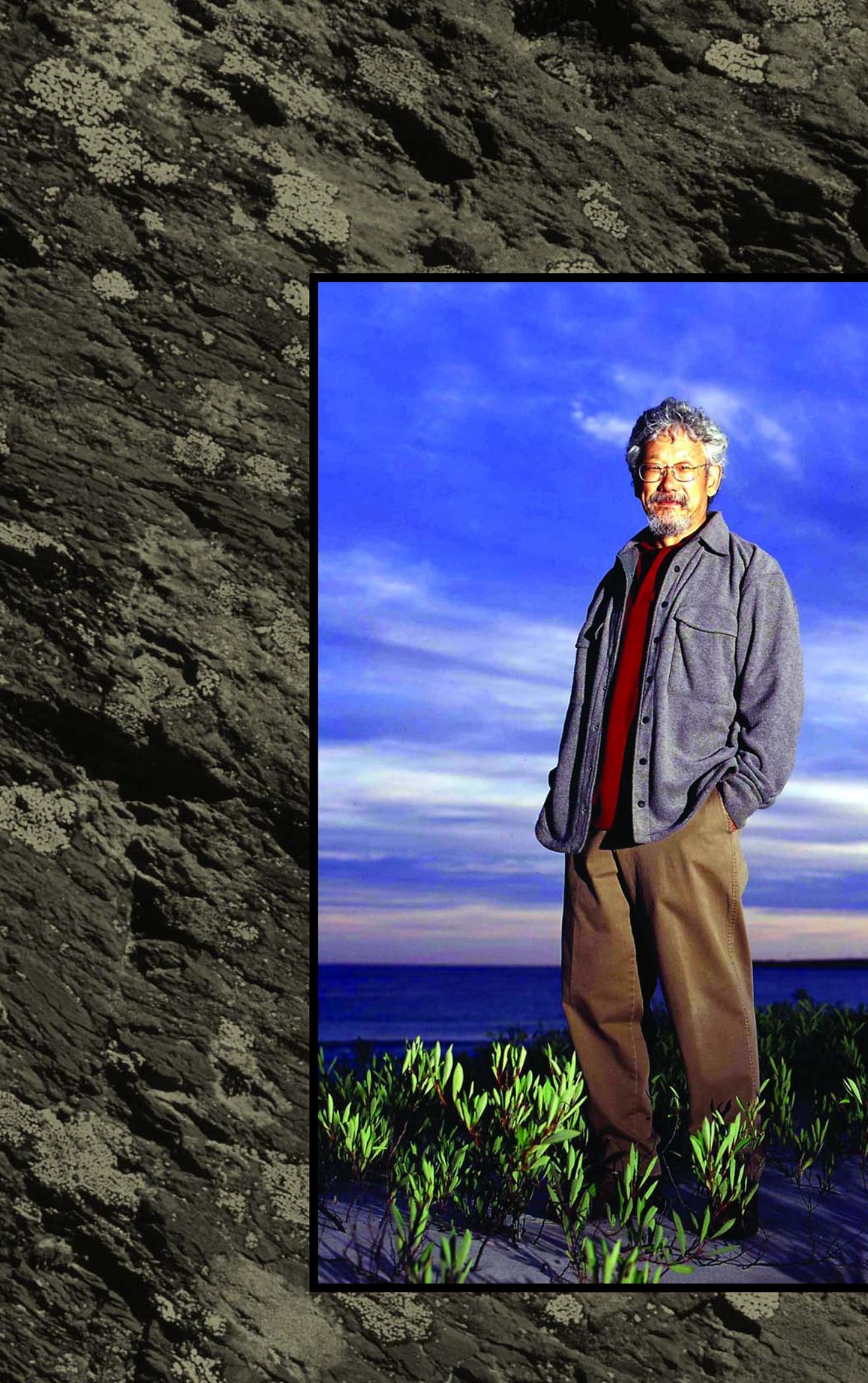
DS: Polls consistently show that over 90% of Canadians consider nature an important part of who they are and that they are willing to pay extra taxes to protect it. Yet, whenever a survey of actual Canadian legislation and policies designed to protect nature, water, air, etc. is done, of the 30 OECD countries, Canada ranks 28th. Thank God for Belgium and the United States or we'd be at the very bottom. Our elected representatives simply do not legislate in a way that reflects the public's concerns.

C: How is Canada positioned to comply with its obligations as set forth in the Kyoto protocol?

DS: Of 35 countries that have signed onto the protocol, 31 will meet the targets. Unfortunately, Canada's emissions have continued to rise at levels even higher than the two rogue nations, Australia and the U.S. With no concrete plan, the Harper government has scrapped all of the Kyoto commitments, some of which were effectively helping to reduce energy use.

C: Can Kyoto be effective without the participation of the U.S.?

DS: Yes because it is the process of negotiation that has brought the rest of the world onside. We've never had to do this before and it is not easy; but that's not a reason to ignore the process. Many states and cities in the U.S. are already committed to meeting the Kyoto target and I believe the federal government will have to get involved eventually. Kyoto is very important because if the industrialized nations who have created the problem of climate change in the first place can't begin to reduce emissions, the up and coming nations like India and China will have no compelling reason to try to restrict their emissions.



C: Please briefly explain the concept of 'Carbon Neutral'.

DS: When we use electricity, drive or fly, carbon dioxide is emitted on our behalf. For each atom of carbon emitted, it is possible to compensate by putting an equivalent amount of non-polluting energy into the grid somewhere else on the planet or to remove that amount of carbon by growing trees. That is the concept behind carbon neutrality. Please contact Paul Lingl at the David Suzuki Foundation for additional information at paul@davidsuzuki.org.

C: "An Inconvenient Truth" has done a lot to stimulate the public's interest in climate change. Do you feel that we are on the right path?

DS: The fossil fuel industry has done its best to suggest that human induced climate change is not happening, that the science of climate change is not credible, and that the cost of doing something will be prohibitive. I believe in the future, people will look back on the efforts corporations have made to stave off any action on reducing emissions as not only immoral but criminal. Al Gore's film was powerful, as has been Tim Flannery's book, *The Weather Makers*, but industry is launching an all out assault on their credibility. Are we on the right path? I don't know. Some people are still arguing over whether climate change is even an issue. Some countries like those in the EU are taking things very seriously and meeting the Kyoto targets but, overall, emissions continue to climb. I simply don't think we have the understanding that this issue dwarfs terrorism as a serious problem and that we ought to be acting as if we are going to war. From that perspective, we are not even on the path yet.

C: Is it too late to make a difference?

DS: No one can say that. What has already been added to the atmosphere cannot be removed. We've set into motion changes that will reverberate for centuries. What we've added will not equilibrate - first in air, then land and finally water - for many hundreds of years.

We've begun an experiment with the planet and there's no way of knowing what the long term repercussions will be.

It is truly terrifying that, in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence and consensus that we must stop adding more, we aren't seriously acting with sufficient urgency to at least limit emissions so that we can stay below a 2° rise in this century. When you think that the temperature change from an ice age to a warm period is about 1° per millennium, limiting the rise to 2° in a century is a huge change, and we still haven't embarked on meeting that target.

C: What is the most effective way for our readers to get involved?

DS: Become a supporting member of the David Suzuki Foundation or at least examine our website for information. Examine the three areas where we impact the most with our surroundings: our homes, transportation and food. Check the Nature Challenge which has a list of the ten most effective things we can do to reduce our impact on the planet. Sign up and become an active part of the solution.

C: Before you go, please tell us of any new projects you have planned for the upcoming year.

DS: I will be continuing to work on *The Nature of Things*, which is coming under new management within the CBC and I hope will become a higher priority for the corporation. I'm also working to increase the endowment for the David Suzuki Foundation so as I get older and weaker, the foundation will have a bit of economic security. The Foundation does not accept government support and has a definite policy requiring environmental commitments from any corporation that might want to contribute. We depend on the generosity of individual donors and foundations for our financial support.

C: Thank you very much for your time.

DS: Thank you.

To become a supporting member of the
David Suzuki Foundation

please contact 1-800-453-1533

Be sure to visit www.davidsuzuki.org
and learn more about what you and
your family can do to help reduce
your emissions.



Climate change is real and it affects everyone.
It's time to do your part!