

Drag our Leaf Icon above to your taskbar to bookmark TGAM in Internet Explorer 9.

[Show me how](#)

[Please don't show me this again](#)

[Remind me later](#)

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 



MARGARET WENTE

## The agony of David Suzuki

[MARGARET WENTE](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Saturday, Apr. 14, 2012 2:00AM EDT

---

David Suzuki should be a happy man. As Canada's patron saint of the environmental movement, he has led a seismic shift in public consciousness that has fundamentally changed the way we think and live. Fifty years after the birth of the environmental movement – which began in 1962 with Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* – it's safe to say we're all environmentalists now.

I remember reading *Silent Spring*. It came out when I was 12, and I was horrified by its account of how the indiscriminate use of pesticides had killed off birds and ravaged the natural world. It soon became one of the most influential books ever written.

“When her book came out, there wasn't a single department of the environment anywhere on the planet,” Mr. Suzuki said during a visit to The Globe and Mail the other day. Now, all developed countries have laws to protect the air, the water and natural habitats. No industrial development, however minor, can proceed without an examination of its environmental impact. Countless companies have committed to a “triple bottom line,” meaning that their responsibilities are social and environmental as well as economic. And environmental concerns drive fierce debates over the development of our natural resources. Even people who identify as conservatives want industry to behave responsibly.

But Mr. Suzuki now feels a sense of bitter defeat. When I suggested that the environmental movement has reached a dead end, he said: “I absolutely agree.” The federal government is hostile, and environmental agendas are being rolled back everywhere. Barack Obama may have cancelled the

Keystone oil pipeline for now (or, at any rate, the bit that crosses the border), but he's also expressed an enthusiasm for new drilling that's positively Sarah Palinesque.

In Europe, governments are ditching their commitments to green energy as their economies tank. Hopes for a global climate treaty are dead. In retrospect, Mr. Suzuki says the whole idea was folly. "Copenhagen was trying to deal with something that didn't belong to anybody – the atmosphere – through the lenses of borders, which the air doesn't care about, and the economic interests of 192 countries," he says. "We were trying to force nature into our agenda."

In fact, Mr. Suzuki believes the movement has been going backward for 20 years: "We didn't sell the right message." Instead of arguing that environmental responsibility could co-exist with economic growth, he thinks, in effect, that the movement should have argued that we must abandon the quest for economic growth altogether. "We thought if we stop this dam, if we stop this clear-cutting, that's a great success. But we didn't deal with the underlying destructiveness, which was the mindset that attacked the forest or wanted to build the dam."

There's now a fundamental split in the environmental movement – between those who think that some fossil-fuel development might be acceptable if properly managed, and those, like Mr. Suzuki, who think no fossil-fuel development is good at all. If he had his way, all the bitumen in Alberta would stay in the ground, forever.

Yet, the problem isn't that the environmental movement has failed to explain this message. It's that people have rejected it. Mr. Suzuki fears the consequences for the planet and the human race will be catastrophic. I'm more optimistic. Doomsday cults have been wrong throughout history, and this one will be no exception.

Depending on your point of view, we're either entering the Dark Age or the Golden Age of energy development. Far from running out of fossil fuel, we seem to have a new bonanza of it. Human ingenuity keeps finding new and better ways to tap the Earth's resources. A technological revolution is unlocking vast new reserves of energy around the world, including, some day, from the Arctic Ocean. None of this will be zero-risk or problem-free. There'll be setbacks, mishaps and, probably, occasional disasters. But there'll also be a gusher of innovation, wealth and jobs.

No one stands to benefit more than Canada. We are now the world's second-largest petro-state, after Saudi Arabia. Some Canadians think this is a disaster. But most think it's a good thing, providing we take due care of the environment. Our natural resources will help protect us from the economic shocks and jobless recoveries that are jolting the rest of the developed world. They'll also help us to afford the education, old-age pensions and health care we need to sustain our idea of a caring state.

Environmental battles over resource development will define our politics for a long time. But the pipelines will be built, and the oil and gas will flow. Thanks to our strong legacy of environmental responsibility, we'll be able to set environmental and safety standards for the world.

I disagree with Mr. Suzuki on a lot of things. But I also think we owe him a lot. Forty miles from Toronto, an American hedge fund is trying to develop a mega-quarry that would destroy thousands of acres of prime farmland and damage the watershed for miles around. He's fighting to stop them. So are thousands of other concerned people, including, in a small way, me. Sure, we have our differences. But one way or another, we're all environmentalists now.

