

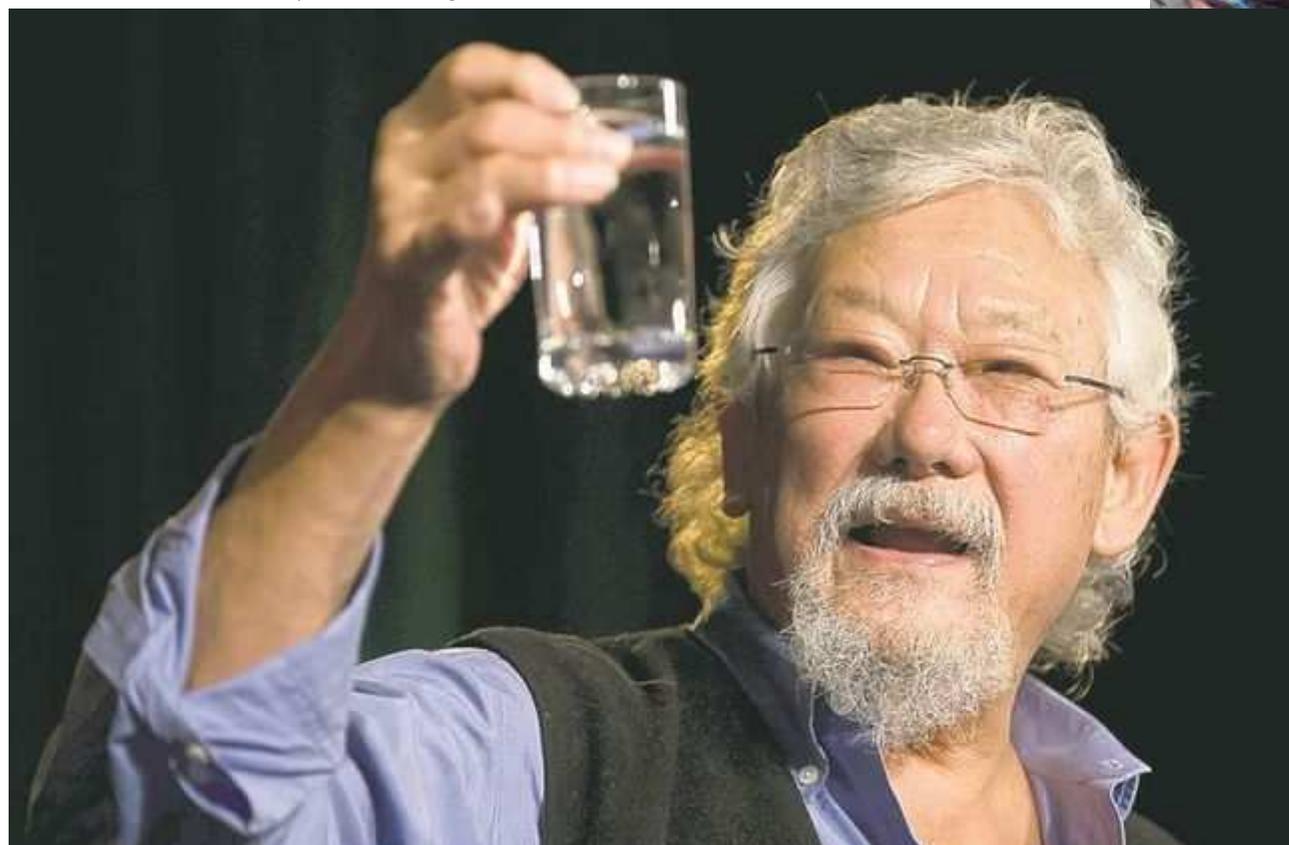
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Suzuki speech shows source of polarization

Green progress all about framing issues

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Environmentalist David Suzuki missed an opportunity to connect with people and influence their views at a recent speech.

What do you get when an environmental crusader such as David Suzuki crosses paths with a bunch of eco-rednecks such as the Manitoba Conservation Districts Association?

Well, for starters, you get a good case study to illustrate new research into why environmental politics is so partisan and polarized.

The MCDA stepped out of its comfort zone this year and invited this country's most famous --or in some quarters, infamous -- environmentalist to address its convention in early December. The decision made some of its members grumble and several of its sponsors nervous.

After all, Suzuki represents everything about tree-huggers mainstream farmers love to hate. They are quick to point out he flies around in jets to cry wolf about the environment and lecture people about reducing their carbon footprint. They see Suzuki and everything he stands for as a threat to their way of life.

Likewise, Suzuki, who calls pesticides the "dumbest thing ever invented," doesn't have much good to say about modern agriculture. He notes it was the evolution of agriculture that gave humans the motive and the means to take over the planet and push it to the brink of extinction, feeding the consumption-based economy's insatiable appetite.

"We have elevated the economy above the very things that keep us alive," he says.

To his credit, Suzuki acknowledged that despite isolated victories in stopping dams, saving forests and canning pipeline projects, the environmental warriors are losing ground.

"We didn't shift the paradigm. I believe the environmental movement has fundamentally failed in making that shift in the way that we see ourselves on the planet," he said.

"I've spent the last 50 years of my life fighting for a better future, fighting to protect forests, fighting to protect endangered fish and I just don't think we can continue this kind of fighting. Because every time there is a fight, there is a winner and a loser or else both sides compromise like mad," he said, noting that in this case, if the environment loses, so do we.

But there's a fine line between getting people thinking, and telling them what to think.

Suzuki told his Brandon audience, mostly from staunchly Conservative ridings, they need to get rid of the Harper government because of its track record on environmental issues. The audience of 1,000 spontaneously applauded other nuggets in his talk, but that one was met with silence.

You see, the eco-rednecks or grassroots environmentalists or duck-huntin' nature lovers -- whatever you want to call them -- are caught squarely between two enviro-political extremes. There are those who see the natural world as enriching in its own right and those who view it as an undeveloped source of enrichment.

Conservation districts are on the front lines of dealing with the effects of a compromised landscape and climate change.

They know you can't lecture or force people into changing their minds. But they are making change -- and changing minds in the process -- by demonstrating that it is in peoples' individual self-interest to do right by the environment. Conservation district-assisted projects such as off-site watering systems, which prevent cattle from drinking and defecating in streams, protect water quality. That improves beef-herd health. Improved herd health increases profits. Erosion control makes better soil. Better soil produces more crop. And so it goes.

The annual conservation districts conference is one of the best-attended of the year, and Suzuki had an opportunity to connect with a lot of people who are genuinely making a difference. He blew the chance. Too bad.

Scientists have recently come up with an explanation for why environmentalists find themselves polarized along partisan lines. A University of California Berkeley study concluded it's all in how people frame their conversations on environmental issues.

Conservative thinkers react more positively to messages built around a need to protect the purity and sanctity of the Earth, whereas liberal thinkers responded better to arguments built around a moral obligation to care.

For example, Suzuki says humans have a duty to lessen their environmental footprint and limit consumption to within the laws of nature -- for the planet's sake.

Livestock producers get that; they would call it the planet's "carrying capacity." Exceed it, and the whole herd is doomed.

The research findings, published in *Psychological Science*, suggest reframing pro-environmental rhetoric can reduce partisan polarization on ecological matters. "These findings offer the prospect of pro-environmental persuasion across party lines," said Robb Willer, a co-author of the study.

It's all about making peace with the land. To do that though, we must first make peace with each other.

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