

How Committed to Science is David Suzuki?

February 6, 2013 at 5:30 pm

No Frakkin Consensus

23 years ago, David Suzuki declared science “fundamentally flawed.” These days he delivers speeches to naturopath conventions.

When David Suzuki addressed students at a Quebec college last October, Kathryn Greenaway, a reporter with the *Montreal Gazette*, **described** him as a “renowned scientist and environmentalist.”

That choice of words came directly from the school’s own press release:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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OPENING OF THE NEW BUILDING AND DR. DAVID SUZUKI’S VISIT: A HISTORIC COINCIDENCE

On Wednesday, October 24, 2012, John Abbott College will proudly host Dr. David Suzuki, **world renowned scientist and environmentalist**. In order to provide the opportunity for all students and employees to attend the lecture, classes will be released in the morning.

“Essentially, the College will become one big classroom on the morning of the 24th,” stated Erich Schmedt, Academic Dean. “Certainly worth noting is that more than 13 000 students from the Lester B. Pearson School Board will also have access to the lecture via webcast. A very high percentage of students throughout the West Island and beyond will share in this unique learning opportunity”.

Suzuki’s **official biography**, posted on the David Suzuki Foundation’s website, similarly describes him as “an award-winning scientist, environmentalist and broadcaster.”

Over at the archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, we find the same pattern. The headline there **reads**: “David Suzuki: Scientist, Activist, Broadcaster.”

In each of these cases, *scientist* is the descriptor that gets used first. There is nothing accidental about this. It tells us he isn’t just anyone. He’s a “scientist.” He knows what he’s talking about. The authority of science stands behind him.

But an interview published in a 1990 book suggests that Suzuki repudiated science a quarter of a century ago.

The book is titled *Rescue the Earth! Conversations with the Green Crusaders*. The part about Suzuki appears in a section called *Mavericks and Activists*. The interviewer is Farley Mowat, an entirely sympathetic contemporary of Suzuki's.

Early on, Suzuki talks about becoming a scientist. He says:

Science seemed to be a natural for me. I was good at math. I could memorize. When I discovered genetics I fell madly in love with it because it was so precise and mathematical. In those days we geneticists had nothing but contempt for ecologists – we thought they just went out to listen to birds. What they did seemed too subjective and non-quantitative.

My eventual questioning of science did not initially come from an interest in animal rights or from ecological awareness; it originated from my deep involvement with civil liberties. [bold added]

Suzuki then discusses racism in the the American south, and says that once he began teaching, “students started asking me about eugenics, which I'd never heard of.” After examining the eugenics movement of the 1920s, he says, “I began to realize that science has incredible ramifications that ripple throughout society.”

So far, so good. Casting a critical eye on one's profession, acknowledging its horrors as well as its triumphs, is sensible. But then Suzuki gets philosophical:

The minute you introduce direction, rather than seeing life as a cycle, you have the idea that you are going somewhere, and that's *progress*. That's **the whole thrust of the scientific paradigm** – that we use this very powerful way of knowing to *get* somewhere – that's our definition of progress. [bold added, italics in original]

A little later, he adds:

my sense of injustice at what human beings were *doing* to the living world didn't suddenly happen. It was a gradual understanding that **science is fundamentally flawed** because scientists focus on parts of nature and study these in isolation from the rest. [bold added, italics in original]

When interviewer Mowat suggest that perhaps “we can only know nature by becoming a part of it,” Suzuki responds:

But science doesn't recognize that kind of knowledge. I have come to appreciate **the limitations of the scientific method** and the arrogance that comes with it...It's the arrogance of modern man to think that we, viewing the world through **our tiny windows of science**, can control, dominate and direct the natural world. [bold added]

Finally, there is this announcement:

I have essentially walked away from my scientific colleagues. That's been painful. But I had to do it. [bold added]

Directly after uttering these words Suzuki talks about an experience he had eight years prior to the interview. A left-leaning politician invited him to do a television show on logging. In the course of making that show, Suzuki says he interviewed a “young Haida Indian”:

That's the first time I comprehended a radically different relationship with nature. To the Haida, if you destroy the trees you destroy what makes the Haida unique. It's not only their culture and their history, it's their very identity.

It's a free country. If native American/First Nation cultures resonate with Suzuki, good for him. But if he now believes that native spirituality trumps hard science, that's another matter.

Twenty-three years ago, David Suzuki was publicly rejecting “the whole thrust of the scientific paradigm.” He was declaring that science was “fundamentally flawed.” He was equating the scientific method with arrogance, and talking disparagingly about “our tiny windows of science.”

Twenty-three years ago, David Suzuki had already “walked away from” his scientific colleagues. There was a fork in the road and, by his own admission, the scientists went one way and Suzuki went another.

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photos courtesy of BayBlab.blogspot.ca (click)

The fact that he delivered the keynote address to a [naturopath convention](#) in 2009 indicates that little has changed since then.

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The interview in *Rescue the Earth!* contains some other interesting tidbits. Suzuki laments that progress is “measured by how fast our economies grow and how much profit we make.”

When he spoke to students of John Abbott College, Suzuki similarly condemned capitalism and insisted that money isn't important. But these opinions didn't prevent him from [billing the school \\$30,000](#) for a day's work.

Which makes the following fairly jump off the page:

My father taught me when I was very young: you are what you do, not what you say. One of the problems with our species is that because we can write and speak, we get hung up in what people say. **Watch what people do, don't listen to what they say, just watch what they do.** [bold added, italics in original]

And then there's this cheery assessment, which followed some remarks about global warming:

The whole planet is a ticking bomb waiting to go off. It's going to go off.

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The 2009 Suzuki speech to the naturopaths was titled: *The Challenge of the 21st Century: Setting the Bottom Line*. Tickets cost \$37.80.

The speech he delivered at John Abbott College three years later sounds rather similar. It was called: *The Challenges of the 21st Century: Setting the Real Bottomline*.

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UPDATE: *These lines were edited out of the post a few hours after it went live: "The choice to emphasize this particular aspect of his persona is done for a reason. It adds to his stature."*