

Rob Breakenridge: We need a better David Suzuki



[ROB BREAKENRIDGE, NATIONAL POST](#) | February 4, 2014 | Last Updated: Feb 3 2:00 PM ET



Peter J. Thompson/National PostCanada needs someone who can make science understandable for the masses. But they have to get their facts straight first.

Regardless of what you think of him, Canada needs David Suzuki. Or rather, we need the concept of David Suzuki.

We need great scientific minds who can serve as ambassadors and popularizers of science. We need those with the scientific literacy and communications skills to make science accessible and understandable for the masses.

That's how David Suzuki has always been billed. His official bio at the David Suzuki Foundation describes him as someone who can "explain the complexities of the natural sciences in a compelling, easily understood way." And clearly many Canadians still view him that way. An Angus Reid poll last October found that David Suzuki was at the top of the list when it came to the most admired Canadians.

Unfortunately, though, the reality of David Suzuki now seems completely at odds with the perception of David Suzuki. On a number of issues, he is not informing Canadians, but *mis*informing them. Rather than scientists getting their messages out through David Suzuki, they're having to undo the damage his words are causing.

We have before us now a perfect illustration of this, in the form of a reckless and irresponsible comment from three months ago that Suzuki only recently owned up to. It goes back to an Oct. 30 event at the University of Alberta. Although the focus was public water policy, Suzuki broached the topic of the tsunami-damaged nuclear power plant at Fukushima, Japan.

Suzuki declared, "I have seen a paper saying that if, in fact, the fourth plant goes in an earthquake ... it's 'bye-bye Japan' and everybody on the West Coast of North America should evacuate. If that isn't terrifying, then I don't know what is."

Well, it certainly sounds terrifying, much like the sort of alarmist conspiracy theories found in the dark recesses of the Internet. But it isn't true, and the report Suzuki claimed to be citing makes no such claims. The lead author of the paper in question, France-based nuclear energy analyst Mycle Schneider, told the Vancouver-based newspaper the *Province* that he's "really, really shocked about the way it's being discussed in Canada. It's just totally insane." Moreover, he notes that he has "never seen any credible source for a scenario [requiring] evacuation of the West Coast of North America."

This is the sort of anti-science fear-mongering that someone like David Suzuki should be rebutting and debunking, not perpetuating. Suzuki finally addressed the matter last month in an email to the *Province*. He expressed his "regret" for the "off-the-cuff response" and also expressed surprise that his comments were being recorded.

So a respected scientist is warning of Japan's destruction and the possible abandonment of the entire North American western coast ... and he sees it as a glib throwaway line that no one ought to have picked up on? Granted, he's not a nuclear physicist, but that shouldn't matter. He's the guy who makes science understandable to the masses, remember? Shouldn't he try to get it at least somewhat right?

This isn't the first such incident. Last September, Suzuki took part in a question and answer session on Australian television. After being peppered with questions by climate skeptics, Suzuki pointed out that "I am not speaking on behalf of scientists. I'm just

trying to translate their information so the public can understand and make up its mind ... I'm just the messenger."

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That's exactly what we should want him to be. Yet, when the discussion shifted to genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Suzuki was quick to abandon this role. After it was repeatedly pointed out to him that his anti-GMO rhetoric was at odds with an overwhelming scientific consensus involving every major scientific organization in the world and based on literally hundreds of studies, Suzuki was left flummoxed.

So again, rather than Suzuki being the messenger for the scientific community on an important issue, the scientific community has to work to counter Suzuki's message. The public is left confused, rather than informed.

If David Suzuki wants to be the sort of activist who's willing to exaggerate, ignore, cherry-pick, or distort science to advance an agenda, then that's a choice he can make. Unfortunately, what we're left with is someone who loses credibility when it comes to conveying actual science and someone who can find an attentive audience when it comes to nonsense.

It's time to find a new David Suzuki.

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