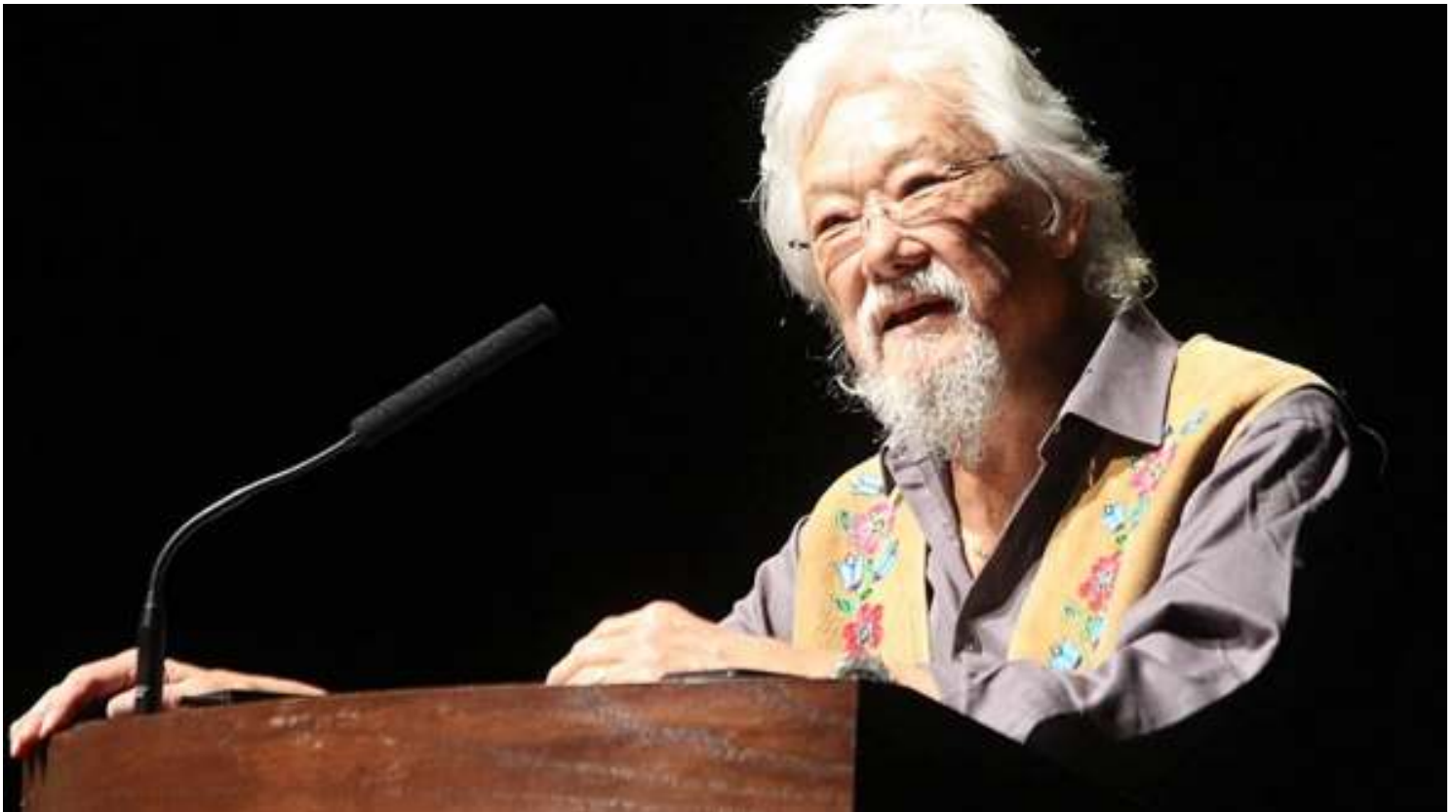


David Suzuki should not be celebrated in Alberta, says former Dragons' Den star

Controversy over environmentalist's honorary degree raises questions over donor-university relationship

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The University of Alberta received backlash - some of it from the school's own faculty members - when it announced it planned to award environmentalist David Suzuki an honorary degree this spring. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)



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A university's offer of an honorary degree to David Suzuki has sparked an angry wake-up call for the silent majority in Alberta, according to an entrepreneur who spent his career in the oil industry.

"This is a group of people who'd been attacked, for two decades now, by David Suzuki," said W. Brett Wilson, who has also starred on CBC's *Dragons' Den*.

The University of Alberta announced earlier this week it will award the controversial environmentalist an honorary doctor of science degree this spring.

Despite backlash from some of the school's own faculty staff, U of A president David Turpin confirmed Tuesday the award will go forward.

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Suzuki, the co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation and host of CBC's *The Nature of Things*, has been a vocal opponent of the oil and gas industry.

"Who stands [in front of the gates of Kinder Morgan?](#)" Wilson asked *The Current's* Anna Maria Tremonti. "It's David Suzuki, it's Elizabeth May, it's 20 or 30 grandstanders looking to draw attention."

Wilson argued that Suzuki's actions celebrate "regionalism and NIMBY-ism in ways that make no sense to a nation."



Former Dragons' Den star W. Brett Wilson argued that Suzuki's actions celebrate 'regionalism and NIMBY-ism in ways that make no sense to a nation.' (Darren Calabrese/The Canadian Press)

"It's one thing to tolerate him crossing the border into our province ... but it's another to be celebrating someone like this, especially under the false guise of academic freedom," he said.


The Current invited David Suzuki for an interview, but he was unavailable.

The University of Alberta's intention to honour Suzuki was denounced by both its own staff and its corporate donors. Moodys Gartner Tax Law, a tax advisory firm, had committed \$100,000 over five years to the university's law school. It has now terminated the gift early.



Environmentalist David Suzuki, centre, poses with protesters at an entrance to Kinder Morgan in Burnaby, B.C., in March 2018. (THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The rhetoric around the issue highlights an "immaturity" in the understanding of how corporations and universities interact, said Joe Arvai, the Max McGraw professor of sustainable enterprise at the University of Michigan.



For a donor to stand up now... reflects a lack of maturity and a lack of understanding.

- Joe Arvai

"Ultimately, universities should be viewed as places where research and development occurs in the public trust," he said.

That will involve projects that try to balance social, environmental and economic interests, Arvai added, which will at times lead to controversy. But those conflicts are part and parcel of the mission.

- **THE CURRENT** | [David Suzuki turns 80, reflects on eco-morality and mortality](#)
- **CBC NEWS** | [U of A president's statement on Suzuki's honorary degree](#)

There is an expectation among a lot of donors, he said, that what they're really buying into is the credibility of the university, in return for a boost to their own reputation.

"For a donor to stand up now, over one honorary degree," he said, "because they feel like that's somehow harmful to their interests... I think it reflects a lack of maturity and a lack of understanding."

Listen to the full conversation at the top of this page, where you can also share this article across email, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

This segment was produced by The Current's Geoff Turner, Ines Colabrese and Jessica Linzey.