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👤 KARRY TAYLOR 📅 19 March 2013 2302

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Ecologist and economist on national speaking tour



They initially seem like an odd couple.

Environmentalist David Suzuki, who has been publically critical of economists, is currently on a cross-country speaking tour with Jeff Rubin, the former chief economist of CIBC World Markets.

In 2012, Rubin published his book, *The End of Growth: But Is That All Bad?* He argues that rising oil prices will bring the growth of Canadian and other western economies to a halt. According to Rubin, as prices become too high for people to burn non-renewable fossil fuels such as oil, carbon emissions will drop — slowing the pace of climate change.

Suzuki, who recently published a new environmentally themed book with Ian Hanington, *Everything Under the Sun*, said he became interested in Rubin's ideas. The two are now on a cross-country speaking tour that will include stops in eight provinces.



The Calgary Journal's Karry Taylor recently spoke with Rubin and Suzuki during the Calgary stop of their tour.

David Suzuki (left) and Jeff Rubin will tour together until the fall of 2013.

Photo by Karry Taylor

Although motorists may not see any upside to higher fuel prices, as an economist and an ecologist, what benefits does each of you see?

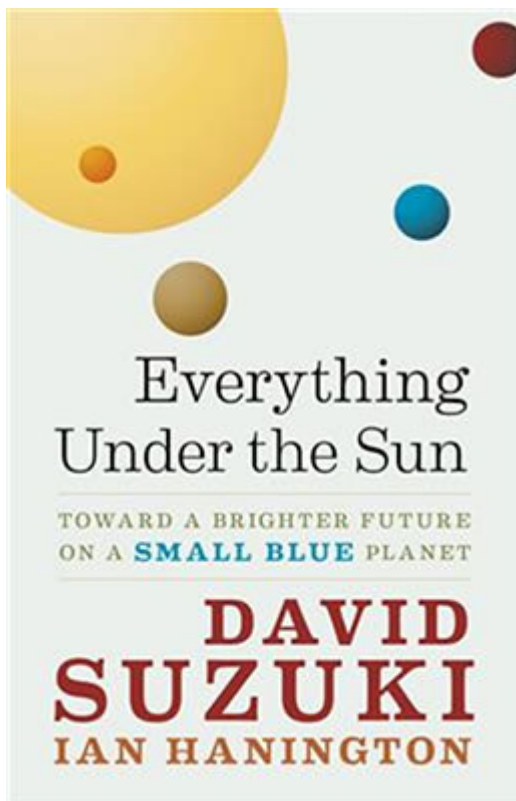
Jeff Rubin: The consequences of higher fuel prices are that we are not going to be able to grow at the same rate. The caveat being, of course, that in Alberta's case, it's the opposite — higher fuel prices benefit Alberta. But for the rest of the world, triple digit oil prices are very problematic.

GDP is 80 per cent driven by oil, coal and natural gas. So when you stop growing, whether its your intention or not, you stop emitting. But I guess the question is: if we couldn't get our act together to put a meaningful price on carbon when the economy was growing, what do you rate our chances of doing that when our economy stops growing?

The silver lining here is we're not going to have to do anything, because the very process of not growing is going to lighten our carbon footprint, whether we intend to or not.

David Suzuki: Higher oil prices are a good thing. I wish that we had taken advantage of the fact that we have brains, and that we could have used our brains and managed our way to that kind of steady state.

This provides us with a crisis — and it's a multiple crisis. It's an economic crisis because all of our thinking is that if the economy isn't growing, we are in deep trouble. But we are also facing an ecological crisis — which is the amount of carbon that we are putting in the atmosphere. So, I think that if Jeff's thesis is right, this is the moment to start thinking hard about where we are going into the future.



In his latest book, David Suzuki looks at a number of current environmental issues including what we can learn from the nuclear reactor meltdown in Japan.

Photo courtesy of the David Suzuki Foundation

How aware are Canadians of the interplay between the economy and the environment?

Jeff Rubin: The reason they are called 'man-made emissions' is that we are putting it out there. But we don't want to hear that. We want to hear 'green economy.' We want to paint everything green and we want to pretend that we can continue to consume as much energy as we have in the past, with wind and solar. And guess what? It's bullshit. We can get energy from wind and solar but it faces constraints similar to oil.

I am an economist, so prices are my religion. I believe that prices determine human behavior. Triple digit oil prices are going to lead us to some very green places — whether we have that as our goal or not. But who cares what our goal is? What really matters is where we are going.

David Suzuki: We seem to be going from denial, without any kind of acceptance that it is happening and looking at what we might do about it, to simply crisis and depression and saying 'its too late.'

Wind power is now competitive with oil. It doesn't need any subsidies — windmills will pay for themselves. Solar power is coming very rapidly. But the reality is that oil is a very special source of energy and it's going to be very hard to replace it. We can have all of our electricity, I believe, generated by renewables. But the challenge is renewable energy requires strength of will.

Given Canada's geographic size and population density, how realistic — and how fair — is it to expect things like mass public transit systems such as trains to replace automobiles?

David Suzuki: Well it's a problem. It might be possible to economically justify between Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary. But there generally aren't the population concentrations needed, certainly, for inner-city travel.

But our cities haven't been designed in the right way. You look at Calgary — the sprawl here is sickening. There has been no attempt to create communities as the city sprawls out. Every block should have a grocery store — things like that is what creates community. We have badly designed our cities — everything is in the service of cars.

The concentration of people in Europe is greater, and that is why they are confronting these challenges and opportunities. They don't have the resources that we have and they don't have as much spaced — so they are having to confront climate change and having to actually do something about it much quicker than we are here. But I certainly think that our cities could become much more benign.

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Editor's note: Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

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