



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

David Suzuki (Canada)

Honorary Award (2009)



*"for his lifetime advocacy of the socially responsible use of science, and for his massive contribution to raising awareness about the perils of climate change and building public support for policies to address it".*

Picture: Al Harvey

**David Suzuki is one of the most brilliant scientists, and communicators about science, of his generation. Through his books and broadcasts, which have touched millions of people around the world, he has stressed the dangers, as well as the benefits, of scientific research and technological development. He has campaigned tirelessly for social responsibility in science. For the past 20 years, he has been informing the world about the grave threat to humanity of climate change and about how it can be reduced.**

## Life and career choices

David Suzuki was born in Canada in March 1936 to parents of Japanese descent. Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, the family was interned, and later, after the war, settled in Ontario. With a PhD in zoology from the University of Chicago, Suzuki went to the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1963, where he became Professor of Zoology six years later, specialising in genetics.

During his scientific work, Suzuki became more and more concerned about both the relationship between science and society, and the impacts of human activities on the natural world. He says: "After a great deal of soul-searching I concluded that all scientific insight has the potential to be applied for good or bad and the only way to minimise the misapplication of science is an informed public." While continuing his university professorships until 2001, Suzuki gave up his laboratory research in the late 70s to become one of the most important communicators of natural science in the world and "an environmental icon" as the 2005 Right Livelihood Award Recipient Tony Clarke

has described him.

From 1979 until today, Suzuki has been the anchorman of "The Nature of Things with David Suzuki", a prime time science programme on Canadian television, which has been sold to more than 80 countries. He has produced numerous other TV shows and series, and has written 43 books, whereof 17 for children.

### The David Suzuki Foundation

In 1988, Suzuki's 5-part radio series about the global ecosystem crisis, It's a Matter of Survival, produced letters from 16,000 listeners asking what could be done. Suzuki's response was to set up, in 1990, with his wife, Dr. Tara Cullis, the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF). Since its inception, DSF has become a nationally recognized and trusted voice on issues of the environment, one that is increasingly asked to speak on matters of critical importance.

In 2008, the David Suzuki Foundation reviewed its progress over the first two decades of its existence, and decided to focus its future efforts on five key areas.

1. Reconnecting with nature - Helping Canadians to become aware of their profound interdependence with nature.
2. Protecting natural systems - Working to ensure that systems are in place to protect the diversity and resilience of Canada's marine, freshwater, terrestrial and atmospheric ecosystems.
3. Transforming the economy - Encouraging a transition of Canada's economy towards increased well-being, fairness and quality of life, while recognizing the finite limits of nature.
4. Living neighbourhoods - Empowering citizens to live healthier, more fulfilled and just lives.
5. Protecting our climate - Holding Canada to account for doing its fair share to avoid dangerous climate change.

In 2009, the David Suzuki Foundation had 58 staff members and an annual budget of nearly CND 7 million, which comes from numerous foundations, and tens of thousands of individual supporters.

### Climate change

For many years, Suzuki has been at the forefront of the climate debate, informing the public about the extreme urgency to act which follows from the best scientific evidence in the field, and calling on the Canadian Government to take action. At a speech in 2009 at McGill University, he said: "When you have politicians who are advised by scientists how bad climate change is going to hit, and by economists how bad it is for the economy, and they still do not take action, that is an intergenerational crime." Together with a group of engineers, Suzuki is now working on a study to see if and how Canada can get its energy entirely from renewable sources.

### Suzuki on biotech

In his own discipline of genetics, Suzuki has played a crucial role in informing and warning the public about the weak and risky scientific basis of many of today's commercial applications of genetic engineering. With science writer, Peter Knudtson, he wrote of his concerns in *Genethics: The Ethics of Engineering Life*. In an article *Biotechnology: Panacea or Hype?* he writes: "Every scientist should understand that in any young, revolutionary discipline, most of the current ideas in the area are tentative and will fail to stand up to scrutiny over time. In other words, the bulk of the latest notions are wrong. The rush to exploit new products will be based on inaccurate hypotheses and questionable benefits and could be downright dangerous. The discipline is far from mature enough to leave the lab or find a niche in the market. The problem is that those pushing its benefits stand to gain enormously from it."

### Suzuki's role in Canadian society

An important aspect of Suzuki's and DSF's work is his relationship with Canada's First Nations. He

used many of his broadcasts to campaign for their rights of decision over their ancestral resources, and has been formally adopted by three tribes, and made an honorary chieftain of one.

In a 2009 poll on 'Who does Canada Trust Most?' in the Canadian Readers' Digest, Suzuki was ranked no. 1. Suzuki holds a large number of honorary doctorates and has received Canada's highest honour, Companion to the Order of Canada.

### Quotation

*"Conventional economics is inevitably destructive and unsustainable because it ignores nature's services as 'externalities'. But nature maintains the biosphere as a healthy place for animals like us. Growth is just a description of the state of a system, yet economists equate growth with progress as if growth is the very purpose of economics. So we fail to ask 'how much is enough?', 'what is an economy for?', 'am I happier with all this stuff?'. Steady growth forever is an impossibility in a finite world and our world is defined by the biosphere, the zone of air, water and land where all life exists. Endless growth within the biosphere is like the goal of cancer within our body. We need to internalize the services of nature in an ecological economics system and work towards 'steady state economics.'"*

David Suzuki

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