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Science and Health:

Transcript: Bill Moyers Interviews David Suzuki

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Transcript 

MOYERS: We get so many reports of what we're doing to our air, our soil and our water. But I ask you as a scientist, is the diagnosis lethal?

SUZUKI: I don't think anyone can say at what point it will be lethal to us as a species. I like to say that in Canada not long ago, Cape Breton coalminers took canaries in the coal mine. When the canary keeled over, they didn't say, "Hey, Jack, come on over here. This bird just fell over. What do you think? Do you think it's..."

They hauled their backsides outta there as fast as they could go. Birds are, especially canaries are super sensitive to hydrogen sulfide, and sour gas. So, they give you an early warning.

Well, canaries have been falling all around the planet for decades now. Plants and animals that no longer are able to survive in the plan... in the conditions that we've created. And what have we done? We've ignored this. We've always said, "Oh, well, there's plenty more where that came from."

There aren't plenty more where that came from. And now our own children have become the canaries. One out of five children in Canada will now have asthma. When you and I were boys, asthma was a rare disease.

MOYERS: And that's as recent as the 1930's, right?

SUZUKI: Exactly. Exactly. So, our own children are now telling us we're doing something fundamentally wrong.

And all you have to do is every time you have a smog alert, go down to the emergency room in the hospital, and sit there for a day. You will see that room, those emergency rooms jammed with people in deep respiratory distress.

Well, you don't have to be a genius to say, "Maybe it's got something to do with what we're taking into our lungs." And the point of the sacred balance that I did was to say, "Look, people, we can't continue to act as if air is something out there. And we are here. And we manage our interaction with the air."

"We are the air." At our ages, I reckon we've taken about 350 million breathes. We've taken one to four liters of air, breathed it deep into our bodies, and fused to the air, and filtered whatever was in that air into our bodies. The idea that we use air as a toxic dump, and somehow it goes away and doesn't affect us is absurd.

MOYERS: Or water.

SUZUKI: Or water. We are over 60 percent water by weight. We're just a big ball of... blob of water, with enough organic thickener added so we don't dribble away on the floor.

MOYERS: That is interesting. You're changing the metaphor. You're saying that air, water, soil, are not outside of us. They are us.

SUZUKI: We are made of those things. And this isn't rocket science. This is ancient, ancient understanding.

I apologize to my aboriginal friends when I talk about this. Because I am a Johnny-come-lately. They all look at me, and go, "Where the heck have you been? It's taken you a long time to figure this out."

MOYERS: I can hear people in the audience saying, "Oh, no, here we go again. Back to that kind of romantic idea of human beings living in the Garden of Eden, in an innocence that." You know, it just doesn't apply...

SUZUKI: Uh-huh.

MOYERS: ...in this 21st century world.

SUZUKI: The whole problem with modernity today is we think anything new is good. Anything that's old is bad. You know? So, even old timers like us gotta get those old guys out of the way, so the young, hot-shots can come in there.

MOYERS: The fact of the matter is you and I are living longer because of modern technology. I had heart trouble nine years ago. And I've had a productive nine years, whereas 100 years ago, I would probably have died...

SUZUKI: Absolutely.

MOYERS: ...at 60.

SUZUKI: Absolutely.

MOYERS: So, there's a tradeoff...

SUZUKI: Oh, of course. There have been huge, huge advances. I mean, what are we doing right now? We're sitting in a studio.

And this miracle of modern television, global telecommunications, computers, we can't imagine existing without it. I would hope that with all of this so-called technological progress, there would be enormous benefits. And there have been. But I think it's important to put it all into perspective.

We have to put it into a perspective of are human beings now so intelligent that we've now escaped the physical, biological constraints of the planet? I think most people today believe that, that we're somehow special, and different. What again, to refer back to aboriginal people tell us is the Earth is our mother.

Now people immediately think a Mother Earth, you know, that's a metaphor. That's poetic way of speaking. They mean it literally. And I, as a scientist have come to understand, they are absolutely right in the most profound scientific way...

MOYERS: How so?

SUZUKI: ...way. We are created out of the most important elements of the planet.

People don't even understand that every bit of our food was once alive. We take another creature, plant, animal, microorganism, tear it apart in our mouths. And incorporate those molecules into our own bodies. We are the Earth in the most profound way.

And we are fire. Because every bit of the energy in our bodies that we need to move, and grow and reproduce is sunlight. Sunlight captured by plants, converted into chemical energy that we consume and store in our bodies. So, when they speak about the Earth as our mother, and the four sacred elements: Earth, air, fire and water, they mean it literally. And they are right.

MOYERS: Uh-huh. I was touched in watching the Sacred Balance. The first program in the series begins with you and your grandson in an arcade.

[VIDEO EXCERPT]

SUZUKI: And that swamp, because me, was my magical place. I grew up in central Ontario after the war, as a teenager. And those are terrible times, at the best of times, when your hormones are raging through your body, and you look at the world in a different way.

But I would go to that swamp. And forget all of my problems. And there was a world of

enchantment. I was very interested as a boy, in insects. And I could just go and look in that pond, and spend the whole day there.

Because there was diversity and wonder and surprise, that will never be duplicated by human ingenuity. So, my grandson's world is a very impressive world. You know, when you see him in that arcade, boy, he just beat me at every game. But when I took him out into a swamp, I was so delighted to see that the enchantment was still there.

And when I asked him at the end of the shoot, "Which would you prefer?" he said, "Grandpa, let's go back to the swamp." So, it's still there.

MOYERS: What does it say to you as a scientist that in the last 200 years, the United States has lost 50 percent of its swamps, its wetland?

SUZUKI: Well, you see we've regarded nature as an enemy. As an enemy to be made over into our image. And we continue that process, draining swamps.

I thought that the Everglade National Park was an attempt to suddenly realize that the terrible, smelly swamp in fact, was a national treasure. But as you know, the Army Corp of Engineers would like to dig canals right across the neck of Florida, and drain it. And change that whole area.

We haven't learned to respect and treasure these wild areas. We consider wild something that we don't like. We want to make it over so that we understand it. So, we're doing the same thing in Canada.

We're draining our potholes, and our wetlands. And we wanna clear cut our forests, so that we can make a managed forest, a plantation. And we can control it, and grow what we want. That's not a recognition, I think, of where we belong. Or that we don't know enough to be able to manage the Earth.

MOYERS: You say in the series, and in the book that we have become a super species.

SUZUKI: Uh-huh. I don't... never in the four billion years that life has existed on this planet has a single species been able to transform the physical, chemical and biological makeup of the planet as we are doing now. We have become a new kind of force, what I call the super species. Now, human beings have never had to worry about what are all of the humans on the planet doing to the Earth.

We were a local, tribal species. We aggregated within very small areas. You know? I've gone down into Brazil many times in the Amazon. And you go into a native community. There's plastic everywhere. And you say, "What's wrong with these people?" Well, they've never lived with material that persists over time. They eat a banana, they throw the peel around, it biodegrades in a matter of weeks. That's been the way we've always existed.

For the first time in human history we now have to ask what are all six billion people on the planet doing? What is the collective impact of humanity? And because we've never had to do that we're not used to thinking this way. And it's taking time for us to catch up and adjust to this new collectivity.

MOYERS: How much weight do you think the earth can bear?

SUZUKI: That's the big question. We brought an aboriginal Kayapo from the Amazon to Vancouver and I thought, "Boy, is he gonna be impressed with Vancouver. You know, sparkling city, cars." And he looked out and he said, "All of this has come from the earth. How long can the earth keep doing this?"

And I thought, "My God, here's a guy right out of the Brazilian rain forest and he sees it immediately." I don't know. Who can tell? We have now become the most numerous mammal on the planet. I was just in Australia a few months ago and I said there are more humans than all of the rabbits on the planet. And they got it right away...

SUZUKI: That is a hell of a lot of human beings. There are more humans than all of the rabbits on earth. There are more of us than all the wildebeests, than all the rats, than all the mice. We are the most numerous mammal on the planet.

But because we're not like rabbits or rats or mice we have technology, we have a consumptive appetite, we have a global economy. We are now like no other mammal that has ever existed. And it's time for us to sit back and start saying, "Wait a minute. Now, yes, we've got a very productive economy. But what are we doing in terms of our grandchildren and their grandchildren?"

I thought that the responsibility of every generation was to receive the earth from our ancestors and to pass it on to future generations as we receive that. This hasn't been going on for many generations now.

The places that I remember as a child in British Columbia where we went fishing for halibut and sturgeon and salmon I can't take my grandchildren to because there are no fish left. Well, you know, what are we to assume? That the fish that we destroyed are somehow somewhere else? They're not anywhere.

MOYERS: But once you start talking like this immediately you raise in people's minds the fears, "oh, well here's another environmentalist, another eco freak who wants to take away my comfort and my security. And that if this consumption that you talk about doesn't expend the economy, well go to hell."

SUZUKI: Well...

MOYERS: You've heard that...

SUZUKI: ...there is no question now that our economy is going to be in deep trouble either way. If it doesn't come... if we don't come to grips with the fact that we live in a world that's finite, the biosphere, the zone of air, water and land that life exists is fixed. It can't grow anymore than it already is.

This is our home. This is where we live and where we will always live and it's fixed. And we have now become a major user of that biosphere. And the economy has now bumped into all kinds of limits and it can't keep growing indefinitely.

MOYERS: So, how do you assure people that protecting the environment is not ruining the economy that provides jobs, income, food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, television? How can you assure people that David Suzuki doesn't want to stop everything? **SUZUKI:** I don't want to stop progress if progress is about improving the quality of our lives. If life is all about more stuff, if it's about quantity, if bigger is better, more is better then yes, David Suzuki is against that.

MOYERS: As a scientist do you take seriously something you never even thought of when you first went on television: global warming?

SUZUKI: Absolutely. And the thing that hurts me today is that the scientific community overwhelmingly has warned us that global warming is real and that humans are a major contributor to it and that we should do something.

The fact that it is still regarded as a theory that is highly controversial has been maintained by the media. The media, aided by huge amounts of funding from corporations, have actively perpetuated the notion this is still a controversial scientific notion.

MOYERS: How do you explain the different views on global warming?

SUZUKI: Oh, it's very easy. In Canada — I can't speak for the United States, but in Canada — it costs more and more money now to run for office. And much of that money comes from the corporate sector.

In British Columbia where I live, the forest sector, which is now responsible for less than five cents of every dollar in our economy, perpetuates the notion that it's 50 percent of the economy of British Columbia.

And that you get far more revenue cutting the trees down than say having eco-tourism or, you know, hiking and camping and all of the things that are bringing in far more revenue. They still fund our politicians, our candidates for political office disproportionately so they have direct access to the pillars of power.

MOYERS: What do you think when you read that the White House recently ordered our Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA, to leave global warming off it's report because it's such a political hot potato?

SUZUKI: It's absolutely scandalous. It's shocking. Increasingly, I am very distressed when I come and visit the United States. I spent eight years getting my education in this country. I love this country.

And Americans have been incredibly generous to me and my family. In November of 2001 just a couple of months after September 11th I was invited to an environmental meeting in Buffalo, New York. And of course people were still very, very raw after the Twin Towers.

But someone at the end of this my talk got up and said, "What do Canadians think about what's going on in the United States?" And I said, "You know, I... when Mr. Bush was elected the first thing he did was he said no to the nuclear weapons test ban. He said no to global warming Kyoto Accord. He said no to a world court. He said no to land mines banning."

And then when September 11th happened he said the world must join behind us in fighting terrorism. And I don't think you could have it both ways. You can't say we're going our way and to hell with the rest of the world and then say, oops, sorry, you've gotta come and now join me. You can't, well, I thought I wasn't gonna get out of that room alive. It really shocked me to see the response to that.

And I think, in a time of crisis it's when you need as much dissent, question, criticism as possible and yet that seems to be a time when there is no toleration for that. And that's frightening to me.

MOYERS: You were a kid in Canada when World War II broke out. I didn't know until I read about you that Japanese-Canadians were interred like American-Japanese. What did that experience teach you?

SUZUKI: Well, it was the definitive event of my life. It shaped my persona and my drive, my priorities. I, to this day, when I look in the mirror, I cannot... I don't like to look in the mirror at myself. I hate...

MOYERS: Why?

SUZUKI: ...watching programs with me in it. Because when I look at myself, I see the slit eyes. And I see the face that was, for four years during World War II, depicted as the enemy. And it was my enemy too. That face was my enemy because I was a Canadian. And we wanted to go out and kill Japs.

Except that my country had put us into a prison, in my case. My father was sent away to a road camp he was working in the mountains for a year. He was separated. And my mother and father were born and raised in Canada. Never been to Japan. But we were called enemy aliens... considered enemy aliens. Deprived of everything we had. Given 70 pounds of luggage each and shipped to camps in the Rocky Mountains.

We landed in a place that is now Valhalla Park. It's this wonderful area. And as a boy, there were no teachers in the village for a year and a half. So I was seven years old.

I was roaming the mountains fishing and meeting bears and wolves. And that was where I bonded to nature. But in the camp there were all these children whose parents had come from Japan who spoke Japanese. And I couldn't speak Japanese and they beat me up. And the white kids, of course, had nothing to do with us. So I grew up with a tremendous sense of self-hate.

MOYERS: Were you bitter? Were your parents bitter?

SUZUKI: I think if one broods on this and becomes bitter and hateful then ultimately the bigots win. You become them.

And what I learned is that democracy sounds great on paper. But democracy is only as good as the people who try to live up to it.

And you always have to fight to get more of it. It's not perfect. I don't know anything that's better. But you have to fight all the time to make it better.

When times are good you can guarantee anything. "Yeah, you can go anywhere you want. You can say anything you want." Times are good. It's only when times are tough that those rights become most precious.

When society is threatened, that's when you need to be able to speak out without fear of intimidation or fear of losing rights or being imprisoned.

And if you can't guarantee those rights when times are tough then what the hell's the point of saying that we are a democracy, blah, blah, blah. People go to war and die for those rights. And in order to make those rights real in times of crisis, that's when we have to speak out and defend them.

MOYERS: Spoken like a grandfather.

SUZUKI: It is.

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NOW with Bill Moyers. Transcript. Bill ...

MOYERS: Those pictures of you and your grandson around the world.

SUZUKI: That's everything, Bill. That's everything. At our age what have we got except a legacy for our children and grandchildren. I want to be able to look at them and say, "I did the best I could." And that's all anybody can do.

MOYERS: The book, the series is THE SACRED BALANCE. Thank you very much, David Suzuki.

SUZUKI: Thanks for having me.

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