

THE MAN WHO CRIES WOLF

*Will David Suzuki
warn us about the environment
once too often?*

BY DAVID LEES

The first time I saw David Suzuki in person was at a gathering last October of about 300 parents and children, stroller-sized to about 10 years old, at a children's environment festival in Toronto. The festival's purpose was to "connect" children to their environment and to introduce important ecological issues to them "in positive and nonthreatening ways." To that end, its sponsors had set up a series of games on the grounds that included the snakes and ladders of environmental degradation, an acid-rain fish pond stocked with make-believe dead fish, and giant crossword puzzles spread out on the floor — find a three-letter word, starting with D, for what organisms do when their water becomes polluted.

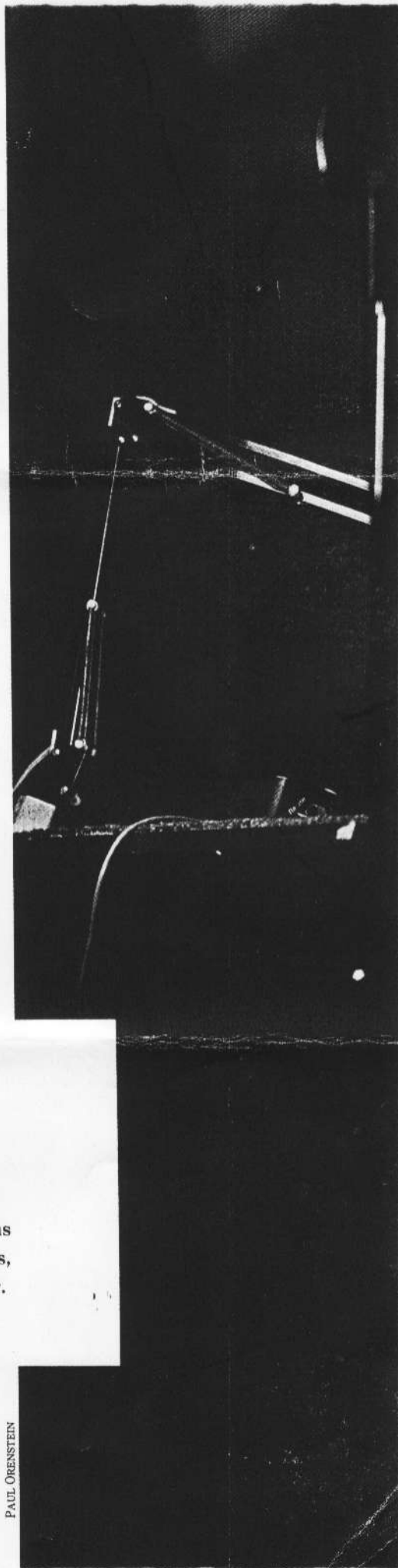
There was a sense in all this that there is something ennobling and virtuous in sharing bad news, but as I wandered back to the main hall in time for Suzuki's speech, I found myself wondering how soon is too soon to tell children they have been betrayed by the generations that went before them. Suzuki, when he appeared, had

clearly been thinking about this too.

"I have a fairly serious talk I wrote for today," said Suzuki, "and I considered throwing it out as I walked down here from my office. It's a beautiful day, and it's kind of heavy to lay a sad picture on everybody. But I can't help

At work in a CBC Television sound booth, David Suzuki records voice-overs for *The Nature of Things*. The show, watched by 868,000 Canadians and aired in 82 other countries, has made Suzuki a media star.

saying what really comes out of my heart, and that is that ever since human beings evolved on this planet about 800,000 years ago, every generation of parents, of grown-ups, has hoped that their children might have a little better opportunity than they did,



PAUL ORENSTEIN

a little better life – at least that their children would have a greater hope for something in the future. Today, for the first time in human history, we as parents know with absolute certainty that our children will not have more opportunities than we did when we were children.”

Suzuki was wearing shapeless cotton trousers, a brilliant red shirt, socks that collapsed around his ankles, a yellow wristband and tinted aviator glasses. His grey-black hair and tangled goatee made him look familiar and rumped at one moment, apocalyptic and wild-eyed the next. His phrasing was perfect, his language was simple, and his images were crystal-sharp. The cadence of his voice slid up and down an emotional scale from concern to indignation to rage as he mused about the gulf between civilization and the natural world and about the probability that an “absolute catastrophe” will take place in the next 30 years. He spoke about PCBs diluted in motor oil, the loss of topsoil, the decline of food crops, the thinning of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, the rise in ocean levels and the demise of the world’s rain forests.

“There are far too many human beings on earth,” said Suzuki, who has five children of his own, “but we are increasing at the rate of 90 million every year, and every new addition is one more set of lungs to fill with air, another stomach to feed, another body to clothe and shelter.” He told the roomful of Toronto parents with children on their knees that the air, water and soil in Toronto were so poisoned, he wouldn’t let his children live there; instead, he commutes to work on flights from Vancouver, British Columbia.

“If we don’t do something in 10 years, the very support systems for civilization will disappear.”

And then he told the children the parable of the frog that cannot detect gradual temperature changes in water.

“If you take a frog and put it into a pot of cold water,” he said, “and then you put that water on a hot plate and gradually heat it up, the frog will just sit there because it can’t tell that anything is different. If you tell that frog, ‘Mr. Frog, you’d better get out of there,’ the

frog will say, ‘I’m fine, what are you talking about? Nothing’s wrong.’ And that frog will sit there until it boils to death because it can’t tell the difference. And we are like the frog in many ways. We are sitting here, and we simply can’t tell what the great hazards to our survival are.”

It was a striking metaphor, and it stayed with me for days. It contained a fairy-tale image of a talking frog to hold the attention of the children, and it captured our universal sense that we are sliding gradually into an environmental cauldron. It also neutralized critical analysis. To suggest that the image is unreasonably bleak or “gloomy and doomy,” as Suzuki paraphrases the complaints of his critics, is to fall into the role of complacent Mr. Frog. The image also contains something purely characteristic of Suzuki himself: a denunciation of the senses and an appeal to the heart to reach out and grasp the enormity of planetary death. It is a dichotomy that has played itself out in Suzuki’s own life in his transition from scientist to media guru and that shows up in his commitment to native and wilderness issues and in his unconditional rejection of technology and economic growth. It has made him the outspoken conscience of the nation, a hectoring voice that speaks out from bookstands, newspapers, radio and television, warning us to change before it is too late.

In some ways, he may be telling us that it is already too late.

While I wait for Suzuki in his living room overlooking English Bay in Vancouver – a room as cluttered with exotic artifacts as is the storage vault in a museum – a telephone rings elsewhere in the house. Whatever is being said on the other end of the line clearly delights Suzuki, and he comes into the living room elated. William Thorsell, editor in chief of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, has apparently just given a lecture at the University of British Columbia (UBC) about the media, public policy and the reasons why the newspaper dumped Suzuki’s weekly column from the Saturday science page. The column, Thorsell said, had begun to sound like a broken record because of Suzuki’s obsession with the environment. Moreover, Thorsell told the audience, it is the job of a newspaper not to advocate social change but to reflect the priorities of its readers. “I’m glad he said that,” says Suzuki, “because it shows exactly where they’re at.”

If there is one thing for which Suzuki

makes no apology, it is his unrelentingly bleak view of the human condition on earth. For almost two decades, Suzuki’s own anxieties and convictions about the nature of society and its technologies have shaped perceptions in Canada. His weekly appearances on

Suzuki in his North Vancouver home with wife Tara Cullis and children Severn, 10, and Sarika, 6. Suzuki flies to work rather than expose his children to Toronto’s “poisoned” air and water.

CBC’s *The Nature of Things* have made him as recognizable as Brian Mulroney, and his participation in the 1985 eight-part special series *A Planet for the Taking* and the 1989 two-hour special *Amazonia*, about the destruction of the Brazilian rain forest, secured his stature as the environmental conscience of the nation.

He has written columns in magazines, on and off, for a decade and, for the past four years, has churned out a weekly column for the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe* and now the *Star* again, which picked it up when the *Globe* let it go. He has published three major books, including an autobiography called *Metamorphosis, Stages in a Life* and, in 1989, *Inventing the Future*, a collection of many of the broken-record columns about which Thorsell had complained. The defining characteristic of Suzuki’s writing and of his public presentations is his sense that humanity is on the very knife-edge of catastrophe: overpopulation, the depletion of resources and the collapse of the biological food chain that will leave the planet inhabited only by lichen and fungi – these are Suzuki’s apocalyptic horsemen.

“It wasn’t just that he wrote about the same subject,” says Terry Christian, the *Globe*’s science editor who received Suzuki’s columns. “Sometimes, he used similar sentences and essentially the same structures, picking ideas out of one column and putting them back in another. If it wasn’t the environment, it was the Indians and how they were one with the environment. We worried that people would get so used to his screaming ‘The world is ending,



the world is ending' that they would just turn off on it. It was all doom and gloom. He made it seem as if it was already too late."

Suzuki replies that it was his impression columnists were expected to express personal opinions. In a letter to the *Globe*, he conceded that his column, which was originally about science, had become narrowly focused on the environment, but this, he added, was "because the environment is all there is. This is the crisis of all time, and if we don't make it through, the consequences for your children and mine are catastrophic." Although he bears no grudge against the newspaper, says Suzuki, the paper's complaint that he was overly negative is a product of the newspaper's orientation.

"I think the fact that Thorsell is closely tied to the business community is bound to reflect itself in his precepts," says Suzuki. "So anybody who dares to question economics as it is practised and the idea of steady growth — which I am totally against — has to be seen to be negative.

"I've heard this before," he continues, "that I'm just too depressing. My answer is that if you take your child to a doctor and the doctor tells you, 'I'm

sorry, your child is dying, but if we take action now, we can save her,' your reaction cannot be that this is too depressing, I don't want to hear it, you're being too gloomy. And that is what I think is the state of the planet today. We are talking about the death of the planet, and all these people who deny, deny, deny and find it convenient to say 'This is too depressing, he's too negative' are simply putting off what a lot of reputable people — people like Paul Ehrlich at Stanford, E.O. Wilson at Harvard, Steve Schneider at the Worldwatch Institute — are saying: if we don't do something in 10 years, the very support systems for civilization will disappear."

In 1987, Suzuki narrated a script written by John Livingston, called *Wilderness Under Siege*, a segment of *The Nature of Things* that aroused Suzuki's sympathy for native land claims the way *A Planet for the Taking* had mobilized his sense of despair about the environment. The programme, a passionate documentary about the efforts of natives and environmentalists to save the South Moresby rain forest in the Queen Charlotte Islands, was later entered into the parliamentary record by federal environment min-

ister Tom McMillan and helped generate the public support that eventually forced the B.C. government to permit the creation of a national park in the area.

Suzuki has been close to native people ever since, and on the weekend I arrive at his home in Vancouver, he has been invited to attend a potlatch in the village of Comox, where he is to be formally made a member of the Tlowitsis tribe. As part of the ritual, he will receive a ceremonial button blanket, worn like a robe, to acknowledge his contribution as a passionate spokesperson for Indian values. He is looking forward to it with the eagerness of a Grammy nominee.

"When I first went up to the Queen Charlottes, I didn't know anything about what was going on," he says. "I had vague notes containing dribs and drabs of the story, but I had to interview a couple of people, and one of them was an Indian. At that time, he was called Gary Edenchaw — now he's changed it to Guujaaw — and he was trying to get his people to go back to the old ways. He was living in a shack without electricity. I said, 'Gary, what difference does it make if they cut down all the trees here? You'll still

have your job, your home. Nothing will change.' He said, 'Yeah, that's true, but if they cut those trees down, we'll just be the same as everyone else.'"

The weekend that lies ahead of Suzuki is well filled. He plans to join the potlatch in midafternoon, but on the drive north, he has scheduled a book signing for *Inventing the Future* and an interview with an ABC television crew — "That's the Australian Broadcasting Corporation," he explains. "I'm very big in Australia" — to take place on the Nanaimo ferry during the crossing from the mainland to Vancouver Island. By the time we stow Suzuki's battered 10-year-old Toyota on the ferry and buy yogurt for his two daughters, the Australians, who are clearly delighted by his arrival, have set up their gear. The tone of the series, as explained by one reporter, is reminiscent of the theme in *A Planet for the Taking*. "We want to give the audience a little bit of what they're used to hearing," he prompts Suzuki, "that this many species of plants and animals are becoming extinct, and then hit them with the idea that there is a possibility we may be one of those species."

During the interview, Suzuki addresses the question of his negativity: "People say, 'We've heard about the boy who cried wolf,' but the whole point about that parable, it seems to me, is that in the end, the wolf did come. I don't think we can afford to take the chance that maybe we are crying wolf at the wrong time." And he goes on to warn about the dangers of exponential growth and the collapse of the biosphere. Twenty thousand species become extinct every year,

Despite his reputation as an outstanding geneticist, Suzuki left the laboratory. His award-winning television shows have established him as the environmental conscience of the nation.

he says, and the demise of humanity — an event he considers probable — would leave a world fit only for fungi and moulds. "As Paul Ehrlich has pointed out," he says at one point, "steady growth over time is the creed of the cancer cell. If you look at the

life systems on the entire planet as a single system, then human beings in that system have the characteristics of a cancer."

Ehrlich's name comes up often in Suzuki's interviews, lectures and writing. The two men met in 1961, a few years before Ehrlich wrote his best-seller *The Population Bomb: Population Control or Race to Oblivion?* in which he predicted that the world would be overwhelmed by death and famine in as little as nine years. Ehrlich called for radical surgery to cut out the "cancer" caused by "the uncontrolled multiplication of people." The surgery would take such forms as an embargo on foreign aid to such overpopulated countries as India; compulsory birth regulation; the addition of temporary sterilants to water supplies and food; and "luxury" taxes on layettes, cribs, diapers and diaper services.

In one of his last columns in the *Globe*, Suzuki quoted Ehrlich's view of public apathy about the perils of economic growth: "Just like frogs in a pan of water," he wrote, "we all sit still while our 'leaders' struggle to turn up the heat." A few weeks later, when the *Star* began to publish the column, Ehrlich was featured in it regularly. "Ehrlich concludes that it would be a dangerous miscalculation to look to technology for the answer [to environmental problems]. Scientific analysis points toward the need for a quasi-religious transformation of contemporary culture," Suzuki wrote on August 26. "As the eminent Stanford ecologist Paul Ehrlich remarked, 'Economists are one of the last groups of professionals on earth who still believe in perpetual-motion machines,' " appeared two weeks later; and three weeks after that, "Stanford University ecologist Paul Ehrlich reminds us that . . . we face a 'billion environmental Pearl Harbors all at once.'" On December 2, Suzuki wrote, "We no longer have the luxury of time . . . when people like Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University . . . tell us we have only a decade to turn things around." And in his Christmas column on December 23, Suzuki wrote, "As eminent Stanford ecologist Paul Ehrlich says, 'The solution to ecocatastrophe is quasi-religious.'"

"The thing I like about Paul," says Suzuki, as we drive to the potlatch, "and I like to think it's true of me, is that we just say whatever we feel. There's no bullshit, no hedging, no dancing around. We just say it. Outrageous things. . . but they're only outrageous

because they're so obvious and blunt, not outrageous in the sense of being out in left field. But he hasn't been the person who shaped my ideas."

In some ways, there has always been an edge to Suzuki's nature, a recurrent pattern of anger and pain that is reflected in virtually all his public pronouncements. His childhood was marred by the passage in 1942 of the

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War Measures Act, which authorized the internment of 1,700 Japanese-Canadians. His father was assigned to a road crew working in the B.C. interior, while Suzuki, aged 6, his mother and three sisters were resettled in an abandoned hotel in a makeshift detention camp in the ghost town of Slocan. Bullied at school because of his inability to speak Japanese and his stubbornly pro-Canadian sympathies, he came out of the war hating both sides: the whites who had uprooted his family and the Japanese who had caused all his trouble. He was also scarred by wartime propaganda linking narrow eyes and yellow skin with treachery, deceit and cruelty and dreamed about dying his hair, anglicizing his name and undergoing an operation that would enlarge his eyes. "The image looking back at me in the mirror," he writes in his autobiography, "became hateful, a tangible reminder of the enemy."

Suzuki portrays himself as an outsider never completely at home, even with himself. In high school in Ontario — where the family was resettled after the war — he was rebuffed, like many bright, shy children, and when he ran for student council, he appealed for the vote of other "outies." When he won a scholarship to Amherst College in the United States, he felt that he was admitted only to fill out the school's minority quota. "I wanted desperately to fit in with my schoolmates," he writes. "But as usual, I felt completely out of my element with my classmates." When he landed his first research job in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, he identified fiercely with the emerging black civil-rights movement and became the first nonblack member of the National Association for the Ad-

vancement of Colored People. When he joined the faculty at UBC, he found the school to be elitist: "I was an oddity who didn't fit the mould."

But if Suzuki felt rejected by his academic peers at UBC, he was embraced by his students. Then 27 years old, he

Suzuki received 6,000 letters in response to *Amazonia*, his documentary on Brazilian rain-forest destruction. He helped stop construction of a dam that would have displaced the Kaiapo natives.

wore bell-bottom jeans and a headband to classes, encouraged his students to call him Dave and quickly became the most popular teacher on campus. He was called the only geneticist in the world with groupies. He also began to spend more than 100 hours a week in his laboratory studying the reproduction of fruit flies, an obsessive dedication to duty, he admits, that destroyed his first marriage.

Suzuki says that his views evolved gradually over those years. In 1969, while still an active professor at UBC, he began giving lectures off campus. In preparation for an address to a Hadasah group, he researched the Holocaust and was shocked to discover that Josef Mengele, the infamous Nazi Angel of Death, had been a geneticist. At the time, Suzuki was considered one of the most outstanding geneticists in Canada and not long before had delivered a brilliant breakthrough paper on fruit-fly genetics — "Temperature-sensitive mutations in *Drosophila melanogaster*: Relative frequencies among x-ray and chemically induced sex-linked recessive lethals and semi-lethals" — to the National Academy of Sciences. Suzuki had produced a mutant strain of fruit flies that thrived at one temperature but died at another, enabling researchers to turn a genetic defect on and off like a parlour lamp.

The revelation about Mengele began to trouble Suzuki deeply. As he read more of the social history of his own scientific discipline, he became convinced that genetic theory had been applied as a rationale for racist legislation in the United States, which in turn had served as a model for the

Nazi programme of race purification.

But if Suzuki's personal demons gave him little peace, he at least was putting them to good use. According to Louis Siminovitch, a leading Canadian geneticist who knew Suzuki at UBC, Suzuki's laboratory at the university turned out some of the best work in the country. "There are two ways to measure the work of a lab," says Siminovitch. "Does it break new ground, or does it do good work with the ground that's already broken? The temperature-sensitivity work that Suzuki did was all new. He was a superb teacher, and he was one of the top five or ten geneticists in the country." At the same time, Suzuki was branching out. He had become host of a local CBC production, *Suzuki on Science*, that had little going for it except Suzuki's own flair and his ability to draw normally reticent scientists into animated discussions about their work.

Siminovitch, who lobbied on Suzuki's behalf for research grants, was also, ironically, the catalyst that took him away from science. Siminovitch had appeared on *The Nature of Things*, where he met James Murray, the programme's executive producer. In 1974, when Murray was looking for a host for *Science Magazine*, a new weekly series to be aired nationally, Siminovitch recommended Suzuki. Murray had already seen segments of *Suzuki on Science* and had liked the energy and intellect that Suzuki projected on camera. Hedging his bet, he invited Suzuki to appear in a segment of the series pilot to talk about fruit-fly genetics. Suzuki didn't know it, but the shooting also served as an audition. He passed.

"I'm prejudiced, of course," says Murray, "but I think David is the best on-camera person in Canada. He's not an actor. He's just a very forward, no-nonsense person. His credibility comes across so well because he's not performing. He talks to the camera in a relaxed and open way, and he makes contact with the audience."

In 1979, *Science Magazine* was consolidated into an expanded one-hour weekly science programme, *The Nature of Things with David Suzuki*. In an industry where "old" means "bad," *The Nature of Things* is a 30-year phenomenon, an outstanding technical and creative success that, as of last October, was drawing 868,000 viewers a week — about 300,000 fewer than *Hockey Night in Canada* but 100,000 more than the high-profile *Fifth Estate*. Dubbed into 20 languages, the show,

or at least parts of it, has been aired in 83 countries. Although it is a source of some frustration among the staff members that Suzuki is universally perceived as the genius and the environmental conscience of the programme — honours they feel should rightly be shared with Murray and John Livingston, the senior writer — it is unquestionably Suzuki's cheerfully inquiring mind and his personality that have made the programme so popular no matter how grim its subject matter. Suzuki cares, and watching him, the country has learned to care about him and, through him, to care about the environment. Aside from its good numbers, the show consistently rates high on what CBC calls its "enjoyment index."

Suzuki took to the media with enthusiasm. Aside from his work on the series, he has been featured on talk shows, documentaries, films, specials and children's programmes. He hosted *Quirks and Quarks* on CBC-Radio for five years and appeared on programmes as diverse as CBC's *The Beachcombers*, *Celebrity Cooks* and *Man Alive*, CBC-Radio's *Morningside* and *This Country in the Morning*, CTV's *Alan Hamel Show*, ABC's *Virginia Graham Show*, Global's *Rumours of War*, a BBC science special; and he will soon appear on an environmental special produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

He was even more of a success on the small screen than he had been in the laboratory, and in quick succession, he won four Bell-Northern Awards for science communication in the electronic media; a Japan Gold prize for a *Nature of Things* segment on Japan; a B.C. ACTRA as best host for *Quirks*

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and *Quarks*; a national ACTRA for best host/interviewer for *The Nature of Things*; a Cybil Award from the Canadian Broadcasters League as broadcaster of the year; an Etrog for the documentary *The Hottest Show on Earth*; and a Prix Anik for his documentary *Tankerbomb*. Suzuki is an officer of the Order of Canada and has won the Sandford Fleming medal from

the Royal Canadian Institute and the Canadian Medical Association Medal of Honour. In 1986, he won the Royal Bank award for Canadian achievement, an honour that brought with it \$100,000. "He has turned television into a beguiling electronic classroom, informing, educating and provoking his audience about science and nature and the delicate relationship

"If people only knew the truth about me, they'd know they could blow me away with a word."

between man and his environment," said the chairman of the selection committee. "He has demystified science for the nonscientist."

But just as Suzuki lost heart for genetic research, he also began to have doubts about scientific methodology, which he considers to be reductive, exploitative and lacking a larger world view. The work on *A Planet for the Taking*, three years in the making, welded his views about science to a concern for the environment; his columns written in 1984 for *Science Dimension* magazine contain themes that would later show up on the CBC broadcast. He also began to quarrel with Siminovitch, his former benefactor, over the moral culpability of science and scientists. By that time, Siminovitch was science advisor to the CBC, and he tried unsuccessfully to prevent *Planet* from being aired. He criticized both the programme and Suzuki for being negative to a fault and for failing to suggest alternatives to pessimism. "I admire Suzuki's science and the tremendous contribution he has made to the exposure of science," says Siminovitch, "but what I don't admire about him is his evangelism and the one-sided way he views things."

Just as Suzuki's work on *Planet* shaped his feelings about the environment, his interest in native issues was sparked during the shooting of *The Nature of Things* segment about the struggle to preserve the B.C. rain forest. The final revelation in the evolution of Suzuki's consciousness, however, took place in a clearing in a Brazilian rain forest during the filming of *Amazonia*. Suzuki arrived in Brazil carrying trail mix and granola bars for the crew of *The Nature of Things*, which

had been there for six weeks recording the destruction unleashed upon the jungle. Smoke and the smell of burning animal flesh hung constantly in the air. The only bright note that was later conveyed by the documentary was the stand taken by Paiakan, a Kaiapo chief who had mastered the art of confrontational politics and who was fighting the government's plans to develop a series of dams on the Xingu River. The hydroelectric project, which was to be financed with a \$500 million loan from the World Bank, would flood an area the size of Great Britain and displace the Kaiapo people from 80 percent of their homeland.

The first encounter between Suzuki and Paiakan was almost magical. By that time, Suzuki was thoroughly steeped in the native lore of the Pacific Northwest, while Paiakan had formed close ties with a Japanese medical doctor whose first name was David. "It was like love at first sight," says Amanda McConnell, a writer who worked with Suzuki on the *Amazonia* script. "They didn't have a language in common, but Paiakan is a very forceful and dynamic person and so is David. They did the interview through a translator, and then they just went fishing together."

Suzuki identified strongly with the Amazonian chief. He chartered a private plane to get into the jungle to Paiakan's village, where he heard more about the hydroelectric project. Paiakan's idea was to bring together chiefs from more than 20 tribes in the Amazon Basin to a central meeting in the town of Altamira, the proposed site of the first of the dams, to rally opposition. The project was expected to cost \$100,000. When Suzuki got out of the forest, he phoned home to his wife, Tara Cullis. "I thought at first we had a bad connection," says Cullis. "Then I realized that his voice was breaking. He said the smoke was so bad that the planes couldn't take off and that his eyes were watering constantly. He talked about the number of Indians who had died since whites first made contact; he said there had once been five million Indians in the Amazon, and only 200,000 are left today. It was breaking his heart. He just said, 'Tara, you've got to do something.'"

Cullis contacted a network of friends that had developed during the fight to save South Moresby and organized two fund-raising benefits that were held in December, one in Toronto and one in Ottawa. Highlighted by speeches

from Paiakan and Suzuki, with songs by Gordon Lightfoot, readings by Margaret Atwood and performances by Haida dancers, the two events netted \$70,000, which, along with \$24,000 raised in Great Britain, financed Paiakan's Altamira conference in February 1989. The event attracted media from around the world, not to mention the rock star Sting, and generated so much publicity that the World Bank loan to the Brazilian development was postponed indefinitely, effectively killing the project. Suzuki attended with a troop of Canadian environmentalists who had helped raise the funds, including Simon Dick, a Kwakiutl dancer from British Columbia, and Guujaaw, the Haida activist from South Moresby. Of the 2,000 Europeans and North Americans at the conference, only the Canadian delegation was admitted to the native campsite set up outside Altamira; the presence of Simon Dick and Guujaaw had special meaning for the Kaiapo; they had been told that the tribes in the Amazon Basin were the last surviving primitive people in the world.

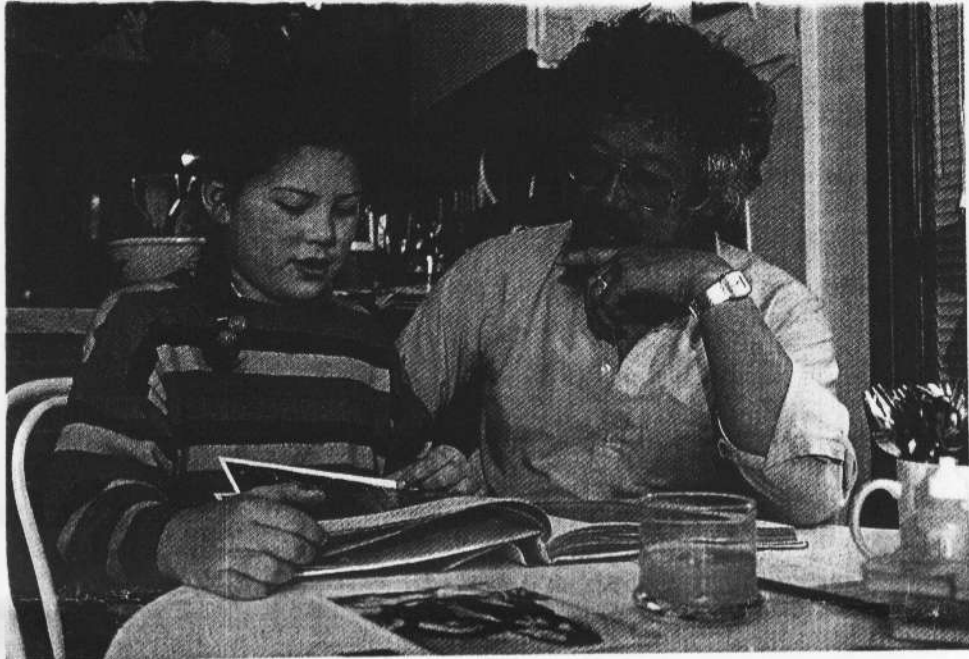
"It was fantastic," said Suzuki. "Simon Dick and Guujaaw came totally decked out in their garb and with their faces painted. Tara and I wore our regalia, and we came in with the two Indian drummers and danced. The Brazilian Indians went crazy. They just loved it."

Sometime during the drive to the potlatch in Comox, Suzuki made an observation that struck me as being out of context to the conversation. We were talking about his stature in Canada and the influence he wields

"For the first time in human history," says Suzuki, with daughters Severn, top, and Sarika, bottom, "we know with absolute certainty that our children will not have more opportunities than we did."

whenever he speaks out about environmental issues. "If people only knew the truth about me," he said, "they'd know that they could blow me away with a word."

The remark didn't seem to make much sense at the time, although its



meaning was clear: the sometimes arrogant public persona that Suzuki presents to the world is an ego defined by its vulnerability. The comment came back to me later, however, when I realized that it must have been just before the potlatch weekend, early in November, that Suzuki wrote his now famous letter to Carleton University in Ottawa. The letter was a reply to Kenzie Thompson, associate director of development for Carleton University's alumni services. Thompson had sent a note reminding Suzuki that the scholarship fund he had set up in 1985 was running low. The fund provided two \$1,500 grants each year to students specializing in science journalism. In her letter, Thompson told Suzuki that the name of the 1989 graduate recipient was Laurie McLean.

"Thank you for your note about Miss McLean," Suzuki replied. "I don't know how much money remains, but I don't wish to add any more money to the fund. Please use it up and close the fund. I intend to fund scholarships elsewhere. A faculty member of the school of journalism has reviewed two of my books in a most unpleasant and uncalled-for way. Of course, that is his prerogative, but I don't see why I should continue to support students in a faculty with such a puerile member. This is merely to explain to you that I have not changed my commitment to supporting prospective scientific journalists."

The reviews that had bothered Suzuki were written by Christopher Dornan, an assistant professor of journalism at Carleton University, and had appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* in October 1987 and July 1988. In the first review, Dornan said that *Genethics: The Ethics of Engineering Life*, a book written jointly by Suzuki and Peter Knudtson, was simplistic. In the second, Dornan stated that *Metamorphosis*, Suzuki's autobiography, was immature. Suzuki, he wrote, "is so admired, it's almost a sacrilege to point out that his persona as the benign voice of reason means he rarely has anything particularly original to say." Both reviews were sharp, witty and more than a bit bitchy, which is par for the course on the book-review circuit. A less sensitive writer might have shrugged them off; Suzuki did not.

Suzuki's subsequent explanations were not very convincing. He claimed that his intention was not to compel the university to censure or censor Dornan but merely to make the point that he

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could see no reason to support a faculty containing a member who held him up to derision. This is an exceedingly fine distinction, and it misses the point: cancelling the scholarships would have no effect on Dornan but would penalize two students. Suzuki also protested that he had never promised to fund the scholarships indefinitely and noted that the money for the scholarships

"These are practically the poorest people in the country, but they're the most generous."

was coming out of his own pocket. In 1989, this was true, but for the previous eight years, from 1981 to 1988, Suzuki had been getting federal grants totalling more than \$400,000 for his work in popularizing science. Most of the endeavours he cited in his 1987 application for \$58,000 – his hosting of *The Nature of Things*, the speeches he gave, the newspaper columns and books he was writing – were undertakings for which he was already being paid. The notable exceptions in his application for funding were the Carleton scholarships.

Speaking to Michael Enright on CBC-Radio's *As It Happens*, Suzuki admitted that he was surprised that so much fuss had been made over his letter and wondered why the university hadn't called him back to say, 'Why are you being so childish? Please don't stop doing this. This is not what the university feels.' The remark was odd. It suggested that he never expected his letter to Thompson to be taken seriously. It was the bluster of someone who had been hurt and wanted an apology, and it suggested to me, not for the first time, that Suzuki underestimates the power of his own prose in missives both for good and ill.

WE ARRIVE IN COMOX LATE IN THE afternoon, when the potlatch is already several hours old. The ceremony is being held in a huge barn reminiscent of the tribal longhouses that once dominated the B.C. coastline. As we enter, a roaring fire is burning in the middle of a central arena, sending flames upward to a gap in the roof and sucking cold air in around the 400 natives who have assembled to witness the retirement of George Speck as chief of the

Tlowitsis and the accession of his son Wedlidi. In keeping with tradition, the day and much of the night are devoted to ceremonial dances, feasting and the distribution of gifts. Toward the end of the ceremony, Wedlidi begins peeling hundred-dollar bills from a stack three inches deep and handing them out to friends and relatives. "These are practically the poorest people in the country," says Suzuki excitedly, "but they're the most generous."

Suzuki's arrival causes a ripple of attention among the low, crowded bleachers surrounding the arena. He is called forward almost immediately by George Speck, who announces that Suzuki is now a member of the Speck family and, as such, has been reborn with a new name. "When you speak to the people about the plight of the world," says Speck, "you will speak on behalf of our family. We carry a very special flame in our heart for you." The new name was Nanwagaway, after a legendary tribal figure who overcame a cannibalistic spirit signifying greed and perverse selfishness. The button blanket that is draped around Suzuki is red for the colour of the earth and black, the colour of introspection. It is inlaid with the figure of a thunderbird. With the lightning that comes from its eyes and mouth and the force of its wings, the thunderbird blows away the impurities of the world: it is an appropriate symbol for Suzuki and his dream of an unspoiled planet.

"People say I'm so negative," Suzuki says later. "But the fact of the matter is that environmentalists are for clean air, they're for clean water, and they're for biodiversity. In the kind of perverse

Keenly interested in native-rights issues, Suzuki proudly wears the button blanket that signifies his membership in the Tlowitsis tribe. Red and black represent earth and introspection.

economic-growth vision, to be for those things is to be anti-everything. But we're not saying we have to undergo fundamental changes because we're against everything. We're saying it because we're for preserving something for the future."

PETER BENNETT