Dr. David Suzuki: "David's Community Party"

Season 2, Episode 9

***Small Planet Heroes* Podcast**

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***This transcript has been lightly abridged for optimum coherence and flow.**

Kai: Hello, I'm Kai Chan. I'm a professor and Canada Research Chair at the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability at the University of British Columbia. And I'm a co-founder of CoSphere and this podcast, *Small Planet Heroes*. And I'm here with Sam.

Sam: Hi again. I'm Sam Blackwell, a Master's student in the CHANS lab here at UBC. I'm studying urban birds, community-based science and human-nature connections, and I'm honored to be part of this conversation today.

Kai: We are so excited to be hosting Dr. David Suzuki. He's someone who doesn't need an introduction here in Canada, because he's been monumental in the environmental movement here and across the world. He's had a full and varied life. He's gone from being thoroughly unappreciated as a Canadian when he had to spend a few years of his childhood in Japanese internment camps in the interior of British Columbia during World War Two, to being one of our most celebrated Canadians. In a CBC poll in 2004, David was voted the fifth greatest Canadian of all time, and among those, the highest ranked of those still living.

[*Medley of Small Planet Heroes theme song:*]

If there's a pit in your stomach from the way that we live,
You want it to change, something's going to give,
We've got stories that'll give us a glimpse
Of better ways to reconnect everything.
We're Small Planet Heroes,
Small Planet Heroes.

David: Thank you for having me.

Kai: You've spoken many times over the years about your time at CBC on *The Nature of Things* and *Quirks and Quarks* and in other cases, and you've mentioned that there were a few times, maybe even many times when you had things to say that you were told that you should probably not say, or you shouldn't say the way that you want.

David: Over and over again. "Oh, that's too depressing." Or "No, you can't do that because people won't have any hope and they'll give up." And increasingly, I've been told that even as the global conditions have worsened, I'm told, "No, no, you know it's–it's too depressing." Well, my message is that Mr. Trump's success is the triumph of capitalism, and when you look at the people that he's gathered around him now who are really radically transforming government, the American government, and where they see their role on the planet. It's all about money. All about money. And, you know, unfortunately, we're tied up in it as well. If you hear the Premier of Alberta, Danielle Smith, you know she's not going to ever say the words "climate change," because, of

course, the fossil fuel industry is such an important part of the–of the–economy of Alberta, and so we're all kind of dancing around, avoiding this huge thing. And kids! I just gave a talk last week at TREK, you know, for kids in the TREK Program, and, well, I mean, I was told my message really leads to despair among the young kids. I feel, if kids who are aware of what's going on in the world…and Greta–Greta certainly galvanized everybody by, by just saying it like it is.

Kai: Do you wish, do you wish that you'd said more? Do you wish that you'd push back?

David: No, I–what I see now, even our Foundation–we said at the time we started it, the environmental issues were at the absolute peak. And we said, well, is there a need for yet another organization, or is there one here that we ought to throw our support behind? And I called a group of friends, and they–we gathered on one of the Gulf Islands, and after a day of going back and forth, they said, "Look, most environmental organizations spring up because there's a problem. They're going to cut this forest, they're polluting this river or"–and so they spring up over an issue, but it doesn't get at the underlying root causes of our destructiveness. So we said we need an organization that really analyzes why are we such a destructive animal? Once we understand that, then we can begin to look at ways of, you know, using our power to go in a different direction. And what I find is we got caught up. Even though we started off this way, we said we will not take money from the government or from corporations, so we can feel free to speak out as we see it. We got caught up when, when the government would come to us and say, "Okay, you're one of the more visible organizations, would you sit on this committee here to look at, you know, salmon farms" or whatever? And we thought, look at that! We're really–we're making success–we're successful. But what these things turned out to be is the industries were trying to green-wash themselves by saying, you know, we're working with the Suzuki Foundation whereas government simply used it as a way of delaying the crisis and pushing it on. And our voice, what are the underlying root causes got shoved aside as we– "Oh, they've reduced the herring–the commercial herring take by 50%. Look at that, we did that." There shouldn't be a commercial herring fishery! You know. And so anyway, I think that we got caught up in [that].

Kai: And yeah, there's, there's that trade-off between the size of your platform, right, when the big players invite you in, build a platform for you, but it's constrained.

David: Yeah, and it's constrained by the system. The problem we face now is for 99% of human existence on this planet, we understood that our very survival and our well-being depended on nature. You know, for 95% of our history, we were nomadic hunter-gatherers. I told this TREK group, our ancestors had to go out every day and find their food. Thank goodness nature was abundant enough, but we were also smart enough, and we found ways of preserving food longer than just one or two days. But when you live that way, you know very well nature is the very source of our livelihood and our well being. And so, you know, Indigenous people, they always say, "Well, we've got to act in a good way." And when you realize that nature, or Mother Earth, is the source, you know, we have to commit to acting in a good way so she can continue to be abundant. The problem is that we've come out. And I believe that began in the Renaissance in the 1400s but we began to see ourselves as different, that we're, you know, Rene Descartes said, *Cogito ergo sum*. You know what that means right?

Sam: No. [giggles].

David: I studied–oh, I studied Latin for four years in high school. *I think, therefore I am.* And by saying that, he elevated the mind. This became, well, the mind was our one, you know, survival attribute

that we have, but we elevated it. That's everything, right? And then you get, *Scientia potentia est*, that Francis Bacon said *Scientia*, which "knowledge," or "science"--*knowledge is power*. And so now you see this activity that we can now have power. And of course, Isaac Newton and all of that stuff. And then with the Industrial Revolution, a few 100 years later, we start, "Oh, we're not like any other animals." We can invent a machine that can work 24 hours a day. They don't have to take a lunch break or a pee break; they don't fall in love and lose 50 IQ points. I mean, these machines, and they can move mountains and, you know, and so we began to see with the Industrial Revolution, we're not like any other. We don't see up until then, we realized we live in a web of relationships. We're one strand in a web of relationships with all other animals and plants, with the air, the water, the soil. But when you elevate yourself and say, "We're on a pyramid, everything down below is for us, but we're at the top, and it's all for us." [**Kai:** This reminds me of our conversation with Eli Enns.] And you get in the 20th century, this amazing shift in the way that we live. In 1900 Canada had no city with a million people. I don't know how many there were in the world. It couldn't have been more than a handful. Most people in the world, including Canada, lived in rural village communities because we were still a farming animal. But in 100 years, by the year 2000, 85% of Canadians were now living in cities. And over half of the world is living in gigantic cities.

Kai: A totally different world.

David: And nature in a city: what is your highest priority? It's your job. I need a job to make the money to buy the things I want.

Kai: So in terms of setting our priorities straight, you did, in a sense, benefit from that trade-off as your producers constrained what you said, because it probably grew that audience, right? Do you think that you would have been voted so high on that list of Greatest Canadians if you had been more vocal, more outspoken much earlier in your career?

David: No, I mean, I was outspoken outside of television. And the one time, this is way back when, was before Brian Mulroney, there was a big issue over the tar sands. And Alberta was championing more tar sands exploitation. And I came–and the NDP had a big program: anti-tar sands. So they came to me and asked, "Would you endorse this?" I said, of course, I endorse this thing. Well, all hell broke loose, and the CBC, the CBC said, you know, our–our presenters are not supposed to show bias. I was so mad. I said, "Screw this. I quit." But my boss, who was my best friend, Executive Producer, said, "No, no, no, we need, you," no, you know, and he--but they pulled me off the air, and the CBC announced that I wanted to become more political, and therefore I was stepping away, which was total bullshit, but I didn't. We had all these old programs that they ran, but I didn't host any of them. They paid me the whole time I was off the air, but they were just trying to avoid some smackdown from–from the right wing. So, I mean, that was, I wanted to–when I did the show on the fight over logging in Haida Gwaii back in the early 1980s, I wanted to go and get arrested, and they just–CBC went nuts, and they said they'll pull you off the show for sure, but they might cancel *The Nature of Things.* Now, I didn't start *The Nature of Things*. It started in 1960. It was, you know, and I–to me, it is, was, and is the most important program on CBC, and so they blackmailed me by saying, "If you get arrested, you know that…" And so I was very frustrated, but my father, who was 60 something at the time, said, "Well, I got the same last name, I'll just go up." The Haida love my dad. And the Haida love my dad. And so he went up. He was going to get arrested, my–but it turned–it wasn't necessary. But so there have been those constraints. I've had lots of people trying to pull me off *The Nature of Things* and to get me fired from UBC. There was a guy who wrote a regular column in *The Vancouver Sun*. Man, he came after me and said, I should

be, you know, turfed off the UBC. And when you look at the record of the Board of Governors, the Board of Governors was loaded with forestry executives. Oh, man, I had the greatest thing going. I had a thing called tenure. Yeah, you know, to me, tenure was not a guarantee of a job. It meant as long as I was doing my job, I could speak out and not worry about getting fired, but believe me, there were a lot of people in UBC and CBC that wanted me to get the hell out of there because they just didn't agree.

Sam: Yeah, and I mean, yeah, like you've been–you've always been an outspoken person, as you've said, and I remember reading about–kind of–how outspoken you were about genetically modified organisms and recombinant DNA while you were still a professor at UBC, which you know eventually led to stepping away from academia and focusing more on the David Suzuki Foundation. But I was curious, um, whether you ever considered shifting to politics and becoming a politician? You know Andrew Weaver, he did lead the Green Party for a bit and, but like, did you feel as though a career in science and activism was more impactful? Or, like, would you go back and change anything?

David: First of all, I think to be a politician, you really have to have thick skin. And while, you know, I've taken a lot of shots, I've always felt that, you know, those–those shots are not people that agreed with me. In politics, the shots are completely different. And I don't think I would have been a good politician, but I came very close a number of times. Once under Joe Clark's–when Joe Clark was the Prime Minister, he had a man named Heward Grafftey. He died a few years ago now, but Heward was, I can't even remember what ministry he ran. He was a Conservative. He called me and asked if I would, first of all, would I? He wanted me–to hire me. And first he said, "Would you like to run MRC, Medical Research?" I said, "I'm not a medical doctor." Then how about NRC? And? And I said, "No, no, no," and–and then I thought, well, if I got into (NRC at that time was a–was a granting agency, it's now NSERC). But I thought, Geez, you know, maybe I should. This wasn't a political–it was a political appointment–but I wouldn't be a politician. So I taught my–I had invited my wife's mom and dad to live with us when they retired (they were upstairs), so I said, you know, is it okay? And the family finally said, "You got to do this." So I was–I was ready to call Heward and say, "Okay." And that night, the government fell. That was really an amazing: I was saved by the bell! And it was amazing. Joe Clark's government fell and. But the other time when I came very close was when Dave Barrett was the–was the–Premier of BC, first NDP government. He was great. And he came to me one night with Mike Harcourt. He said, "I want you and Mike to run in Little Mountain. It was– he wanted me to run, and he came and he talked about it, and I said, "No, no, no, no, no." So finally, he said, "You academics! You talk a good lie. You talk, talk, talk. He said, you see that mountain up there? That will never be logged because of me." He said, "You see that building over there? That got stopped because of me," and he started going through all the things that he did, and he said, "What have you got? You just got a lot of talk." And I felt so guilty because he was so right that that came that close to me, saying, "Okay, I'll try," but I never did so. But his government was the best government ever in Canada because the word is that when he got elected, he met with his members and said, "Okay, are we going to have fun, or are we going to get re-elected?" And he knew if they did what they had to do, he wouldn't get re-elected. His government passed more legislation than any other government in Canadian history. He knew damn well he wouldn't get re- and this is one of the problems we face, is re-election. So I've had a supporter here from Vancouver for years. He supported my foundation. He's now a Member of Parliament. He came to a fundraiser we had in Montreal. I said (I won't tell you who it was) but I said, "Great to see you here. But listen, you're in power now. You got us get climate off the political agenda. Set up a committee with Michael Chong from the Conservatives, Charlie Angus from the

NDP, and Elizabeth May and whoever you want from the Liberals and say this committee is going to set the limits on emissions and blah, blah, blah, and this is what you got to do right away." And his answer was, "But if we do that, Poilievre will get in." So I said, "This has got to be done now, and you're telling me you're not going to do it because of the next election?" And he went, "Yeah, you're right," and that's the problem.

Kai: So you have been very clear in terms of your guidance for politicians. You tell them what should be done, right? And in a sense, what I think you've answered is that you didn't get into politics in part because you could see the trade-off, the difficulty of–of speaking that and going after the truth.

David: It's the whipping. I hate the whipping. And I told–we have the best Environment Minister we've ever had in history, and that's Steven Guilbeault. And I wrote to him a year after he was appointed. I said, "Steven, you and I go way back. We were allies in Kyoto at the meeting, and you know, I've known you for a long time. You're the best guy, but you've got to resign because you're whipped in. You can't say what has to be said." I said, "You can't even tell the public the truth that we have an emergency!" Now, to his credit, he wrote back and said, blah, blah, blah, and he will, but he's been great. He's been great. The measure of how well he's done is how much Danielle Smith attacks him all the time, right? That's a measure of how well he's done. But he can't tell us the truth. And that's, you know, the greens are the only ones that don't whip their members.

Kai: Yeah, so. But although you see the limitations of government and intergovernmental processes, like the conferences of the parties, the COP events for climate, you've talked about how those don't actually accomplish very much. But you go so that you can support young people is the way that I've understood it, that you go to events–

David: I haven't been to any of the COP meetings on the atmosphere since…when the hell was it? Decades ago. I went recently to the one in Montreal on biodiversity. The 15th one, and I went there because I had gone to one previously in Malaysia. And there I actually gave a keynote address in which I said, "The hope here is Indigenous people." [Sam: Absolutely] And you know that the Indigenous people have a long relationship and blah, blah, blah. At the end of that a woman, an Indigenous woman came up, threw her arms around my neck, and just cried. She couldn't talk. She just cried. She said, "At least, at last, someone gives us some." So I went to the Montreal one knowing the Indigenous people were going to be there now in big time, and they were, and that was great. But they came up with what–they're bragging 30 by 30. Right, protect 30% of the land by 2030, what the hell kind of a boast is that? We're one species out of maybe 10 to 30 million species? And we think if we protect 30% of the land, then we can trash 70% of the land? Like, give me a break! It's and–and–you know, COP, the COP meetings on climate. Now, what is the 29th one coming up?

Kai: I have lost track.

David: Yeah, come on? At some point you got to say, "Hey folks, we haven't–after 29 meetings–we haven't even capped our emissions. Get serious! This isn't serious." So unless it becomes non-political and non-economic, it's about survival of everyone, these processes, they're not going to–they're not going to work. Now, you know, the IPCC, this is an intergovernmental panel, so it means every report is vetted by every country: Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United States. The IPCC reports have always in their projections [of] what's going to happen in the next five years, have always fallen way short of what actually happened. So a few years ago, they brought out an amazing special report. I don't know if it was vetted by all the countries.

Kai: I think it was.

David: But they brought out the special report saying 1.5 has to be–we have to keep it at 1.5 or lower, or all hell breaks loose. The next day, marijuana became legal in Canada. And guess what the hell happened to the IPCC report? It was a one-day wonder, right? When in 2019, I think–the UN came out on the biodiversity–

Kai: I was lead author on that report.

David: Okay!

Kai: Yeah and there was a royal baby.

David: The day after Harry and Megan had a baby. So it just tells you the media are not serious! And so anyway, we've come to think we're so important, and the structures that we've created to guide and constrain and shape human behaviour left out the most important element going: the foundation of our existence, which is nature.

Kai: Yeah, absolutely. So I want to turn this in a slightly personal way and see what you think of this contrast. So on the one hand, you are very clear and outspoken about what politicians should do. On the other hand, when you're taking a mentorship role, you seem to take a very different approach. So I, as we walked into the studio, I told you about how the first time that I contacted you was when I was having a mid-Ph.D. crisis. I wasn't sure whether it made sense for me to continue. I wanted to have more of an impact on conservation than I thought that I could with my theoretical evolution study [**David:** Huh!] in my Ph.D. I wrote to you again a few years–

David: Did I answer?

Kai: So hold on–I'll get to that. I wrote to you again a few years later when I was doing my postdoc and I wasn't sure whether I had an offer at UBC for my current position. I also had some offers in the Canadian government, and I was trying to decide between those or another route. And I again, I had another moment of "What would David do?" And I thought, Well, I should just reach out and ask. [**David:** Hum!] And you wrote back to me. I still have your handwritten note. Your letter is actually somewhere buried in my special items, and you didn't answer my question either time. But it was enlightening. But what you did was you just–you made me think about it in a new light. And I've always wondered, did you have–did you have a sense of, like, whether I should finish my Ph.D., whether I should go to government versus UBC, or was it just, you know, did I make the right decision is really what's at the heart of it?

David: Yeah, well, I–you know–who knows? All I can say is, from my standpoint, completing (I've pushed this on my kids) you know, getting a Ph.D. is really important. If nothing else, you make a commitment to a certain discipline and you–I meet so many people that say, "Oh, yeah, I was in my third year of my Ph.D. and hell, I dropped it." Lots of people like that. And you know, if they're in the media, maybe they made–it was a good decision. But I've always felt–forget about it, showing other people. You know, when you've done it, you've jumped through all those hoops and you finished it. That's really important to me and I hope I said that. But the choice between government and university is a choice between whether you believe in changing the system from inside or outside. And in my experience, now, the problem–and lots of people that have chosen to go into government–but you're immediately constrained [Kai: That's right] and not free.

Kai: Yeah, no, I mean, I look back at those decisions that I'm pretty sure I made the right one, but I was always curious as to what you would have said if you had felt like you didn't need for me to have it be really my own.

David: But you know, who knows–if you didn't finish your Ph.D., you might be out there blowing up pipelines or doing other things. I mean, you know, and I would say, good on you. But anyway.

Sam: Yeah, whatever path speaks to you, follow it, right? And so, I mean, I guess shifting a bit back to your time with media and science communication, I was curious, like when you started your science communication career, the media landscape was entirely different. There are fewer channels. There's no streaming platforms, and far less public awareness about the climate and ecological crisis. But today, there's an overwhelming flood of information to try to sort through, and the dominance of streaming services. Like it's hard for me to imagine somebody following that same path that you did, and especially coming from, like a field like genetics, which studies things in a reductionist view, studying specific mechanisms in isolation, when you know you've been quite outspoken about how interconnected all life is. And so if you were starting today as maybe somebody in my generation, would you try to go about it the same way? Or do you think the way scientists engage with the public has to be completely different now?

David: The big problem for me was not the criticism from outside but from academics. And because at the time, now, this is, you know, I had my first national program was *Suzuki on Science*. This is back in the 1970s. Now, remember, my hair was down to my shoulders–

Sam: The classic cut.

David: And my signature was a headband, right? So I was a hippie. Scientists hated it! They hated this hippie coming on. But just because he's got a Ph.D., speaking on behalf of the scientific community. And I remember Dr. [Robert] Noble, who is very distinguished–cancer–I think he discovered, what is it? From some plant in Madagascar, he discovered it. Yeah. Anyway, he was just livid that I was. [**Sam:** Really!] And then 15 years later, I heard he apologized that I was right. But that was the hardest part, because my students would–no faculty would come to my face and say, "You ought to get off television," but they'd go after my students and say, "You know, your boss is a show off. He's an egotist" and all this sort of stuff. And that really angered me that

I don't know today's world is so different. As you know, my youngest daughter now has taken over co-hosting *The Nature of Things*, and even *The Nature of Things* itself is very different now. I think there's much more–I hate to use the word pandering to the public, you know–with the things like free–well, for example, they did a show on sweat. Fascinating show, I think, you know, but the host treated it as "Sweat, that smelly," you know. Sweat is one of the body's mechanisms to cool off this, you know. But it began with this notion, "Oh, it's stinky and… and all that" rather than–than–you know. But that's the public out there, and it kind of reflected the public's attitude. So I think there is a bit of pandering. But it's just–if we, when I started, if *The Nature of Things* got less than a million and a million and a half, 1.4 million watching, we were scared stiff. We haven't had a million in two decades. Because what happened back when I started, there were only two two stations, right? CTV and CBC. So there wasn't the competition there is now, and once we got cable, and then satellites and all the stuff that just has come flooding in now. Television, and I know that Sarika, my daughter, she's spending much, much more time, not on the programs themselves, but they're doing all kinds of short little items!

Sam: Like TikTok?

David: Yeah, so I don't know what that–but it's a different world out there. And from my standpoint, just as an ordinary person, I'm overwhelmed with information.

Sam: Me too!

David: Stuff, including stuff on climate like this stuff's coming in, and I can't wade through it all. So it's a very different world out there. And to be honest, the other day, when I saw Doug's Winter Party, I cried. I said, that's what's needed. Did you see Doug's Winter Party? [**Kai:** No.] I'm sure you've all heard about it. Doug is an 87-year-old man in Pennsylvania who was filmed by a woman who came to the door and knocked on it and–and when she came, he said, "Hi, I'm your neighbor. I wanted to be sure to give this to you in person. And it was an invitation to a party at his place. And it said, "Just come with a smile and we'll party until the cops shut us down." But she posted it on the internet and it went viral. There was a Doug's Winter Party in Calgary! A Doug's Winter Party in Edmonton, in Ontario, all. I thought that–people are hungry for communities. This is where our conversation about climate should be going on. What are the implications for the community? You know? And I thought, maybe this is just going to take off. Maybe it will. I don't know. I did the same thing. I got approached a few years ago by a group in Ontario called SCAN: Seniors for Climate Action Now. And they said, "This is just a group of seniors in Toronto." And so I said, "Great." I threw them some money, and I said, "You know, go for it." Well, it took off. October 1 last year was International Seniors' Day. They had over 75 places in Canada, from coast to coast, with seniors' demonstrations from a few dozen people to hundreds of people. [Sam: That's incredible.] And I guarantee you, next year, it's going to be huge. But we this is what we need, this thing to percolate up from the grassroots, I think.

Kai: That actually takes us to another piece that we wanted to talk about. So you worked with David Boyd and the way that we understand it, in–in terms of the lore, you wrote this book together *Sustainability within a Generation*.

David: He wrote the book.

Kai: Okay. The way that the lore goes, as we have heard it, is that you handed the book to Paul Martin, and that Paul Martin read it and was convinced and hired David Boyd, the other David, into the Privy Council Office for initially six months, and then it was a year. So is that part true?

David: That's part true.

Kai: Okay, great. And, and so what we were curious–because it's almost a generation since then, right? It's been 20 years, I guess, since then, and that's almost, you know, so in a sense, we haven't achieved that sustainability within a generation. And we're wondering, you know, what that seemed like, such a great moment, right? To have the Prime Minister read something in detail and act on it in a way that, you know, we've heard a bunch of what David Boyd was able to do when he was in the Privy Council Office, and there's a lot, right, but it wasn't the kind of transformation that we needed. And–

David: No, I mean, that was one of, to my mind, working within the system. That was one of our great achievements. David came to us with what we called SWAG: Sustainability Within a Generation. It was his idea. And he said, "What do you think? Is this interesting?" We jumped on it and said, "Thank you." And we took–did a whole program of Sustainability Within a Generation. We took it

across the country on a tour. And because Jim Fulton, who had been a Member of Parliament for 14 years and was much loved in Ottawa, Jim was a close friend of Paul Martin. Okay, Jim got the book to Paul. Whether Paul read it or not, I don't know, but Paul embraced it and welcomed us, welcomed David and took him in. That to us–we did it!

Sam: Yeah, big win!

David: I hope you talked about [it] to him about why he jumped out then, but I think that he recognized roadblock after roadblock after roadblock.

Kai: And it wasn't long after that that the government changed.

David: Yeah, yeah. Which, yeah. It's too bad. He also gave us the idea of–it was his idea, again, of making a right to a healthy environment part of our Constitution. [**Kai:** Yeah] We did a tour across Canada, again, the Blue Dot Tour [Kai: I remember]. Unbelievably successful, at least in the involvement of thousands of people and enthusiasm. Took seven years.

Sam: Wow.

David: I mean, it's now enshrined somewhere. [**Kai:** Yeah, in CEPA. A limited, a limited right. We talked to David Boyd about that. And yeah, there's still work to be done.] And, you know, those are great contributions. David has been, to my mind, a real giant about all of that.

Sam: He's incredible.

David: But the reality, again, is that it's too little too late. [**Sam:** Yeah] So I've been–when Seth Klein came to me, he had written a book. So you know, **A Good War* (and not that wars are good, but) showing that when you embrace a crisis as you have to face it, because the alternative is worse, all kinds of magic happens because it no longer is a political issue. And, and in a way, we did that during COVID. I mean, Trudeau spent over $300 billion on COVID but I didn't hear Harper or the Conservatives screaming, "This is going to destroy the economy." It was a crisis, and he dealt with it. And so Seth Klein came to me and said, "Look, I'd like to try to take this and push the idea of it's an emergency." I said, "Great." And so I raised the money for him to get started, and he said, I said, "Look, this has got to–." It's like Sisyphus pushing the rock, it's got to go over. We can't just keep doing this. So I said I'll get the money for you for five years. But that's it. Well, it's–we're in our fifth year now. Hasn't worked. But the thing–when I go down to the States, I tell them, it is absolutely un-American. I was in my last year in college in the United States. October 4, 1957. Do you know what happened? You weren't born then.

Kai: I wasn't born then.

David: Yeah, that is a huge date. That's the date the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. And I can tell you, if I was representative of people in America, I had never heard of the space program. It was a shock. And every hour and a half that satellite went over, and it went, "Yaaaanah" [sing-song tones]. It was sending up, "beep, beep, beep." And the Americans then, yeah, you know, got their Army, Navy, Air Force, every one of their rockets blew up. Meanwhile, the Russians launched the first animal (a dog, Laika), the first man (Yuri Gagarin), the first team of cosmonauts, the first spacewalk, the first woman (Valentina Tereshkova). The Americans didn't blink. They just said, "We got to catch up." And they poured money, I mean, they set up NASA, and any science department in a university got huge–. Here I am, a Canadian, studying in the States. You just have to say, "Oh, I

like science." They threw money at you! It was–I was studying fruit flies, right? So I'm doing a postdoc, and I go to a fruit-fly meeting in California to report on my Ph.D. work, and it was just a small meeting. There couldn't have been more than 50 people there. I get back to my office in Oak Ridge, and a week later I get an offer from Stanford, an offer from UC Davis, an offer from Cal–San Diego State, and I wasn't looking for a job! So it was a glorious time to be a science person down there. [Sam: Yeah!] In 1962 the American President, John F Kennedy, said, "We choose to go to the moon." So that was it. He said, "We're going to beat the Russians to the moon." And at the time, he had no idea how they were going to do it. He just made the commitment and poured the money into that. And look what happened. He said, "We're going to get to the moon and back in the decade." They beat that record. They're the only country to do it. And every year, NASA publishes a magazine called *Spin Off*, which is hundreds of spin-off technologies: laptop computers, GPS, you know, space blankets, ear thermometers, hundreds of things that no one could have anticipated. [**Kai:** Yeah] It just came because America said, "We're going to get to the moon." [**Kai:** Maybe that's the kind of trickle-down economics that actually works. When you invest in science.] Once you make the commitment, then magic happens. Every 60 years later, every year when Nobel Prizes in science are announced, guess who still gets a majority of them? Either scientists working in America or American scientists. Yeah, because 60 years ago, they said we're going to beat the Russians, and that's what's needed for climate change. It's un-American to say it's going to cost too much or it can't be done.

Sam: And I mean, it's such a different view of how science is being treated right now in the States. And I mean, even in Canada, in like, a recent email that you sent out through the DSF mailing list was about Alberta opening up the Rockies to coal mining. And, you know, billionaires' control over politics and, kind of this ignorance of science. And you know, a lot of people buy into this trickle-down economics where, you know, they'll–they'll eventually reap the benefits of these billionaires. But you know that's not true. And like, can you tell us a bit more about, like, why folks should be concerned about this, like, rising inequality and wealth and the–the consolidation of wealth in the top 1%?

David: Well, the shocking thing to me has been that their focus is on what? Making *more* money. When you're the richest guy on the planet, why do you need more money? Or why do you need compatriots who are getting rich like you? I mean, what is the purpose? Why do they need it? And the attack on DEI has been absolutely shocking to me. And to see what's happening at the universities now? The universities are being cowed into getting away from any kind of, you know, these controversies. Universities traditionally have been the seat of radicalism. That's where you are exploring ideas at the cutting edge of human thought, and that's why universities have always been under fire, and they guaranteed tenure. Tenure is there so the universities can continue to explore these ideas without fearing getting fired. But even the universities, you know, the Harvard President resigned, like, I'm going, what the hell is going on?

Sam: Yeah, and yeah, no, I heard about like, threatening to pull funding if you know, these universities allow, quote, "illegal protests." And you know, I heard about Columbia, you know, where historically, they have always been very outspoken students. You know, they've–they've kind of succumbed to this pressure a little bit, which is just really sad. I guess, this brings us a bit more onto a sadder part of this episode. But you know, you've been quite vocal now about how the environmental movement as you've known it, has collectively failed. And you know, as we said, we caught you shortly after the inauguration, and you seemed more convinced than ever that it has failed and in this diagnosis of failure. Can you tell us a bit more about why you're so sure in this diagnosis? Because, you know, as people that look up to you, this is a bit frightening!

David: Yes, well, I have this constant battle. In fact, this morning with my older daughter, you know about my message. And you know I say that I take the science seriously. Not that science is the solution, but science is very good at drilling down and giving you a description of a piece of the world around. And the person that I really pay a lot of attention to is Johan Rockström*, who's defined the nine planetary boundaries. Now, we're an animal like any other creature on the planet. We are subject to the same laws of nature, and nature tells you that you get–exceed the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, you're going to pass a boundary of sustainability. Or, you know, you deplete all your fresh water by pumping it down into fracking, fracking outfits, you know. There–there are the nine boundaries: fresh water, nitrogen cycle, carbon in the atmosphere, pH of the oceans, and so on. If you–so these are easily measured by science, scientists. If you pass these, the equilibrium, or a sustainable level, you pass into the danger zone, which means that things become insecure and you got to get the hell out of there. If you–if we pass any one of the nine boundaries, we should be shitting bricks. And I went to hear Johan announce the latest health check in New York last year, and he says we passed six, and we're about to pass a seventh. Now he, to my shock, he says we can get out of the danger zone if we do it in five years. I don't believe we've got five years. But even if it, if we do have it, unless you have gigantic crash programs, you just have to look at our record on greenhouse gas emissions. 1988 and at an atmosphere meeting in Toronto, opened by the Prime Minister of Canada, keynote address by the Prime Minister of Norway, James Hansen was there. I mean, that was it. And they said climate change (we called it global warming back then), represents a threat to human survival, second only to a global nuclear war, and called for a 20% reduction in 15 years. That was it. If the world had done it, we wouldn't have the problem we have today. That was a moment. Why didn't we do it? Brian Mulroney was the Prime Minister. Set up a committee to say, can it be done and how much will it cost? And the report came back: we can do it. It's going to cost at least $70 billion up front, but 15 years later, it's going to save $150 billion. That report was never released to the public.

Sam: Wow.

David: So what the hell does that mean? It made no economic sense. In order to do–take it seriously, any politician is going to be kicked in the head by the fossil fuel industry, and when they start saying we're going to have to spend this money upfront, the government knew that they wouldn't be in power 15 years later. Why would they do something so that someone else could take credit for it 15 years later? they've got to get credit for it before the next election. So the politics prevents us from doing the right thing.

Kai: Yeah. What could we have done differently as scientists, as activists? Do you see? Do you see anything?

David: I think scientists should have been far more vocal on this. But even in the 1990s, you know, it was, you know, Carl Sagan, of course, had made a huge impact. Mar–what was her name–Margaret Mead had made an impact. But still, science popularization. It's interesting. The word for popularization in French is *vulgarisation*, and we, in English Canada regard it as "vulgar," right? "Vulgar" just means popular, but I think there was still an attitude that the people speaking for science should be the science leaders and all the Nobel Prize winners and all that. So I think the scientific community should have been much more forthright in its statements.

Kai: From the very beginning of my scientific career, even before I was talking about research I was talking about the "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity." Yeah, I wasn't–I hadn't even finished my undergraduate and I was invited to explain what that meant in a public context, and it just

seemed like the most important thing to do. And there are so many times that I wish that folks had paid more attention, but, you know, there's only so much you can do when you're in that kind of–

David: That is such a beautifully written piece, though. You know, it's–to me, it was so uplifting, and they presented the problems and in only two pages, you know, and then said, Look, if we don't do something, as little as 10 years, we're going to be in trouble. And then it listed the five things that you have to do. We just…and so now, what? 25 years after the first one, we've got a second one, but now signed by 16,000 scientists. But where–where is it? Like where? Where is that in the media? It should be headlines. So I think the scientific community has got to come off their–their high perch and start getting down to the grassroots and really, and not doing it out of self interest. You know, "I'm going to solve the problem and just give me the money," which a lot of scientists are doing. It's much more complex than that, but scientists now have to speak out.

Sam: Yeah.

David: Thank you for doing what you're doing, Kai.

Kai: We try…

David: Oh, you're doing that.

Kai: Yeah, that's right. You've been–you've been in this fight, or war, as we want to call it, for decades now, you know. And you've–you've done everything that we could have imagined. You've created organizations and shows, both radio and TV. You've spoken to world leaders over and over again in this conference, in that conference; you've talked to so many audiences and so many audiences in so many venues and, but now you're talking about how you feel like we've failed. But your life has meant something important, right? Like, well, you can't have given up on that part–

David: No, I think that the important thing really is not that we win, but that we try. And even though the Rockström planetary boundaries, to me, say very clearly, as a species, we're just not going to make it. We're not taking it seriously. We're the only species that can recognize where we're heading, that we have caused the problem and that has solutions, and we're not doing it. I say we're a doomed species. We just are too smart for our own good!

Kai: I like your answer, though. I really–and I feel that–and that's what I've told my daughters because they asked the same question, right? They're like, it seems like we're doomed. They point to all the same signs, the inauguration and all of these signals, and that's my answer too, is that, you know, we have a choice, each of us individually: we have a choice to care and to try or not to. You know, what's hard, I think, for many folks is to find the hope to propel oneself forth, right?

David: So this is what everybody's looking for and unfortunately most people treat hope as "hopium." [**Sam**: Took you a minute there, Kai!] To me, hope, the only hope there is is when you see your mom and dad busting their ass to try to–try to avoid what's coming. If a child's own parents aren't bothering, you know, and I've…In the past, I've got on planes (when I was still flying all over the place) and people. I remember meeting this guy. "You really pissed me off," says the guy. I said, "What did I do?" He said, "My kid is giving me hell all the time," and I thought, "Yes!" Right? And that's, that's what kids–that's what Greta [Thunberg] said. Greta said it in just no uncertain terms. We're taught in school to take science seriously, and the scientists say, if we carry on this way, I have no future. And it had a huge impact and it galvanized the gigantic movement, I think. It was huge, but the *attacks* on her were unbelievable. We brought her and her father to Canada and

when they were driving from Edmonton to Vancouver, the fossil fuel truckers came and they were harassing them on the highway like unbelievable, that, the power of that–the anti–but that she had a huge impact. I think COVID really took the wind out of those sails. That had huge potential, that movement. [**Kai:** Yeah, it did]

Sam: So, I mean, you describe "hopium," but perhaps something that I've spent some time processing is grief. And I know Kai and I have different views on this. Personally, I think it's really important for me to take time and process my grief, because, I mean, I know it's not the same for everybody, but I've always been a very empathetic person. Like I can feel the suffering of another being, and I've always internalized that, and so for me to, like, get back up on my feet and fight, it's important for me to take time, care for myself, and grieve. But I mean, Kai, you take a different perspective on this.

Kai: And it's not, it's not conscious or pre-planned, it's just, yeah, that I don't, I don't seem to leave the space for it. I seem to have the energy for the fight, you know, and a little bit of sadness, but not not the time of grief–of grieving–and I think we all do it differently.

Sam: Yeah, and so, Dr. Suzuki, like, do you think it's worth spending time on grief?

David: I think we have to get through it. I just had–not an argument–but a conversation with Severn, my older daughter, and she said, "Dad, you're, you're still in the throes of grief, and you better deal with that, otherwise, you know, your– your message…." She was very upset with my message at TREK, where people said, "Well, what can I do?" Well, at the level of carbon in the atmosphere, we've lost that fight. And I believe the only–the only thing that's going to bring about change is Mother Nature. When, you know, I thought Katrina, Hurricane Katrina would, Hurricane Andrew. We've had many, many hurricanes here [**Sam:** And Hurricane Milton this year]. You know, when, when you have Fort McMurray on fire, you have Jasper on fire, and this premier won't even mention the words "climate change," like. There are going to be multiple, multiple disasters because it's getting warmer, and that's going to be undeniable in the end. Meanwhile, then what do we do? You know, the thing that upsets me is–not the threat of extinction–because we're going to go extinct. Everything else has. But that it has to happen *now* and it doesn't have to happen. That's what really makes me angry, but that fuels me then to say that we can, at least, even though the big forces, the barriers, the boundaries have been passed, at least we can slow things down a little bit. [**Kai:** That's right] And it's got to be focused on local communities, because communities are going to be the unit of survival in an increasingly uncertain world. So if we can work together, and that's where there's *joy,* there's real joy working with people, and–and you can see the effect in the local community. So there's got to be, this is why Doug's Winter Party was so exciting to me. That's what people are hungry for, and that's how we're going to do it. We're going to act as–

Sam: We need a Doug's party here in Vancouver!

David: Exactly! I think there was one actually. [**Sam:** Oh darn, I missed it!] Yeah, there were a whole bunch that happened, and I just didn't keep track of them. Yeah, there was one in Kitsilano.

Sam: Oh, really.

David: So, yeah.

Kai: So although I agree that we have failed to avert some *very* significant and avoidable disasters associated with climate change, it's not like the fight's over, right?

David: No!

Kai: There is still something worth fighting for: whether it's slowing down the damage, whether it's actually turning things around, whether it's picking up the pieces after some kind of a collapse, right? None of us knows which way that's going. But let's–let's pivot a little bit towards good news for a change. I know you're a fan of that because you wrote a book by that title.

David: I wrote two! I wrote *Good News for a Change* and *More Good News*.

Kai: That's right. And you've got a David Suzuki Foundation newsletter that you still write with–or contribute to…

David: Yeah, I read every one but I don't write them all.

Kai: So let's talk about, let's talk about positive pieces other than, other than community. When I was a boy, I think I was around 10 years old when I saw your episode on Haida Gwaii, and I understand that was, that was transformative for you as well. And it's, it's a place that is quite magical and that has seen some great successes, including very recently with the recognition of rights and title. So tell us a little bit about Haida Gwaii.

David: Well, everything I learned was from my involvement in Haida Gwaii. I mean, I always said I was a shallow environmentalist until I got involved to the Haida. And the most important one was, I was, you know, I flew to Haida Gwaii in early 1980s and I knew about the battles going on, and I interviewed politicians, environmentalists, loggers from all areas. And the one that had the most impact was *Guujaaw. And Guujaaw had led the fight against logging and yet I knew they had over 50% unemployment, and many of the loggers were Haida. So I said to him, "You know, you're–you're not a logger, you're a–you're an artist. What difference does it make to you if they cut all the trees down?" And he said, "Yeah, well, when the trees are gone, we'll still be here, but then we'll be like everybody else, I guess." And at the time he said that, I didn't know what the hell he was saying. It was only later, as I reflected on it, what is he–he's saying he will no longer be Haida if the trees are gone. And that's what I realized he was talking about: a connection with his surroundings, very profound, that the air, the water, the trees, the birds, the fish, all of that are what make Haida Gwaii and what make the Haida who they are. And that led me, then, to write *The Sacred Balance,* which is the most–*Rediscovering our Place in Nature*–which was the most important book I've written of all of them, that sees us then in a radically different way. And it's still the underpinning of everything I do, that nature, the source of our lives, has got to be elevated to–to a different status. And Mark Carney's book *Values*, in the first chapter, he points out that Jeff Bezos' Amazon is valued by the economy in the tens of billions, but the Amazon rainforest, the greatest ecosystem on the planet, has no economic value until it's logged, mined, until the trees dammed or it grows soybeans, cattle, or cities. And you know, that says it all. There's a wonderful big tome by Partha Dasgupta, an economist in Britain, that shows that nature is basically an externality to the economy. And so when the Prime Minister of Canada says, "Well, we can't do anything about global warming: that's crazy economics," he elevates the economy above the atmosphere that gives you air to breathe, that gives you weather, climate and the seasons. So we've become so puffed up, we've created this thing, the economy, which we think is the source of everything that matters to us. So we fight, it's our highest priority. But it is so flawed. Not only does it ignore nature, it should be built on nature. The word "economics" comes from the same root word as "ecology." Ecologists are trying to, you know, "our household or domain." Ecologists are studying the rules of sustainability. I would have thought any economist who is managing our

household or domain, would say, “Oh, before we do that, what are those ecologists telling us?” But we don't do it that way! The economy is what determines what we do. That's crazy!

Kai: So thinking about finding that hope though, we talked to Suzanne Simard earlier, who talked about the Mother Tree. She–she talked about how she was sustained by the forest. We also talked to Alex Morton and she talks about how even after the depression that she experienced after the fight to save wild salmon that she–she was effectively sustained by this place that she lives. And so, in a sense, I guess, what we're saying is folks can find hope in their connections to nature, that when– when you're there… Alex Morton also had this wonderful anecdote, or this metaphor. She said–she called it “The Big Team.” She said that for her, to be in that space in the Broughton Archipelago is–is–to feel her teammates, right, that she–she feels like she's on the same team as the–as the bees and the bears and the wolves [**David:** Kuh!] and the salmon, right? And she's like, “It's The Big Team, I'm on the winning team in the long run, you know?” And–and so maybe that's where we find our hope.

David: Well, ultimately, of course, nature is going to go on. And I meet a lot of kids who say, “The planet’s in trouble.” The planet’s not in trouble.

Sam: Humanity is.

David: *We're* in trouble. And we know from the past record, when you get up to 95% of animals disappearing in the fossil record *suddenly* (well, suddenly would be 1 or 2 million years, but still in geological terms “suddenly”), nature recovers! I mean, can you imagine 95% and that nature recovers, but it takes up to 10 million years. We've been around as a species for 200,000 so to me, there's a real clash of nature's time. Nature has adapted to *unbelievable* changes. The sun is 30% warmer now than it was 4 billion years ago. Tectonic plates have moved, crashed into each other; mountain ranges risen up and worn down; oceans filled and depleted; magnetic poles reversed and re-reversed; warm periods and ice periods and all that while life survived and flourished! And that's because geological time is very different from human time. We've only been here for 200,000 years. We've only become this new kind of force for the last 200 years. You know, it's been very, very sudden.

Sam: Yeah, just a little dot in the grand scheme of things…

David: Given geological time, of course, life will go on. And that's–

Sam: And that's, yeah, one thing that I've found hope in continuously. And I can't remember who it was, but when I was in Costa Rica, I asked somebody like, “How do you keep fighting?” And their, yeah, their answer was, “You know, in 100,000 years and a few million years, you know, nature will still be around. She–she'll recover. We don't need–she doesn't need us. We need her.”

David: Exactly, exactly. But I mean, it still doesn't–that doesn't relieve the pain of knowing that my grandchildren and, you know, your children are paying the price for this. So that all our activity is to try to lengthen the time that they will have to enjoy this beautiful place. And I have to tell you that during when the COVID lockdown came, it happened over spring break. And I happened to be at our cabin on Quadra Island with both of my daughters and their families. Now, the older daughter, Severn, she immediately caught the last plane to Haida Gwaii, which is their–their–home. Then Haida Gwaii was shut down. My youngest daughter got stuck on Quadra with her three young kids and her husband. I can tell you that was the happiest six months *of my life*! Because suddenly we're in this cabin and we're stuck there, but I had the morning shift,

because I'm an early morning guy, and the kids would come in like clockwork–every–quarter to seven every morning–so I'd get them dressed and cleaned up and feed them breakfast, and out we went every morning, rain or shine. And, of course, I look out and I go, "Oh, God, they've cut down that tree over there. Look at all that garbage on the beach." The kids don't know any of that stuff. They go out. And I remember when we'd found a salamander, you'd think I'd won a Nobel Prize! That was the greatest discovery, right? And through their eyes, it's still a magical place. And I thank them for that, because I got to celebrate what the–and made me more determined than ever. We got to fight for our place, wherever it is! Now, you know Alex Morton lives up there, and you know the Haida live up there, but most Canadians are now living in cities, and they can't go flooding over to where Alex or the Haida live. We've got to make our place and we've got to welcome nature back into our place.

Sam: Yeah, and I mean, that connects so great with, like my research, which is like trying to, you know, create this, like, little eco-action community that inspires people to find nature in cities and connect with it, you know, through birds in my case. But you know, there's still ways in cities, if we design them as such, to be able to connect with nature and form these relationships, which is just so important.

David: But we're so estranged from it. You know, during the COVID lockdown, I remember reports are coming out: oh, they're they're seeing these fish in–

Sam: Yeah, like dolphins in the Venice Canal!

David: Exactly, in Venice. And hummingbirds are now by the Toronto Airport. So the reports seem to suggest nature has bounced back. No! Nature has just come out of hiding. Nature is still out there! If we give her a chance, the opportunities are immense. [**Sam:** Um hum, um hum]

Kai: Thank you so much for this conversation. We will, we will find hope in nature, and we will keep fighting the good fight. Thank you so much.

David: Thanks for having me.

Emma: And now for a short message from one of our conservation allies:

[*Medley of Waterbodies theme song, no lyrics, instrumental*]

Colleen: False Creek matters a lot to me just because it allows me and others to really connect with nature, even though we're living in a giant city.
Fin: We're fundamentally connected to the water bodies and the surroundings that we're in.
Michelle: Blue spaces in particular are good for our mental and physical health.
Zaida: Welcome aboard! I'm Zaida and this is *Waterbodies*, a podcast from False Creek Friends.
Matt: The reality is that False Creek is actually quite alive.
Kai: How do we navigate the protection of these places that we love?
Mutuma: What do you imagine False Creek might look like in the next 10 to 20 years?
Eli: False Creek can become a beacon and a place to showcase the conservation efforts that are happening throughout the rest of British Columbia.
Soudeh: What it means to be a steward of a land.
Mendel: Watch, listen and subscribe to *Waterbodies* wherever you get your podcasts and visit

falsecreekfriends.org to learn more.

[medley of Small Planet Heroes theme song]

Maia: Thank you for joining us for Season Two of *Small Planet Heroes*. *Small Planet Heroes* is a production of CoSphere, a project of the University of British Columbia. UBC is situated on the unceded territory of the Musqueam First Nation. Our guest this week was Dr. David Suzuki. Check out our show links in the episode description to learn more about their work and ongoing projects. *Small Planet Heroes* was created by our Executive Producer, Dr. Kai Chan. This episode was edited by Emma Jarek-Simard. Production is by me, Maia O'Donnell, Sam Blackwell, Emma Jarek-Simard, and Clare Price. Your hosts this week are Dr. Kai Chan and Sam Blackwell. Our show coordinators are Clare Price, Sam Blackwell, Maia O'Donnell, Dr. Nancy Kang and Emma Jarek-Simard. Special thanks to Jai Ranganathan, Bilal Bartai, Elizabeth Ye, Katie Kathierson, Nancy Kang, Anahita Seragi, Dr. Sarah Klain, and Zaida Schneider. Our theme song was written and performed by Daniel Forrest. Our interviews are conducted and recorded at UBC studios. If you would like to join our community of Small Planet Heroes, check out cosphere.net. Thank you for listening. If you would like to support us, subscribe to our podcast channel, rate the show, and follow us on Instagram @smallplanetheroes. If you enjoyed this episode, feel free to share it and spread the word. Thank you for listening.

Selected Links to Things Mentioned or Discussed:

David Suzuki: The Autobiography

The Greatest Canadian

Quirks & Quarks

Nature of Things

TREK Program

The David Suzuki Foundation

Haida Nation

Climate COP (Conference of the Parties)

Biodiversity COP (Conference of the Parties)

Doug's Winter Party in Vancouver

Sustainability within a Generation: A New Vision for Canada

World Scientist's Warning for Humanity

Good News for a Change: How Everyday People are Helping the Planet

Haida Nation press release regarding court declaration of Haida Title

Small Planet Heroes information:

CoSphere.net

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UBC Studios

Executive Producer Dr. Kai Chan

Production and show coordination by Sam Blackwell, Maia O'Donnell, Emma Jarek-Simard, Clare Price, and Dr. Nancy Kang

Editing by Emma Jarek-Simard and Maia O'Donnell

Theme song by Daniel Forrest

Transcripts by Sam Blackwell, with the help of Otter.ai, and with Dr. Nancy Kang