

“Know your stories...you are the world's expert on you...”

Excerpted from Severn Cullis-Suzuki's speech at YES! on 12 October 2006.



First of all I'd like to acknowledge the Stoney First Nations whose traditional territory we are visiting. It was also so good to have the welcome from the Blackfoot last night. It's important to acknowledge our hosts.

I am deeply honoured to be here, speaking to such a diversity of youth from all over Alberta. Reading about your projects and talking with you since last night I am so inspired! The women from Lakeland College were just teaching me about bio-diesel.

You are here because you're already leaders – and there are many forms of leadership.

Each time I give a talk, I always tell some stories of myself so that people know where I'm coming from. If you know your stories, where you are coming from, and why you believe what you believe, you can stand up and speak out. Because no one can take that away from you: your stories, your experiences. You are the world's expert on you!

When we think of “the environment,” we may think of the rainforest, of endangered whales in the ocean somewhere, or recycling, maybe hippies chaining themselves to trees, the Kyoto Protocol – or maybe crazy old David Suzuki. We think of something *out there*, something we don’t have to deal with in everyday life in the city. We don’t think of our environment as *everything around us*.

In many languages there is no word for environment. Frank Weasel Head spoke about Mother Earth last night, and I think there’s a very powerful scientific argument for that. If you think about it, everything that we use, eat, consume, came from the Earth. Evolutionarily, we came from the Earth. Now, if our society really believed that we come from the Earth, there’s no way we would have the environmental problems we do.

Like all of you, I am a product of my childhood. I grew up in Vancouver, and spent most of my time as a kid investigating the tide pools at low tide. And I know this is why I pursued biology in school and university. But I also care about my surroundings because of food. Looking back I see that food was my major in environmental education!

Grandma and Granddad have lived upstairs all my life, and from the beginning we ate local. We grew up eating the salad, vegetables and fruit that Granddad grew for us. Granddad taught me how to grow a garden. I just started my own little plot this summer.

Fishing is my family’s religion, fishing for food. Every summer we fish in Vancouver, just off the seawall in the city. At high tide during the smelt season, we head down and set our nets, always hoping for a big run (smelts come in to spawn). Then we always come home and fry up the catch, no matter what time of night!

My parents and Granddad took my sister and I all over the province, fishing and camping. We spent a lot of time in First Nations villages up and down the west coast of BC. We were always going up to Haida Gwaii, Alert Bay or Bella Bella for a potlatch or feast. In Haida Gwaii when someone is throwing a feast, all the seafood is caught off the islands. It has been caught and prepared by relatives, the specific clans as the traditions dictate. Feasts and potlatches are where people are honoured, adopted, given names. In Haida Gwaii, I’ve heard the saying, “our food is our medicine.”

Growing up I also learned that if you care about something, you have to raise your voice.

One thing that I have always been taught is that you have to stand up for what you believe. My Japanese-Canadian father was a victim of prejudice during the

war, as he and his family was imprisoned in camps in interior B.C., so all his life he has spoken out against prejudice and social injustice.

My English grandparents fought in the Second World War and have been strong advocates for peace ever after. (My grandma actually saw Hitler speaking to his soldiers in a square in Germany.) All my life they have taught me you must speak out against what you know is wrong.

From First Nations friends I grew up hearing the stories of residential schools, and the efforts of the Canadian government to destroy First Nations culture. Their experience shows the severe personal and societal consequences of prejudice, of racism. We have to speak up, so that we can heal rifts and prevent current and future prejudice.

These teachings are the backdrop for what is really important to me today.

We are living at a time of immense change, seeing challenges that no humans have dealt with before. The only way of dealing with 6.5 billion people on the planet is to find a sustainable way of doing things.

I am so glad to be speaking here, because young people – you guys – are key to the transition to sustainability.

Why? First of all, doing things differently isn't scary to us like it is for our folks! We are 21st century people. We have grown up with this word sustainability. Our parents didn't. We don't have to break old habits. We are not afraid of change.

Second, there is opportunity for us – in jobs, in creativity, in innovation. You hear all the time about the economic ills of Kyoto and environmental regulations, but of course no one wants to shift what is currently profitable to them! No one talks about all the opportunity and new niches of economies that will inevitably spring up as things shift. If you can think outside the current paradigm, there will be opportunities for you. Young people in Canada are already leading the way.

Third, as role models – people who influence those around you – who are louder than teenagers?

Finally – and this is perhaps your biggest role – you are whistleblowers. As people who have everything at stake, our whole adult lives are ahead of us. We will see climate change, we will see population boom, we will see resource decline. Who else can speak out about what has been done to the opportunities in *our* future? You know how adults hate it when you call them on their hypocrisy. But someone has to do it. ...

This is one of our most important tasks, and it's why I'm speaking to you here today.

One key aspect of affecting change is awareness. And one issue I have to bring up for a minute is climate change. Climate change is now the backdrop, the background issue for our lifetime.

My friend Miali Coley in Iqaluit tells me the hunters are reporting changes in the ice and animal migrations and it's making it hard to read the landscape and hunt. It's affecting people who already live on the edge of survival. Their traditional economy is shifting.

It's an issue of health. Heatwaves over the last three years have caused thousands of premature deaths. Smog also becomes worse under heat; people with breathing troubles have it worse because of pollution. Asthma is a modern problem that we've all come to accept, but this was a rare condition 50 years ago.

It's an issue of economics. Yesterday at a high school in Banff kids were concerned about the lack of snow. Climate change is affecting snowfalls, decreasing snowfall and making it less consistent. And that's a big deal for the Bow Valley and Whistler in B.C!

It's an issue of basic human rights. It's going to affect the world's fresh water resources. Many people in the world do not have good access to fresh water. My cousin working in Ethiopia has been sending emails home about the drought that is starving millions in East Africa. Climate issues are and will result in millions of environmental refugees.

In the context of the global population, we here in this room are powerful. We are literate. We are educated. We speak English, the most widely used language in the world. We know how to use a phone, a library, a computer. We live in a democratic country with the freedom of speech. We even live in a small democracy where we can actually communicate with our elected leaders. We live in a tolerant society. We live in a country where women have equal rights. We have been born into a small part of humanity that doesn't face major challenges to daily life.

I think the biggest thing that we can do is make connections – to figure out how *we personally* are affecting global change, how environmental issues are economic, health and social issues and spread this sense of connection and responsibility in our society.

One, find out who the First Nations are in the area where you live and acknowledge them when you speak or organize an event.

Two, get outside! Go for a walk in the park. Go camping. Over 80 per cent of Canadians live in cities. We are spending less and less time outside and we are forgetting why nature is important.

Three, start asking questions about food. Food is where your environment becomes part of you. How was it grown? Who grew it? How did it get to your supermarket? What chemicals are in it? I'll give you a tip: begin with chocolate!

Four, get out the vote. Democracy is a word we hear a lot about these days. Democracy gives a voice to the people – on condition that we speak up. It's not just a right. It's a responsibility. Youth are really under-represented at the voting booths. We could rock the vote! And think of running too!

Five, one of the most powerful things we can do is examine our daily habits and take responsibility for them. So here's shameless plug for the *Recognition of Responsibility*, a one-page pledge to live more sustainably. You can find it at: www.skyfishproject.org

Six, go and have an experience. Go outside the city limits and check out where your garbage goes! Find out where your electricity comes from. Don't take it from the news, the Internet. Don't take it from me. *Go and check it out for yourselves.*

We are going to witness a lot of change in our lives. No other generation has had to deal with this extent of pollution, consequences of globalization, genetic engineering, with climate change, with AIDS to the extent we're seeing it, or with six billion people on the planet. Huge issues face us not only as a generation but as a species. It's pretty intense.

But look at the situation from another angle: never before have human societies been more connected. Never before had we had the technological resources and communication and insight and global awareness as we do today. Never before have we been so well traveled! We have access to so many minds and perspectives and different ways of tackling problems. All the solutions are out there.

This is a time of innovation, of problem-solving and positive thinking. It's a time for spreading ideas, for having conferences like this one. It's the time to talk with your family, your friends, your teachers about what is important. It's a time for dreams and ideals.

I agree with Gandhi. We must lead by example. By being here at this conference, you are already "being the change."