

# Deep Ecology for the 21st Century

## David Suzuki

**DAVID SUZUKI:** Life on this planet has existed now for almost four billion years. During that time, of course, there have been a number of extinction crises, when large numbers of species have suddenly disappeared from the planet. We're going through a period that looks like a major extinction crisis, but it's different from any other situation that has ever existed in that it is being driven by a single species. We're in an absolutely unprecedented situation.

Human beings are now the most numerous mammal on the planet. Unlike other mammals, we are highly adaptable, so we're not confined to a specific habitat; and we have this enormous capacity through our brain to create technology, which gives us enormous muscle power at being able to extract materials and resources from around the Earth. So as we approach the end of the millennium, we find that our own species is in that terrible phase of exponential growth when our numbers are skyrocketing. We're adding three more people to the planet's population every second. That's over a quarter of a million human beings a day; it's over ninety million people a year.

Human populations are skyrocketing at the very same time that our capacity to produce food is declining. We're losing on the order of twenty-four billion tons of agricultural topsoil a year-equivalent to the entire wheat-growing capacity of Australia. Of course, a great deal of the technological optimists would say, "Well, we've got biotechnology and we'll be able to increase production of food massively to feed the world's starving millions." That's an absurd claim for which there's absolutely no evidence.

Because of the tremendous technological capacity of our species, we're adding toxic materials to the air, the water and the soil on such a massive scale that there's nowhere you can go on the planet without encountering the toxic debris of this activity.

We are adding so much new material to the air that we are literally changing the atmosphere itself, not only in terms of the degradation of the ozone layer, but we're changing molecules that are accumulating in the atmosphere and trapping heat on the surface of the planet, the so-called global warming scenario.

All over the planet, our species has become so demanding that we are destroying habitat for other species. It's not just the tropical rain forests, it's the temperate rain forests, wetlands, coral reefs, grasslands. I was just talking to E.O. Wilson at Harvard-probably one of the greatest biologists in the world-trying to get an idea of how biologists estimate the

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number of species that are going extinct. A very conservative estimate at the present time is that at least fifty thousand species of plants and animals are going extinct every year. That's over six species an hour-vanishing forever.

Our grandchildren certainly are going to live in a world that may see up to fifty percent of mammalian species gone, certainly a quarter of all bird species gone. This is, from a biological standpoint, absolutely catastrophic.

**MICHAEL TOMS:** It's difficult to listen to that kind of view. It strikes me that consumption patterns are also part of this equation, aren't they?

**DS:** Well, of course. One of the things that Canadians and Americans seem to like to say is, "Oh, well, the problem is population. It's those colored folks, those yellow, brown, black and red people that are breeding like rabbits, and we've got to stop population growth." It's not that simple. Our impact on the planet is not just a function of how many of us there are, but what our consumptive patterns are. The average Canadian or American consumes about twenty times as much of everything as the average person in India or China; so the Canadian population, then, is 600 million Chinese or Indian equivalents.

Your population in the United States is almost 300 million, so you're talking about a population of six billion Americans in terms of Chinese equivalents. We use a hundred times as much as the average person in Somalia or Bangladesh; so you're talking about thirty billion Americans in Somalian equivalents. And that's three billion Canadians in Somalian or Bangladeshi equivalents. We in the industrialized world-in Europe, Japan, Australia and North America-are the major predators on the planet. There are about 1.2 billion of us. But in terms of our consumptive demands, we are by far the major destructive agent on the planet. Although we're only twenty percent of the global population, we consume over eighty percent of the planet's resources. We produce certainly far more than eighty percent of the planet's toxic products. So, while population definitely is a limiting factor, the fact is that we in the industrialized world, in terms of consumptive patterns, are the major problem on the Earth.

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Dr. David Suzuki is the author of *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Prometheus 1998) and co-author, with Peter Knudtson, of *Wisdom of the Elders* (Bantam 1992).

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