Hidden Lessons

David Suzuki is a scientist who, as host of the CBC’s popular and long-lived television series The Nature of Things, has become one of Canada’s best-known public figures. Born in Vancouver in 1936, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1961, specializing in genetics, then quickly gained an international reputation for his genetic research on fruit flies. In 1969 he won a prize as “outstanding research scientist in Canada,” and since then has received many other awards, grants and honorary degrees. He lectures internationally, writes a syndicated newspaper column, and in addition to scholarly publications has written many books for a larger audience, among them Metamorphosis (autobiography, 1987), Inventing the Future: Reflections on Science, Technology and Nature (1989), The Japan We Never Knew (1996), and many books explaining nature to children. In 1990 he created the David Suzuki Foundation (see “Explorations” for its Web site address), a think tank with 15,000 supporters, whose goal is to influence environmental policy. In all these activities Suzuki rejects the narrowness that sometimes underlies the specialized vision of the research scientist, and instead works to educate the larger public about both the promise and dangers of science: the application of little-understood technologies; unchecked economic and industrial expansion; and the consequent devastation of other plant and animal species through our consumption of their habitat. Suzuki is literally trying to save the planet. “If I didn’t,” he said in a 1998 CBC special about his life, “I couldn’t look my children in the eye.” The essay that follows, from the February 7, 1987, Globe and Mail, pursues this goal in an especially concrete way.

In city apartments and dwellings, the presence of cockroaches, fleas, ants, mosquitoes or houseflies is guaranteed to elicit the spraying of insecticides. Mice and rats are poisoned or trapped, while the gardener wages a never-ending struggle with ragweed, dandelions, slugs and root-rot. We have a modern arsenal of chemical weapons to fight off these invaders and we use them lavishly.

We worry when kids roll in the mud or wade through a puddle because they’ll get “dirty.” Children learn attitudes and values very quickly and the lesson in cities is very clear — nature is an enemy, it’s dirty, dangerous or a nuisance. So youngsters learn to distance themselves from nature and to try to control it. I am astonished at the number of adults who loathe or are terrified by snakes, spiders, butterflies, worms, birds — the list seems endless.

If you reflect on the history of humankind, you realize that for 99 per cent of our species’ existence on the planet, we were deeply embedded in and dependent on nature. When plants and animals were plentiful, we flourished. When famine and drought struck, our numbers fell accordingly. We remain every bit as dependent upon nature today — we need plants to fix photons of energy into sugar molecules and to cleanse the air and replenish the oxygen. It is folly to forget our dependence on an intact ecosystem. But we do whenever we teach our offspring to fear or detest the natural world. The urban message kids get runs completely counter to what they are born with, a natural interest in other life forms. Just watch a child in a first encounter with a flower or an ant — there is instant interest and fascination. We condition them out of it.

The result is that when my 7-year-old daughter brings home new friends, they invariably recoil in fear or disgust when she tries to show them her favorite pets — three beautiful salamanders that her grandfather got for her in Vancouver. And when my 3-year-old comes wandering in with her treasures — millipedes, spiders, slugs and sowbugs that she catches under rocks lining the front lawn — children and adults alike usually respond by saying “yuk.”

I can’t overemphasize the tragedy of that attitude. For, inherent in this view is the assumption that human beings are special and different and that we lie outside nature. Yet it is this belief that is creating many of our environmental problems today.

Does it matter whether we sense our place in nature so long as we have cities and technology? Yes, for many reasons, not the least of which is that virtually all scientists were fascinated with nature as children and retained that curiosity throughout their lives. But a far more important reason is that if we retain a spiritual sense of connection with all other life forms, it can’t help but profoundly affect the way we act. Whenever my daughter sees a picture of an animal dead or dying, she

* Editor’s title.
asks me fearfully, “Daddy, are there any more?” At 7 years, she already knows about extinction and it frightens her.

The yodel of a loon at sunset, the vast flocks of migrating waterfowl in the fall, the indomitable salmon returning thousands of kilometres — these images of nature have inspired us to create music, poetry and art. And when we struggle to retain a handful of California condors or whooping cranes, it’s clearly not from a fear of ecological collapse, it’s because there is something obscene and frightening about the disappearance of another species at our hands.

If children grow up understanding that we are animals, they will look at other species with a sense of fellowship and community. If they understand their ecological place — the biosphere — then when children see the great virgin forests of the Queen Charlotte Islands being clearcut, they will feel physical pain, because they will understand that those trees are an extension of themselves.

When children who know their place in the ecosystem see factories spewing poison into the air, water and soil, they will feel ill because someone has violated their home. This is not mystical mumbo-jumbo. We have poisoned the life support systems that sustain all organisms because we have lost a sense of ecological place. Those of us who are parents have to realize the unspoken, negative lessons we are conveying to our children. Otherwise, they will continue to desecrate this planet as we have.

It’s not easy to avoid giving these hidden lessons. I have struggled to cover my dismay and queasiness when Severn and Sarika come running in with a large wolf spider or when we’ve emerged from a ditch covered with leeches or when they have been stung accidentally by yellowjackets feeding on our leftovers. But that’s nature. I believe efforts to teach children to love and respect other life forms are priceless.

Explorations:

David Suzuki, *Metamorphosis*
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*
Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich: *New World, New Mind*
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
http://www.nceet.snre.umich.edu/EndSpp/ES.new.html
http://www.vkool.com/suzuki/exercise.html

Structure:

1. What device of emphasis sparks the opening sentence, and how does it begin to introduce Suzuki’s subject?
2. Does Suzuki explore more fully the causes or the effects of children’s attitudes toward nature? Which paragraphs analyze mostly causes and which mostly effects? Is Suzuki right to place the causes first?
3. How long a chain of cause and effect does Suzuki show us? Point out each link.
4. Suzuki no doubt hopes his argument will spur us to action. Does his closing promote this goal? When he admits in paragraph 11 that “It’s not easy to avoid giving these hidden lessons,” are you discouraged or challenged?

Style:

1. Describe Suzuki’s prose: Is it full of strategies calculated to affect us, or is it a plain and direct message? Which mode do you prefer when you read? When you write? Why?
2. Why is paragraph 6 the shortest one of the essay?

Ideas for Discussion and Writing:

1. Do you dread insects, worms, snakes, mice or weeds? If so, how did you learn to? How close are your attitudes to those of your parents? What actual dangers, if any, may these life forms pose to you?
2. In paragraph 8 Suzuki writes, “there is something obscene and frightening about the disappearance of another species at our hands.” Elsewhere he has stated that two species an hour disappear from the earth, mostly because we “develop” natural habitats for our own profit. How important to you is a new paper mill, a logging project in the rain forest, a highway, dam, subdivision, ski resort, oil well or aluminum smelter — compared to the existence of a species? Defend your view.
3. First we learned to shun racism, and then sexism. Is speciesism next? Argue for or against our present belief that we are far more important than other members of our ecosystem.
4. How desirable is economic growth when it is based on exploiting nature? If we could save the rivers, the lakes and the rain forests by consuming less, how would you react? How large a cut in income would you accept to achieve the goal: 10 percent, 25 percent, 50 percent — or none at all? Defend your view.
5. Choose an endangered Canadian plant or animal species you have heard about in the news, and which raises your concern. Now visit the David Suzuki Web site given in “Explorations.” Select the “Exer-