

Suzuki kicks off Haldimand County conference

By Alan Gilday
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The environment is the bottom line not the economy-that was the message Dr. David Suzuki delivered during a speech to kickoff the Caring for Your Piece of Haldimand conference in Cayuga, Friday night.

"We say we're smart but we know that air is vital to human life and yet we treat it as a toxic dump," said Dr. Suzuki." There are ways to reduce air pollution. We elect people who know it and they are like accessories to murder because 16,000 people die from air pollution in Canada each year."

Citing the fact that one in five Ontario children have asthma, the doctor, known mostly for his popular science television series, *The Nature of Things*, said he rarely heard of a person with asthma while growing up in Leamington. Now the number of children affected is skyrocketing.

Governments continue to say they will spend money on the environment when the economy has been stabilized and the money is available. They fail to realize without clean water, air and soil, there would be no economy because everything produced is derived from the earth and its elements.

"Bottomline-if we don't clean up our air, soil and water, we die," he said.

The environment has always taken a backseat to the economy and other issues. In the 1930s, the chemical DDT was found to be effective as a pesticide and massive amounts were sold. Geneticists knew it wouldn't be effective for long because insects would build up immunity to it.

"A tiny fraction of insects are pests and

yet, we were using a substance which killed all insects. It's like murder in Toronto. We'll kill everyone in Toronto to get rid of the problem."

The Vancouver-born father of two said he once asked an economist where animals fit on a series of graphs he was explaining. Animals and plants weren't considered part of the economic equation.

Suzuki, known worldwide as a leader in sustainable ecology, spent a great deal of time studying indigenous people around the world.

It was while filming a documentary on a group of Haida Indians fighting against logging in British Columbia that he realized how strongly man is connected to the earth.

"The Haida are wedded to the land and whenever I travel I talk to indigenous people and although they all share a different connection to the land-they all believe it's their mother."

According to Dr. Suzuki, a United Nations report on the environment published in 1987 suggested nations should be protecting 12 per cent of their land. Canada protects less than six per cent.

In addition to protecting our land, Suzuki also emphasized the need for strong families and communities as well as a sense of spirituality, especially in the wake of the September 11 tragedy.

Canadians are ignorant when it comes to the environment. This became evident when Suzuki, who turned 66 on Sunday, recently visited a Toronto classroom. They were unable to tell him where the "stuff" in the toilet goes once they flush it or where the water flowing from their taps came from. They couldn't believe the "stuff" goes

to the same body of water their drinking water comes from.

Suzuki's presentation took a local turn when he fielded questions from the audience including one from a Dunnville resident who asked the doctor for tips on how to fight against a developer planning to build a 3,000 sow hog barn in the area.

The Haldimand County, like many other municipalities across the province is waiting for the province to pass legislation governing nutrients produced by large-scale livestock operations. before passing any bylaws of their own.

Suzuki suggested getting residents who have had experiences with the developer to come before county council and tell them their stories.

He added that grass roots organizations will play a bigger role in ensuring the environment is protected in the future.

"Grass roots organizations are where the action really is," said Suzuki." They are the most credible groups in the community because politicians are too focused on getting re-elected which is their first priority."

During a press conference before his speech, Suzuki said local politicians consider hog farming a great opportunity because of the massive market for pork in countries like China which has been created by globalization.

"No one ever asks what's the capacity of the land," he said. "We have to start thinking of sustainability. Walkerton should have taught us a lesson. Just because people can buy land, they can't do whatever they want with it. There has to be some mechanism to assess the ecological footprint of a piece of land."