



The Girl Who Silenced the World For 5 Minutes

Severn Suzuki

British Columbia, Canada

As a child, Severn and her little sister started traveling with her parents to indigenous communities. They wanted to gain a deep understanding of what was affecting these communities, and formulate a plan of action to help them. The most pressing issue facing the indigenous people of B.C. was the destruction of forests caused by clear-cut logging, the pollution of natural water systems, and the ramifications of these things on their traditional way of life. "Thankfully, my parents always brought us along when they were working with these vulnerable communities. I really felt like I was involved, and had a say. It was really empowering."

Since the late 1970s, the Suzuki family has been courageously fighting for environmental and indigenous rights in British Columbia. For more than 40 years, geneticist David Suzuki has been a mainstay on Canadian television, hosting *The Nature of Things*, a documentary program on nature and society. This platform has allowed his family's message of environmental justice for all to reach a vast audience. But the heart, soul, and genesis of their enduring environmental legacy lies with the indigenous peoples of B.C.

On a work-related trip to the Amazon, the Suzukis met a man who would change the direction and impact of their activism, from small-scale and local, to far-reaching and global. Paiakan was an indigenous leader who was fighting against the construction of a massive hydroelectric dam in Brazil, that would flood thousands of hectares of pristine rainforest, and destroy countless indigenous communities. "Of course, my Mom and Dad did what they always did; they got involved in the fight," Severn says. Her mother, Tara, an accomplished writer, activist, and organizer, led a fundraising effort that allowed them to bring Paiakan to Canada. There, she organized a meeting of indigenous groups to confront the World Bank, which was funding the project - and they succeeded in getting the project stopped.

In the aftermath of this victory, Paiakan and his family received death threats, so the Suzukis brought them to Canada to escape danger. When it was safe to return to their home the following year, the Suzukis traveled with them to ensure their safe arrival, and they were invited to stay in Paiaka's home in the Amazon. "It was transformational for me as a young girl. Fishing for piranhas from the banks of the river we had just been swimming in. Living in a sparkling green jungle. It was beyond my wildest imagination - *and it was real*," Severn remembers.

After a few weeks in the jungle, it was time for the Suzukis to go back home. They got into a tiny plane that took them over the jungle toward the nearest town; but as they climbed into the sky, their windows quickly became completely covered in smoke. "As I got brief glimpses of the jungle below, I saw tons of fires burning everywhere. It was heartbreaking to see this incredible world being burned to the ground. Then I saw the farm and cattle operations scarring the land. I decided right then and there that I had to do something about it."

When Severn arrived home, she told her friends about what she'd experienced, and how she wanted to help preserve these pristine places. She quickly gained support from her peers, who understood the importance of her mission - but they didn't know where or how to direct their energy. Thankfully her Mom had an idea for them. "Why don't you start a club, and organize?" she suggested. So Severn and four of her friends started the Environmental Children's Organization (ECO), to advocate for intergenerational environmental justice.

At age 12, Severn successfully raised enough funds to travel with ECO to the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - the very country that had inspired her activism some years prior. ECO only planned to attend the summit as spectators. But when one of the speakers dropped out, Severn saw an opportunity to get the youth perspective on these

issues out to the world. “We watched as all of these old people were sitting around discussing the future; but we were the ones who would be suffering from the consequences of their decisions,” Severn says. “Who was speaking for us?” So she stepped up, and showed unbelievable resolve as she gave a powerful speech in front of many of the leading figures in the environmental movement including now Secretary John Kerry, former Vice President Al Gore and others. Seeds were planted then for environmental movements now.

A decade later, her speech became a viral sensation, called “The Girl Who Silenced the World For 5 Minutes.” It reached more than 32 million people. “What was occurring, and what is still occurring, is that the people in power are ignoring their sacred duty to preserve the world for their children,” she says. “It’s amazing to see the world finally starting to wake up to the concept of intergenerational justice, after so many years. I’m proud of the young people, and ashamed that it has taken us so long to get on board.”

After her speech, Severn was invited to sit on the Earth Charter Commission and help draft guidelines on how people should be engaging with each other and the planet in the 21st century. “We need an architecture for a different way of being, and it should be intergenerational. Young people have always been on the forefront of social change; they must be central to our guiding societal principles. A lot of people have been advocating for these sorts of things since the 1980s - it wasn’t ever just me. I was falling in line with a tradition of young people being revolutionaries.”

In this tradition, Severn, along with Our Children’s Trust, has advised a group of 15 youth litigants from British Columbia, who are taking up the mantle. In October 2019, *La Rose vs Canada* was brought to the Supreme Court to contend that Canada has not been protecting the constitutional rights and liberties of its young people, who are being unjustly impacted by the ramifications of our environmental crisis. “It’s heartbreaking that it has been left to our kids to take on this burden,” Severn says. “But it’s amazing to see the clarity and dedication they have. It reignites that passion in me.” She, the David Suzuki Foundation, and Ecojustice, are all supporting the case.

With so many new ways to connect digitally, and to create communities through social media platforms, and with so many visible role models, Severn is sure that youth movements will continue to grow. Still, she believes that getting back to nature is necessary for the younger generation to gain a full appreciation of the natural world. “As a parent, that was my main focus for my kids. We live in an indigenous community on an archipelago where the Haida have lived for over 14,000 years. I wanted my kids to experience the way of life their ancestors did. I wanted to ground them in their homeland. And now that they have that connection, we can shift our focus to defend it – and defend the Earth at large.”

She also wants aspiring youth environmentalists to understand that a reimagined future isn’t something intangible or out of reach. In fact, she hopes the movement will continue to support and understand the significance of indigenous people, who have practiced sustainable living throughout human history. “The current way of life that we are experiencing is just one iteration of how a human society can function. There are all kinds of examples of indigenous civilizations, past and present, that show us precisely how to live in harmony with the earth. Indigenous people remain the most marginalized, displaced, and attacked peoples around the world, yet they survive. There’s a lesson there, and understanding it gets more urgent by the day. If mainstream society intends to do the same, it’s this varied legacy of our indigenous forebearers that we should be aspiring to going forward.”

Though the obstacles we face as a global society are many, Severn is hopeful for the future. Now Severn Cullis-Suzuki, married mother and a trained biologist, she has seen how the information that’s been amassed over the years regarding climate change is now irrefutable. This is reassuring, even though it has also made clear the precariousness of our situation. “There’s no ambiguity about what we need to do,” she says. “As a planet, we have to decarbonize, plain and simple. If we love our children, this is what we have to do. And I believe we will.”

*Change is never easy, and it often creates discord,
but when people come together for the good of humanity and the Earth,
we can accomplish great things.*

David Suzuki

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