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## Science Matters

By David Suzuki



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## Learning the value of respect on Haida Gwaii

I spent a week around July 1 in a cabin on one of Haida Gwaii's remote islands. I was there to celebrate a birthday – not Canada's, but my grandson's second. And what a blessed time it was, hanging out with him without the distractions of email, phone calls, or television.

When I got involved with First Nations communities in remote areas, one of the first lessons I learned was about the importance of respect. Without respect for each other, we don't listen and we fail to learn. Instead, we try to engage in conversations set within the perspective of our values, beliefs, and ideas. It's what led to the depredation of Europeans in the Americas, Africa, and Australia. It's what led to catastrophic disasters when explorers failed to listen and learn from local people during expeditions to the Arctic, down the Nile, and into the Amazon.

But respect should extend beyond our fellow humans, to all the green things that capture the sun's energy and power the rest of life on Earth, to the birds, the fish, the rivers and oceans, the clouds and sky, to all the things that make this planet home and nurture our species.

It rained every day but one on Hotsprings Island where we stayed. It's a rainforest, and that's to be expected. We dressed for it and went out at low tide to tickle geoduck siphons. My grandson squealed with delight as each clam ejected a jet of water to withdraw into the mud.

The jumble of seaweed at water's edge formed an astonishing collage of colour and shape, and we peered under leaves to find crabs, sculpins, and starfish.

I was overwhelmed with the thought that this diverse miniature community of animals and plants had flourished for millennia, co-existing and interacting in ways we have yet to discover. All over the world, life has found ways to survive and thereby enable human beings to exploit the abundance and productivity that developed within diverse ecosystems.

Human beings are a clever animal, able to overcome our deficits in size, speed, strength, and sensory abilities with curiosity and inventiveness. We now know we're not alone as tool makers, but no other species has been blessed with the incredible resourcefulness and creativity to make tools such as ours.

I was impressed with my grandson's response to his first birthday cake. He loved the novelty of the sweetness (his parents restrict his candy intake), but he only took three bites and was sated. If only we were all able to control our appetites so well. As a species, we have developed an insatiable hunger for stuff and the technological power and global economy to fulfill that consumptive demand.

It once took the Haida people months to cut down an immense tree to use for their longhouses, poles, or canoes. Today, one man

and a chainsaw can achieve the same thing in a matter of minutes. Driven by a thirst for economic growth and profit, without a sense of respect for the forest as an ecosystem, we use our technology to destroy the forest for a small part of its constituents. We justify clear-cutting huge swathes of forest as "proper silvicultural practice" or "imitating naturally occurring fires or blowdowns". But that's all rationalization.

Think of the incredible technologies in ocean fisheries – radar, sonar, GPS, tough materials for nets, and more. We use drift nets, longlines, and bottom draggers that take immense numbers of target species and so-called bycatch, species deemed of no value or unintentionally taken (birds, sharks, turtles, dolphins, etc). Now the consequences are apparent, something I would never have dreamed possible when I was a boy: the oceans that cover 71 per cent of Earth's surface, the oceans that I was taught in high school were a "limitless source of protein", are a mess, beset not only by overfishing, but dead zones bereft of oxygen, immense islands of plastic debris, and changing pH from carbon dioxide dissolving in the water.

These thoughts flowed through my brain as I wondered about the kind of world my grandson will grow up in and how far we could go if we learn that simple word, respect.

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