



Noting humans are animals, environmentalist David Suzuki takes delight in the school's nickname. "I am so thrilled that the students at this school are Cobras. Right on!" He was in town Feb. 2 to praise 14 Cochrane High students and two teachers who were behind the development of a sustainable energy project.

Photo by Patrick Price

Suzuki lauds solar project

By Ian Tennant
The Eagle

Renowned environmentalist Dr. David Suzuki received a hero's welcome at Cochrane High Feb. 2 before he lavished praise on 14 students and two teachers for launching a renewable energy project.

"This is a very important, symbolic event," Suzuki told a Cochrane High gymnasium packed with students, teachers, school division officials and sponsors of the sustainable development project.

The installation of 30 solar panels and a wind turbine on the school's roof "will be seen as a model (to be) copied by students all across the country," said Suzuki, eliciting hearty cheers from the crowd.

He said reducing carbon dioxide emissions into the air "begins with small steps" and the students were basically telling the politicians and the community: "We want to get on with it. It's our future."

Alberta's environment minister also praised the students.

"Ultimately, sustainable development is a way of life for Albertans, for Canadians and you are living proof of that," said Guy Boutilier. "You are going to continue to make a difference."

The effort started in 2000 as a Grade 10 project led by teachers Stephanie Bennett and Earl Binder.

The 14 students raised around \$47,000 in four months and last year solar panels and a wind turbine were installed on the school's roof. The 30 120-watt panels and turbine provide about one per cent of the school's energy needs.

Bennett and Binder were caught off guard when the students presented each of them with a stained glass window, a present that "radiates the power of light," said one student.

Bennett, clearly moved by the recognition, said the project "has been one of the most incredible teaching, learning experiences I have ever come across in my career."

She also thanked Suzuki for taking time to visit.

"The moment you said 'yes' our world has just changed here. It truly is because of you."

Suzuki used the occasion to lecture the crowd on the importance of taking care of the environment.

He said some of his First Nations friends from British Columbia put it this way: "The earth is our mother; we are born out of the earth."

He added they also talk about "four sacred elements" — air, fire (sun), water and the earth.

"We need air every minute of our lives," Suzuki said, adding when the air is poisoned people are basically poisoning themselves.

He said water is like "a glue that links us all together."

He called humans a "compost heap" because of the consumption of plants and animals, and therefore humans are reliant on the earth yet "the soil is a toxic dump."

As for the fourth element, Suzuki repeated a statement he made several times with variations: "We are fire. The ultimate fire in our solar system is the sun" which is often clouded by pollution.

While Suzuki and Boutilier said they agree on the general goal of sustainable development, the B.C. resident took aim at politicians who insist a strong economy is necessary to protect the environment.

"This has never made any sense to me," the environmentalist said before launching into his speech about humans needing a healthy environment regardless of the economy.