

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH ETHNIC CANADIANS

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TODAY, ENGAGING ETHNIC CANADIANS IS SEEN AS A KEY STRATEGY FOR MAJOR corporations, learning institutions, politicians, all levels of governments, and nonprofit community organizations. With the continuous rise in the number of Chinese and South Asian immigrants to the country, it is no longer enough to engage only the traditional Canadian populace. Involving ethnic populations has also become a challenge for environmental advocacy groups. In this article, we explore the outreach programs of the David Suzuki Foundation.

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Richmond, B.C., is the most multicultural city in Canada. According to data from Statistics Canada, about one out of every 10 people in Richmond is a newcomer who has arrived in Canada within the last five years. If your work is to reach out to the nation's ethnic communities, Richmond is a good place to start.

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon in early spring, reaching out to Metro Vancouver's diverse communities is exactly what the David Suzuki Foundation's Climate Change and Clean Energy outreach team set out to do. Three key members of the team, Ryan, Harpreet, and I, headed out to Richmond to take part in an elementary school Science Jam.

As soon as we landed, we knew the "wind and water" were working in our favour. For a start, our booth was located just behind centre stage and in the middle of the food court of the giant Richmond Centre shopping mall. Could we have asked for a better spot?

We were thrilled to learn that close to 1000 inquisitive young scientists and some of their parents would visit our booth, mostly to have personalized David Suzuki buttons made, but also, we hoped, to ask us about the Foundation's work and to learn about the state of climate change and what they could do to help stop it.

As my colleagues were busy making David Suzuki buttons for the student scientists, I found myself talking with their parents, many of whom were Chinese immigrants from Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Hong Kong – parents like Shirley Ma and Eddie Chan.

"Do you know who Dr. Suzuki is?" I asked Ma, a recent immigrant from Guangzhou, China.

"No, but I think I have seen him on TV," she replied.

Not bad, I thought to myself, for a new immigrant to have seen Dr. Suzuki on television. “You are absolutely right,” I told her. “In fact, Dr. Suzuki has been teaching Canadians how to keep the earth and our air clean for decades now.”

As she responded with a big smile and a nod, I asked her to write her email address on our clipboard so that we could keep in touch. I gave her a Sustainable Seafood Guide and our Dirty Dozen cosmetic toxin alert. Then it was Eddie Chan’s turn. Chan is not exactly a new immigrant. He moved to Canada from Hong Kong about 10 years ago and lives with his wife and two young daughters in Richmond. This afternoon, he had brought his younger daughter to the Science Jam.

“He is a good guy,” Chan said to me in English, pointing at Dr. Suzuki’s poster-sized picture. “Tell me, what exactly do you do? What do you want people to do?” he asked, this time in Cantonese.

I explained that our organization does not ask people to do the impossible, but we do ask them to pause and think, to evaluate the way we live and the way our world lives, and then to decide if this is sustainable. In Chinese, I used the term for “durable,” which is a little stronger than sustainable. Chan looked impressed. He said he liked what he had heard and proceeded to write his contact information on our clipboard, a positive sign for future engagement.

Engaging ethnic Canadians is a red hot issue right now for mainstream organizations. No matter which way you turn, someone or some organization is trying to capture a share of the rising immigrant power. Because numbers tend to dictate which ethnic groups can make the most difference, Canada’s Chinese and South Asian communities find themselves increasingly the target for serious public engagement efforts.

Of course, none of this is new. When Hong Kong immigrants started fleeing to Canada’s two urban centres, Vancouver and Toronto, over two decades ago to escape the handover of Hong Kong to Communist China, they also brought cash—lots of it. As a result, the first large-scale ethnic engagement efforts in Canada were made to well-heeled Hong Kong immigrants by Canada’s big banks. Almost overnight, every bank had a vice-president for Asia Pacific business and started opening Asia Pacific branches in areas where new Hong Kong immigrants were buying up properties.

The David Suzuki Foundation’s efforts are in the forefront of outreach by the environmental movement. When we meet with other nonprofit environmental groups, we find that ethnic outreach is on their radar as well. The most common comment is the sheer number of new Canadians who are already living as an integral part of Canadian society. If these new Canadians are concerned about taxation, crime, and health, there is no reason why they should not care about protecting the environment and combating effects of climate change. After all, the main reason that many immigrate to Canada is to live in a healthier environment. The question, therefore, comes back to whether ENGOs (environmental non-governmental organizations) have made conscious efforts to reach out to the fast-expanding group of new Canadians who tend to come from a vastly diverse cultural and, in some cases, religious backgrounds. But for the David Suzuki Foundation, reaching out to Canada’s immigrant community is more about connecting the dots than meeting the numbers.

Ian Bruce leads the Foundation's Climate Change and Clean Energy Team. He was trained as an engineer and worked for the oil industry in the Maritimes before joining the Foundation to help Canadians take a second look at our addiction to oil. After more than two years of engaging the Canadian public to take climate change seriously, Bruce has recently added engaging the nation's ethnic communities to his work plan. He says that this is a natural next step for the work that started two years ago.

"Out of the experiences from the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009 and the 2010 Winter Olympics, it became clear to the Foundation that there is a hole that needs to be filled when it comes to public outreach," Bruce explains.

The Foundation, including CEO Peter Robinson, president Dr. Tara Cullis, co-founder Dr. David Suzuki, and board chair Jim Hoggan, saw increasingly that the people who are most affected by climate change are from developing countries like China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and different parts of Africa – which are the source countries of many Canadian immigrants and refugees.

Morag Carter, the Foundation's Director of Climate Change and Clean Energy, explains that "some of Canada's latest immigrants are no doubt witnesses to or victims of climate change, and many are hearing stories from home that talk about the impacts of extreme weather and other local climate related catastrophes on the ground. These direct experiences mean that new immigrants and their families can be powerful advocates for climate solutions in Canada, so it is only natural that the Foundation wants to work with Canada's immigrant community."

Carter is right. After all, the push for climate change solutions can only succeed if the majority of Canadians see the need for it and want it. And in today's Canada, multicultural communities are not only visible but are also the fastest growing sector in Canadian society. Recent statistics show that four out of five new Canadians in the last decade have a mother tongue other than French or English. In Vancouver, most of the 151,700 immigrants who arrived during the past five years were born in Asia. Of these, 26.2% came from the People's Republic of China, 12.4% from India, 10.9% from the Philippines, 7.7% from South Korea, and 4.6% from Taiwan.

Along with reaching out to ethnic communities, the Foundation also initiated internal change. Part of that change came last October when the Foundation hired me, a veteran Chinese Canadian journalist, and Harpreet Johal, a young master's graduate in public policy from the University of Toronto's School of Public Policy and Governance, to join the Climate Change Team. The goal of the initiative is not only to help new Canadians become familiar with Climate Change language but also, ultimately, to enable them to engage in dialogue and even debate as champions of effective climate solutions.

As an active member of the new initiative, Johal and I both understand that our outreach efforts will have several stages. Right now, a lot of our initial contacts allow us to learn about "other" points of views that have been traditionally foreign to climate advocates. For example, why do new immigrants find it hard to give up their cars or to fly less? What we found often surprised us as campaigners. For example, while many new immigrants to Canada drive big oil guzzlers, there is an equally large number who have been taking

public transit from day one. Although those who are known as not “fabulously rich” new Canadians may be taking transit for economic reasons, we climate campaigners see champions of climate solutions in these “new Canadian” transit users.

We are also fully aware that public engagement involves two-way conversation; it is not a monologue. Instead of trying to impose our views on new Canadians, we hope to incorporate their views into our new narrative. When we begin our “real” outreach to our target audience, we are talking “with” them instead of talking “at” them. Our goal is that our climate narrative will resonate with our audience because it will incorporate what they have told us.

According to Johal, making contact with Metro Vancouver’s South Asian community has been full of surprises. Two things in particular stand out for her. First, Indo-Canadian radio is a key communication tool within the region’s South Asian population. Second, although people in the Indo Canadian community seem to know more about climate change than she had anticipated, mobilizing them to do something about it tends to present a different challenge.

“It’s a wonderful feeling to be so welcomed by the community when you speak to them about climate change issues” says Johal. “I wasn’t sure what kind of response I would receive, but I am pleasantly surprised each time I meet with someone from the South Asian community.” However, she laments, although “it’s clear that people want to learn more about climate change, the environment is currently not seen as a priority to most people.”

One reason for this lack of urgency is that Canada seems so clean relative to India. The air and water here do not appear to be in trouble, so to speak. Johal thinks this view of Canada’s environment plays a key role in shaping how South Asian immigrants see environmental problems. “It makes it tough for new immigrants to understand why there are environmental concerns in Canada,” she explains. “People think they left these problems behind in India.”

Another problem that Johal has encountered is convincing South Asian immigrants that following the western example of consumerism is not necessarily the best way to go.

“In India, everyone wants to live like Hollywood stars in the West,” she explains. “Living big and being able to waste like the West are often perceived as key indicators for success. If you drive an SUV, live in a mansion, and waste food and electricity like there is no tomorrow, that’s how you know you’ve made it! It is these types of perceptions and values that will be the most difficult to change.”

Despite the challenges, Johal does not think that pushing climate action is a lost cause in the South Asian community. “Ingrained in most South Asian immigrants is a strong sense of loyalty to and pride in their home countries. If we as climate action campaigners can illustrate how climate change is affecting their friends and families in India, people will make that emotional connection, and that will help motivate them to take action in Canada. It’s about creating a narrative that resonates with the people and pumps them up to take action!”

As for my work, which is mainly to engage the diverse Chinese community to get onboard the climate action train, the task is both exciting and daunting. This, of course, is exacerbated by the fact that Canada really does not have “one” Chinese community. There are the CBCs, Canadian-born Chinese who mostly live as mainstream Canadians but still see themselves as Chinese-Canadian immigrants. There are Hong Kong immigrants who have been settled in Canada for between 15 to 30 years, who have maintained their ties with friends and relatives in Hong Kong, and who are often frequent flyers to China. They are also major users of Canada’s vibrant Chinese media but often see themselves as too “Canadianized” to want to live in Hong Kong or China full time. There are Taiwanese Chinese immigrants. They are the “other” Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants who read and write traditional Chinese characters instead of the simplified characters that Mainland Chinese immigrants read. But their rift with China is a lot deeper than the written language. They see themselves as proud representatives of the democratic side of “China.” For example, Taiwan is officially called the Republic of China and Taiwan’s 17 million eligible voters elect their president every four years, just like US voters.

Finally there are the new immigrants from the People’s Republic of China, who topped Canada’s immigration intake from 2001 to 2006, followed closely by immigrants from India. They are generally described as Mainland Chinese and they tend to come from China’s richer cities like Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai. According to the Community Airport Newcomers Network, among the close to 10,000 new immigrants who came through Canada’s airports during the first quarter of 2010, new immigrants from China again topped the list, accounting for 33% of total intake, a percentage point higher than in 2009.

HOW TO ENGAGE ETHNIC CANADA?

If knowing your target audience is crucial in ethnic engagement, then knowing what kind of message you want to send and how to send it will make or break your outreach effort. For the David Suzuki Foundation Climate Change Team, making direct contact with Chinese and South Asian community groups in Metro Vancouver was the obvious first step in our outreach, because this allowed us to listen and learn directly from these communities about what they think about climate change and how we can help the climate message make sense to them.

“I think our success so far has a lot to do with the fact that we are not trying to push a hidden agenda,” Johal says. “What we have done is get the South Asian community together and start a dialogue on climate change action. It was all open and transparent, and the community clearly appreciate that.”

An added bonus of making direct connections with the South Asian community is being able to find the “gem” within the community. “One of our first meetings was with Surjeet Sidhu, a Khalsa school counsellor in Surrey, B.C.,” Johal remembers. “As it turns out, Surjeet has been a long time member of Greenpeace and has admired Dr. Suzuki’s work for the longest time. It was just pure pleasure to see how much passion and knowledge Surjeet brings in our collaboration.”

In the Chinese community, we made contact with school administrators in Richmond, as well as with SUCCESS, a well-respected immigrant settlement service agency in

Metro Vancouver that was founded by a group of Hong Kong immigrants in the 1970s. Apart from picking the brains of these people in numerous meetings, we have also essentially been asking these groups and the individuals behind them to take us into their communities and allow us to engage in direct conversations with the communities – unfiltered.

Remember Eddie Chan from the Richmond Science Fair? My conversation with him was the result of our first level of outreach work with the Richmond school administrators. Through our contact with experts in the Richmond School district, we gained access to the Elementary School Science Jam. Although my conversation with Chan was brief, it clearly opened a window into his views on climate change and the environmental groups that campaign for the cause. Chan agrees that climate change is taking place. As a father of two young daughters, he wants to play a role in finding solutions. However, he has not acted because he has not found an environmental group he deems to be non-extreme. Chan realizes that by putting his name and contact on our information sheet, he may have found the environmental group that suits his views.

In fact, Chan's reaction to the David Suzuki Foundation is typical of the kind of feedback we have received since we started our initiative last October. When our team met with SUCCESS's senior management for the first time, board chair Dennis Chan and CEO Thomas Tam made sure we knew that they were thrilled to work with us. They also made it clear that climate change and the environment are not part of their typical agenda in immigrant settlement work. Right now, our team is finalising a number of exciting projects, including a youth leadership program and a climate research project with SUCCESS.

There is no question that many in the ethnic communities either know or have silently admired Dr. Suzuki's work for a long time. His reputation has helped us open many doors. But behind this admiration, there is also an appreciation of the "non-extreme" and science-based image of the Foundation – a characteristic many Chinese and South Asian immigrants look for in the environmental movement.

What are the ethnic communities doing to work toward climate change solutions?

Not long ago, our Vancouver office at the Foundation received a call from a local English-language news reporter. The question was how to raise awareness among Canada's immigrant communities on climate change.

The Foundation's Climate Team lead Ian Bruce responded by saying that although many in the immigrant community may not know as much about the science of climate change, by doing such simple things as taking transit to and from work every day, hanging their laundry to dry, and using CFL light bulbs at home, they are already part of the solution. We just have to make them aware of it.

Bruce is absolutely right. A few years ago, when BC Hydro first started the Team Power Smart Program, I was invited to join its Chinese New Year celebration in Vancouver's Chinatown. During that event, three Chinese-Canadian women wanted to share their contributions to saving power. All three of them had been using CFL light bulbs for their

homes. They all take public transit because none of them owns a car. One of them had also stopped using her dryer when it was sunny. Why did they do that? Because it saves money, of course!

What does it all mean for a climate change campaigner like me? It means that we have a lot of work to do but that the road ahead is guaranteed to be rewarding and exciting, if we do it right. New immigrants from China and India may not be fluent in the “climate change” language, but they are fluent in the language of economy. If climate solutions can help them live better lives and save money, if climate advocates ask them to do the possible and not the impossible, and if climate change campaigners listen to what they have to say and take notes, then there is little doubt that they will embrace climate solutions. After all, many new immigrants come to Canada to make sure their children are healthier and happier than they were in their countries of origin. In other words, new immigrants to Canada will become agents of climate change solutions, if climate advocates get it right!

WEBSITES

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2008001/article/10556-eng.htm>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/22/AR2008032200442.html>

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