



# Teachers' toolkit on environmental rights

GRADES 7-12

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**This classroom resource is for educators who want to incorporate the Blue Dot movement and environmental rights issues into their lessons.** It offers readings and resources about climate change,

soil safety, air quality and water security. It includes suggested activities to accompany the readings but we encourage teachers to customize the learning experience to suit their own classes and curricula.

For more comprehensive lessons, please email [chammond@davidsuzuki.org](mailto:chammond@davidsuzuki.org).

These resources begin with an introduction to the environmental rights movement followed by specific sections on climate change, soil safety, air quality and water security.



**You can help improve this resource:**

If you have questions or require additional support, please email [chammond@davidsuzuki.org](mailto:chammond@davidsuzuki.org).

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## 1) Introduction

We live in one of the most beautiful places on Earth, with some of the largest reserves of fresh water, natural spaces and remaining populations of wild animals. This image of Canada is deeply ingrained in all of us. It is an identity we hold dear and one we teach our children.

Most Canadians believe that nature is essential to our survival, and 85 per cent agree that our Charter of Rights and Freedoms should include the right to live in a healthy environment.



Despite this, Canada is falling behind when it comes to protecting the people and places we love, ranking 24<sup>th</sup> out of 25 industrialized nations on environmental performance.

Today's youth will live with the consequences of our environmental decisions. Scientific evidence shows that environmental hazards are linked with respiratory ailments, cancer and childhood behavioural challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Canada was once a leader on the environment. We could be again.

### **The Blue Dot movement**

The [Blue Dot movement](#) started with a simple idea: that everyone in Canada deserves the right to a healthy environment — the right to clean air and water, and safe food — and that this right ought to be protected by all levels of government.

Since the movement's launch in 2014:

- More than 100,000 people have signed the [BlueDot.ca pledge](#) calling on all levels of government to recognize our right to live in a healthy environment;
- More than 150 municipalities have passed environmental rights declarations. These communities are home to more than 15 million people and include cities like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa and Hamilton;
- Environmental rights legislation was introduced in British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia and an existing Environmental Bill of Rights in Ontario was reopened for public review and consultation (none of these bills has become law);
- An all-party committee of federal MPs recommended including environmental rights in the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

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<sup>1</sup> [Child Health and the Environment - A Primer](#), Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment.

## 2) Why schools?

Youth have an important role to play in the environmental rights movement. They can take meaningful action to protect the environment while learning valuable lessons about political processes and civic engagement. Fostering this kind of learning in schools helps create informed, involved citizens.

On November 21, 2017, David Suzuki will take part in an important event in Burlington, Ontario, with up to 700 Halton Region students. He will encourage leaders of tomorrow to take action to protect the people and places they love from changes to the environment and climate.



### **Youth care about the world they will inherit and are powerful change-makers in their communities:**

- Ancaster High's Eco-Ninjas team addressed Hamilton, Ontario's city council and helped achieve their city's municipal environmental rights declaration.
- The students of Scott Bateman Middle School invited the mayor of The Pas, Manitoba, to their class following a letter-writing campaign that helped bring about that community's declaration.
- A rally organized by 10-year-old Rupert Yakelashek and his seven-year-old sister, Franny, inspired Victoria, British Columbia's city council to pass a declaration.
- Art students at Beaverlodge Elementary School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, painted depictions of a healthy environment as they worked toward passing their city's declaration.

Educators also play an integral role. The Blue Dot movement can be explored across many different subject areas, from art to zoology. Classroom projects may vary in form and content but all are important and valuable!

### 3) Getting started

This section contains recordings, key messages, facts and images to share with your students.

#### Recordings

- [David Boyd on environmental rights](#)
- [Telephone Town Hall with David Suzuki](#)

#### Key messages

- More than 110 nations recognize their citizens' right to live in a healthy environment. But not Canada.
- The right to a healthy environment is the simple yet powerful idea that all Canadians deserve to breathe fresh air, drink clean water and eat healthy food.
- This movement is about protecting the people and places we love.
- Every Canadian deserves a future that is healthier and more secure. With people from all walks of life coming together, we can make positive change happen.
- Youth play an important role in this movement because they must live with the consequences of today's environmental policies and decisions.

#### Facts <sup>2</sup>

- Half of Canadians live in areas where they are exposed to unsafe levels of air pollution.
- Canada has no national safety regulations for drinking water or binding air-quality standards.
- Canada allows the sale and use of hundreds of pesticide products banned in Europe and has weaker rules governing toxic substances like asbestos and formaldehyde.
- The World Health Organization and the Canadian Medical Association estimate pollution, contaminated water and other environmental hazards cause tens of thousands of premature deaths and millions of preventable diseases each year in Canada.

#### Images

Feel free to use any of the images below for your activities.

- [Blue Dot logo](#)
- [Blue Dot supporters](#)
- [Blue Dot communities \(students\)](#)
- [Blue Dot communities \(youth\)](#)
- [Photo of David Suzuki](#)
- [Images of Earth from space](#)

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<sup>2</sup> [The Right to a Healthy Environment: 9 Things Canadians Should Know](#), Ecojustice.

### 3) Lesson #1: Your right to a healthy environment

#### Materials:

- Video: [Shoulders](#) (Shane Koyczan) (Duration: 7 minutes) *\*Contains one word of profanity at 1:27*
- Video: [Today is the day we decide](#) (David Suzuki Foundation) (Duration: 7 minutes)
- Video: [Taking environmental rights to the next level](#) (David Suzuki Foundation) (Duration: 2 minutes)
- Reading: [A healthy environment should be a basic human right](#) (David Suzuki Foundation) *\*The number of countries with a constitutional right to a healthy environment has increased from 95 in 2012 to 110 in 2017.*
- Reading: (David Suzuki Foundation)

#### Discussion questions:

- How does Shane Koyczan think we are currently treating our planet? In your own personal experience, do agree or disagree? Why or why not?
- According to David Boyd, what are environmental rights?
- If Canada legally recognized and protected environmental rights, do you think we would have a healthier environment and/or a more stable climate? Why or why not?
- Do you think that environmental rights are human rights?

#### Suggested activity — Essay writing:

1. Ask students to read [A healthy environment should be a basic human right](#) (David Suzuki Foundation) as homework and to write an essay responding to the above article using the prompt below. Before writing the essay, students should determine who the audience is, what they want their essay to accomplish and how to effectively weave the research and the Blue Dot movement into the essay.

#### Writing Prompt

*“Human beings are the only species that has ever invented the idea of a future. And because we have a sense of a future, we’re the only animals that realize we can affect the future by what we do today.”* David Suzuki

2. Students should take the essay they have written and use it to write a short and concise letter to their member of Parliament asking whether they believe environmental rights are human rights. These letters should be mailed to their member of Parliament.

#### Optional additional resources:

- Reading: [Traditional aboriginal knowledge is critical to conservation](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
- Reading: [Canada’s four most expensive contaminated sites](#) (CBC News)
- Reading: [New Zealand river first in the world to be given legal human status](#) (BBC News)

### 3) Lesson #2: Climate change

#### Materials:

- Reading: [Climate change 101](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
- Reading: [Greenhouse gases](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
- Reading: [Four places to cut your carbon](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)

#### Discussion questions:

- What do you know about climate change?
- How does climate change affect cities and countries around the world? Are your friends or relatives affected by climate change? Have you lived somewhere that has been damaged by an unstable climate?
- Do you think there is a relationship between the types of energy we produce and climate change?
- How can individuals ensure society makes energy decisions that allow us to live in a stable climate?

#### Suggested activity — Writing a letter to the editor:

- Three to four current, local newspapers
  - Paper for writing
  - Reading: Writing a letter to the editor (David Suzuki Foundation)
1. Circulate local newspapers and form small groups. Provide writing paper to each group. Assign a writer for each group.
  2. Have each group look at their newspaper to see if there are any articles about the environment or, specifically, climate change and/or energy. Check letters to the editor for examples and for the editor's address.
  3. Each group can craft a letter to the editor about climate change and/or energy use, adding pertinent knowledge about the Blue Dot movement that has been accumulated throughout the program.
  4. Letters may be shared in the larger group if there is time and then may be prepared to send.

### 3) Lesson #3: Healthy soil, healthy food

#### Materials:

- Video: [The other inconvenient truth, by Jonathan Foley](#) (TEDx Talks) (Duration: 18 minutes)
- Reading: [Are we burying our natural wealth?](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
- Coloured pencils and paper for writing

#### Discussion questions:

- What happens to people who don't have access to safe food? Or soil to grow safe food?
- Do you think human beings have a right to eat safe food?
- Do you think the land around your school can grow safe, healthy food? Are there ways to better manage the land?
- If it is true that healthy soil makes healthy food and that humans have a right to eat safe food, what obligations do we have in Canada to better manage our soil?

#### Suggested activity — Mapping your school's soil:

1. In small groups, take a short tour of your outdoor surroundings. Each group can take a different area.
2. Make a map of the landscape, including trees, bushes, grassed areas, gardens, sidewalks and paved areas.
  - Take note of any garbage or obvious pollutants.
  - Indicate where wildlife is observed.
  - Indicate whether plants in the area appear healthy or unhealthy.
3. Finish the map indoors, colouring in healthy and unhealthy areas.
4. Come together in the larger group and share your maps.
  - Do some maps indicate a less healthy environment than others?
  - Do you think some places around your school are better than others for growing food?
5. In the larger group, you can plan a garden that will grow healthy food. If there is an outside area with good soil that gets sunshine, use your maps as the basis for your garden plan. List the kinds of food you would grow.
6. Send a message to your school council, a student club or trustee saying you support local, healthy food and ask them for support to make your proposed community food garden a reality.

#### Optional additional resources:

- Reading: [Ontario's green belt](#) (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs)

### 3) Lesson #4: Breathing fresh air

#### Materials:

- Video: [The air we breath, by Mark Turrell](#) (TEDx Talks) (Duration: 15 minutes)
- Reading: [The air we breath](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)

#### Discussion questions:

- How does unsafe air affect peoples' health? Are certain people in society more likely to be negatively affected than others? Are any of those people in your family or class?
- Do you agree or disagree that safe air is essential for human survival?
- How much control do you think individuals have over air quality in their homes and communities?
- If safe air is essential for survival, should it be recognized and protected by our government as a human right?

#### Suggested activity — Cleaning up the air around your school:

1. At the end of the lesson, ask students to think of a source of air pollution at your school.
  - How could this pollution source be tracked and measured?
  - What personal choices can individual students make to reduce this pollution?
  - What choices can your school make to reduce this pollution?
  - What actions do students think would have the greatest impact on reducing air pollution: individual or institutional choices?
2. Ask students to write a letter proposing an individual or institutional choice to address the source of air pollution that your class discussed. Deliver those letters either to your school council, principal or trustee.

#### Optional additional resources:

- Reading: [Urban air pollution](#) (Canadian Environmental Health Atlas)
- Reading: [The cost of air pollution in Canada](#) (The Globe and Mail)

### 3) Lesson #5: Drinking safe water

#### Materials:

- Reading: [A healthy biosphere means healthier humans](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
- Reading: [World Water Day reminds us not to take clean water for granted](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)

#### Discussion questions:

- How does unsafe water affect peoples' daily lives?
- Do you agree or disagree that access to drinking water is essential for human survival or for communities to thrive?
- If safe drinking water is essential for survival, should it be recognized and protected by our government as a human right?

#### Suggested activity — Researching real-life examples of unsafe drinking water:

- Group readings:
    - [Clean drinking water should be a human right](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
    - [Harrietsfield residents demand fair treatment by Nova Scotia environment](#) (EcoJustice)
    - [Grassy Narrows mercury cleanup plan is long overdue](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
  - Chart paper and writing materials
1. Divide the class into three groups and have each group look at a different one of the following articles:
    - [Clean drinking water should be a human right](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
    - [Harrietsfield residents demand fair treatment By Nova Scotia environment](#) (EcoJustice)
    - [Grassy Narrows mercury cleanup plan is long overdue](#) (David Suzuki Foundation)
  2. Have each group read their article and, using the provided chart paper, reflect on the following questions:
    - Who was responsible for the drinking water issue in the article that your group read?
    - What impact did a lack of safe drinking water have on the health of people in that community? Were those health impacts physical, emotional or both?
    - Who was responsible for cleaning up or resolving the drinking water issue?
  3. Encourage students to do additional research, including finding videos, blogs or other news articles about the water issue in the Harrietsfield, Shoal Lake or Grassy Narrows communities.
  4. Come together in the larger group and present on the water issue that your group researched. As a group, consider the following questions:
    - What similarities or differences were there between Grassy Narrows, Shoal Lake and Harrietsfield?
    - If your community faced a similar situation, do you think you and your family would want to stay or leave?

- What resource or support would you need to either stay in a community with unsafe water or move elsewhere (i.e., access to money, social support, employment opportunities and information about how to move)?
- Do you think Canadians should have a legal right to safe drinking water? Why or why not?