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0:06

I am Canadian indeed, in fact I come from a lineage of Canadian lumberjacks. And I know what you're all thinking so I'm just going to answer your question now - we do still wear the flannel, but my generation, we wear it underneath our clothes. So, don't ask me to prove that. My parents are the fifth generation owners of our family hardwood lumber business. And from time to time as kids my brother and sister and I would get to go out with our dad when he'd walk a stand of trees. And on one of those occasions he stopped us in front of a large tree, and said that this tree could be cut down and turned into a lot of good lumber. But then he pointed around the tree and said that there are no smaller younger trees competing with the larger one for sunlight and survival. In other words there wasn't a sustainable reason to cut the tree down. It wouldn't improve the genetics of the forest for the long term.

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Something my father's often said is that he feels fortunate to have found a spiritual element to his work. He feels a sense of responsibility for the natural world, for nature's sake. Giving him a sense of a connection with it. But something else he said is that society's connection with that natural world is diminishing over time. And he spoke of this in the context of his business meaning that it doesn't mean the same thing today to own that finely carved piece of wood and furniture for example that it used to. So from a very young age I thought about these two things. One, there's something of a connection between us and nature. And two, that connection is diminishing over time.

1:34

In being the oldest of three siblings and maybe the most likely to take over the family business someday, I thought a lot about how we might reconnect society with nature. I've come across the term nature connectedness and there's a whole psychology around this. I'm fully conscious of the fact that we are here at Oxford University, we're defining things ruins careers. I'm going to keep this very simple, and in my own words.

1:58

So when I speak of connectedness is there anything about this relationship between us and nature. I'm referring to the extent to which we physically, mentally and spiritually engage or interact with the natural world. So if you go back to the days of primitive man, you would arguably see nature connectedness at its peak. We interacted with the natural world constantly and our survival depended on how well we did that. We were more a singular entity with nature. But over time we've distanced ourselves from nature. We do our thing and our human centric world and nature does its thing separately and, somewhere else. And there are growing concerns about this. And enemy number one has come to be known as technology.

2:38

I'm here to say that we have to reverse our perception of technology as the antagonist. And in fact mobilise it to bring society and nature closer together, to rescue both. This is a rescue mission. Years on during my undergrad degree in Boston I read a story by E.M. Forester. And you might know E.M. Forester from one his famous novels - A Room with a View. Anyone, any heads nodding. Yes, yeah some. It has no relevance to this talk whatsoever, but, a year after he wrote A Room with a View, Forester published The Machine Stops. And in The Machine Stops he was credited with predicting technologies like instant messaging and the internet. He did this in 1909. In The Machine Stops, a machine houses the human population. And technology has advanced to a point where a person can live within a single room in complete comfort at all times.

3:34

We spend our time ideas sharing via live video. And there's no need or want for any interaction between people, or between people and nature. Forester wrote this story out of concern. He was concerned about the dividing role that technology could play between us, and between nature. He compared our civilisation to the one in the story, from the standpoint that we had technology all wrong. Our civilisation had technology all wrong. We use it to bring us closer to things or to get us to things - rather than to make it easier to get things to us. And to put The Machine Stops into a real world context, let's take trend of mass organisation.

4:16

So in 1950, roughly 30% of the world's population lived in urban areas. That's up to over 50% now. And by 2050 it's projected that over 70% of the world's population will be living in urban areas. And this move from rural to urban parallels this shift from outdoors to indoors, and into technologically enhanced settings. On a smaller scale technology is making it easier for us to remain in our homes comfortably and entertained. As we more often see it with youth. And if we look ahead to a technology like the like the driverless car, we might find more use with the vehicle that doesn't need us in it to function, just to stay where we are and have it bring the things we want to us. Just saying. Forester's future makes sense to me.

5:03

As I continually see, and we continually see society drifting away from the natural world on this current that technology has created. From a human perspective our distancing from nature has been linked with issues such as obesity, crime. We can cognitive functioning and the list goes on. From the planets perspective, I mean the earth is roughly 4.5 billion years old, and for nearly all of that time it's functioned on its own accord. But since the industrial revolution, we've done so much and in such a way that we have fundamentally altered the way the planet functions. We've altered the earth's climate. Probably landing ourselves in a lot of trouble as a result. More trouble as we continue to warm it. We are said to be in the midst of a sixth mass extinction.

5:48

The situation worsens and we are indeed in need of a rescue mission. So years on I come here to Oxford to study for a degree in biodiversity followed by a degree in business, which is a pairing that no one can quite understand - but none the less, in my first year of studying biodiversity, I did some research and during that research I interviewed doctor Robin Freeman who's doing some work to better understand animal behaviour in the wild among other things. And I asked Robin what he thought of this disconnect that technology was creating between us and nature. And to paraphrase Robin said; "we are still impassioned by the natural world. But it's also true that technology is allowing us to go to place we've never been. And learn things we wouldn't have learned otherwise. And I think it's increasingly true that technology doesn't just move us away from real animals, or nature - it might give us a much richer understanding of them". This is a key insight.

6:43

You see the thinking is that the ship has sailed. That we will never have as stronger connection with the natural world that our ancestors did. I disagree. Fully. Because we have something that our ancestors, prior generations, civilisations never had. We have these technologies that are increasingly allowing us to know and understand the natural world and not only in its physical form, but in forms invisible to the human eye. Illuminating how it lives and supports life. Yet - efforts to reconnect society with the natural world tend to focus on outdoor activity. Primarily with youths. So connect youth with nature by placing youth in nature.

7:28

But here we are missing the critical step. Working with youth to help them find out what it is about the natural world that captivates them in the first place. Especially at a time, especially in 'the' time in the human life when values are being shaped and formed. And this is really where our mission lies. This is really where our effort is. And to do this, to achieve this, to reconnect youth with nature - we have to bring these technologies, the environmental technologies into the classroom, into the formal learning environment. That is where our rescue mission will play out.

8:08

How might this look. Let's just give an example of how this could play out. Let's take a tree, somewhere in the world and let's give it a live feed into a classroom. So we have a video monitor, maybe an iPad - the classroom is becoming increasingly technological, so this is all feasible. What can we show students with this tree? Safluous sensors can show students how a tree drinks from the ground. Infra-red can show students how a tree cools itself outward towards its leaves. Infra-red can also show disease and decay in the trunk as we see here. We can place a device over the top of the tree in the forest showing carbon in, and carbon leaving. In other words we can show students how a forests breathes.

8:53

With live feeds we can show animal movement in the area. With virtual reality we can allow students to step into the picture for a closer look around. And just based on the sounds, just on sounds that the students are hearing, technology is telling them how this healthy eco-system is. With high resolution satellite images, we can show students where the tree sits or stands in relation to deforestation activity. In other words, students might want to know how close their tree is to being cut down - and maybe its neighbours. And it's this technology in particular that has been flagged by a government to explore possibilities to have it brought into their countries classrooms.

9:35

This could be the beginning. And there are three opportunities I am seeing for these organisations, governments, society to make the most of it. For one, established a focus - establish a focussed effort on working with youth. With younger demographics at the time that values are being formed. Otherwise we will forever be playing catch up with the professional world.

9:57

Two; look for opportunities to bring these technologies together rather than operating them in isolation. The effort here is in the convergence of technologies to create a platform that shows the full range of nature's cool factor and realities. We'll know we're achieving this when youth begin to educate us.

10:20

And three, society, adults, listen to youth so that we can be prepared to offer opportunities for them to engage with nature further beyond what they see in the technologies. Of course, with these opportunities, there's comes some risks. For starters, number one, I mean this could all backfire entirely. We might find that youth are contented just to get their fill of nature by looking at the video screen and not engaging further. And there we're just moving further or closer to Forester's machine where we all live in a machine and we all die. Still read the story - it's a very good story. And maybe not all of us die.

11:04

Risk two; we have to be conscious who we're handing the natural world over to in this connected environment. Who manages it? And at what point have we added so much technology that that which is natural seems more artificial. We still have to know when to leave nature alone.

11:19

And three; respect for indigenous rights. There is still many indigenous communities who interact with the natural world constantly and their livelihoods depend on that. With the westerner's perspective like mine, it can be very easy to forget that. And it was Connie McDermott who spoke earlier who taught me that. You know serving biodiversity. Broadly we have to look for additionally for all. And these risks are better managed that used as excuses of justification for an action. Because, the potential around all of this, and the parlance of Oxford academics is bonkers. And it's not fulfilled when a student views these technologies playing out on the screen it's fulfilled when the student looks out the window, at the tree outside. That's not wired up. Or on the way home from school. It's the same tree that's always been there, but now it's viewed through the eyes and the imagination like no generation has ever experienced. Key point there - no generation has ever experienced the natural world like this.

12:30

Beyond this is see opportunities, or I see the development of new kinds of social media or social networks. We might find that students in classrooms around the world, start connecting and linking with each other based on the natural features that their connected to. We might find that this extends beyond the classroom and goes to individuals who can establish a one to one relationship with the natural feature. I could see next level citizen science, next level consumer awareness, next level quantified self. Technology can be a connector. But the big picture here is that the natural world is the connector. It connects us with the civilisations and generations that went before us. It connects us with each other. By finding its intrinsic value, it better connects us with ourselves.

13:24

I'm not sure if a reconnection effort will be enough to secure our continuity. Not all rescue missions succeed. But I've been exploring this for a long time, and I believe it's the best chance we've got. We have everything we need to act now, and if we can just plug back in, we might enable the natural world to connect us with those who come next.

13:49

Thank you

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