

# BLUE DOT DIALOGUES: Building Together on Common Ground



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Making the case for building an inclusive, informed and open dialogue process into the Blue Dot campaign for enshrining protection of the environment and environmental rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I'll argue that while the Blue Dot Tour's plan (the Plan)<sup>1</sup> for the mobilization of a grass roots movement is powerful, and early progress toward its implementation is inspiring, that very power and progress will almost certainly trigger fierce resistance, warranting the addition to the Plan of a program to support inclusive, informed and public dialogue. I'll note the polarized state of public discourse in Canada—especially on issues triggering the collision of economic and environmental values—and outline cultural and emotional forces that divide even reasonable people into opposing camps and keep them there. I'll make the case for building an inclusive, informed and open dialogue process into the Blue Dot project: as the key for unlocking the gates to those camps, and as the foundation for building bridges between them. I'll highlight the importance of—and offer suggestions for—maintaining a balanced focus on three crucial design aspects in planning this initiative. Finally, I'll identify some potential Blue Dot Dialogues partners, sponsors, convenors and funders.

## 2. Culture Trumps Reason in Economic and Environmental Values

In just a few weeks the Blue Dot campaign has blossomed into a citizens' movement over 62,000 strong, declaring that they are “standing with Canadians across our country who are asking all levels of government to recognize our right to breathe fresh air, drink clean water and eat fresh food.”<sup>2</sup> At least four Canadian municipalities have formally declared their support for a healthy environment.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Dr. David Boyd points out:

Opponents argue that the [constitutional right to a healthy environment] is philosophically unsound or would result in greater costs than benefits. The most common criticisms allege that the right is:

- too vague to be meaningful
- a threat to industrial activity in Canada, particularly in the natural resource sectors
- redundant because of existing human rights protections and environmental laws
- undemocratic, in that it transfers power from elected legislators to unelected judges
- not justiciable, meaning not appropriate for adjudication by courts
- unduly focused on individuals
- likely to open the floodgates to litigation
- capable of diverting attention from more important human rights
- anthropocentric, because it fails to recognize the rights of Nature

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bluedot.ca/the-plan/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://bluedot.ca/join-us/> 62,259 members on November 27, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The Montreal borough of Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie, Manitoba's The Pas, and the cities of Richmond and Vancouver in BC. Email from Michiah Prull, David Suzuki Foundation's Director of Communications and Engagement, October 30, 2014.

- likely to be ineffective<sup>4</sup>

Support for and opposition to this law reform project run deeper than logic or reason; powerful cultural and psychological forces are also at play. Supporters and opponents alike see constitutional protection of the environment and environmental rights as a marker for climate policy. In *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, George Marshall calls on Professor Dan Kahan of the Yale Cognition Project to explain that “cultural coding” embedded in communication about climate change has more influence on believers and deniers than the information itself:

[Kahan] argues that people obtain their information through the people they trust, or beyond that, from the parts of the wider media that speak to their worldview and values. Most of the time, this is a highly effective shortcut ... unless, in Kahan's words, the information becomes “contaminated” with additional social meaning and becomes a marker for group identity.

Kahan cites gun control as a case in point. Polls in West Virginia show that 65 percent of people want more gun control, but, he says, ... “What you don't know—and no poll has told you—is that 85 percent of people in West Virginia know you can't trust politicians who say that they want gun control.”

Attitudes on climate change, he argues, have become a social cue like gun control: a shorthand for figuring out who is in our group and cares about us. Just because polling shows a high level of concern about the issue does not mean that there is an equally high level of support for the people who promote it.<sup>5</sup>

Marshall uses *self-categorization* theory to explain why people not only strongly identify with their own social group, but also believe its distinctive identity makes it superior to other groups:

[T]here are two processes at work. First, we seek to achieve closeness and similarity with people with whom we feel an identity and kinship: our in-group. Then we seek to establish our differences from the people who are not like us: the out-groups. Our attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the people around us who we want to be like as well as by the people beyond us who we want to be *unlike*.<sup>6</sup>

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that our core beliefs are determined more by “tribal morality” than by argument, information or reason:

Morality binds and blinds. This is not just something that happens to people on the other side. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred

<sup>4</sup> Boyd, David R. 2012 *The Right to a Healthy Environment: Revitalizing Canada's Constitution*. UBC Press: Vancouver, 24. See pages 24-35 for Dr. Boyd's rebuttal.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, George 2014. *Don't Even Think About It: Why our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Bloomsbury USA: New York, 23

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 33

values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind when talking about their sacred objects.

... [Morality] binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depends on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Case for Dialogue

The term “dialogue” is derived from two Greek words (“dia” and “logos”) meaning “through the meaning.”<sup>8</sup> The crux of dialogue is “... an inquiry that surfaces ideas, perceptions, and understanding that people do not already have. You have a dialogue when you explore the uncertainties and questions that no one has answers to. In this way you begin to think together—not simply report out old thoughts. In dialogue people learn to use the energy of their differences to enhance their collective wisdom.”<sup>9</sup>

James Hoggan argues that the single greatest challenge we face in bridging the deep divisions between Canada’s economic and environmental interests is the polarized, toxic quality of our public discourse.<sup>10</sup> George Marshall calls for affirming, understanding and validating wider values as the starting point for more inclusive and less partisan approach to climate change dialogue:

Above all, it is critical that we CLOSE THE PARTISAN GAP between left and right by opening up climate change to conservative framings and ownership. This should start with AFFIRMING WIDER VALUES, which, it is well established experimentally, makes people far more willing to accept information that challenges their worldview. This requires communicators to reverse the normal flow that converts the science into people’s values and begin by understanding and validating their values first and then come up the ways that climate change can speak to those values.

Testing suggests that new framings of values could include respect for authority, personal responsibility, and loyalty to one’s community and nation, avoiding intergenerational debt, and reducing societal dysfunction.<sup>11</sup>

The Blue Dot campaign raises both a need and a strategic opportunity to convene a series of inclusive, informed public dialogues dedicated to sharing and understanding diverse perspectives on what protection of the environment and environmental rights in the

<sup>7</sup> Haidt, Jonathan 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Pantheon Books: New York, 311-313

<sup>8</sup> <http://globaldialoguecenter.blogs.com/meaning/2008/04/the-spirit-and.html>

<sup>9</sup> Isaacs, William N. 1999. *Dialogic Leadership*. *The Systems Thinker*, Vol 1, No. 1. Pegasus Communications, Inc., 2

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.desmog.ca/2013/01/14/canada-s-polluted-public-square>

<sup>11</sup> Marshall, *ibid.*, 237

*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* might entail: addressing Hoggan’s ‘polluted public square’ and Marshall’s ‘partisan gap;’ and offering a non-partisan ‘values frame’ with the potential to generate Blue Dot support from across the political spectrum.

#### **4. The Blue Dot Dialogues Initiative: Designing and Convening a Series of Public Dialogues on Protection of the Environment and Environmental Rights in Canada’s Constitution**

The issues are complex and divisive. The Charter-amending formula is politically and practically difficult.<sup>12</sup> Powerful interests will almost certainly seek to exploit public confusion and fear by framing protection of the environment in the Constitution as an attack on the economy. And yet, the very conditions posing such formidable challenges to building broad support for protecting the environment in the Charter might also provide the fuel and friction needed to ignite the inclusive, reflective dialogue that could overcome those challenges.<sup>13</sup>

The mobilization of the Blue Dot campaign’s natural supporters<sup>14</sup> will be crucial to building the political pressure needed to drive change, but will not be enough to build broad understanding that constitutional protection of the right of all Canadians to a healthy environment goes hand-in-hand with a healthy, sustainable economy. Also required is an inclusive public dialogue among a broad cross-section of Canadians—whose demographics, interests, hopes and fears reflect the diversity of our national identity.

The planning, organizing and convening of an inclusive, informed dialogue process on the scale contemplated here calls for a partnership of progressive organizations and institutions: able to muster significant human and financial resources for a long-term effort, and willing to work with traditional adversaries toward identifying common values on environmental and economic issues. Ideally, the partners, sponsors and conveners<sup>15</sup> of the Blue Dot Dialogues will work together from the outset of the project, “... in a way that

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<sup>12</sup>Venton, M. 2009. *Restoring the Balance: Recognition of Environmental Rights in British Columbia*. Ecojustice, formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund. pages 27-36. At page 28: “[T]he amending formula requires the support of the Senate and the House of Commons as well as two-thirds of the provinces that have at least 50% of the population of all the provinces. This process may be commenced by the Senate, the House of Commons or the Legislative Assembly of any province.”

<sup>13</sup> Kahane, Adam. 2002. *Changing the World by Changing How We Talk and Listen*. Generon. 4-5 “In Reflective Dialogue, we move outside of ourselves. We regard others as “Thou” rather than “It,” standing in their shoes, seeing through their eyes. We also listen self-reflectively to ourselves, and hear ourselves through the ears of others. We inquire into how things came to be as they are and envision how they might be. ... In Generative Dialogue, we are fully present to what is emerging in the whole system ... In Reflective Dialogue, each story is a piece of the puzzle, and empathetic inquiry in a diverse group allows the whole picture to become visible. But in Generative Dialogue, each story is a hologram that contains the whole picture.”

<sup>14</sup> i.e. the environmentally aware and politically progressive communities, whose engagement will inevitably trigger the mobilization of their traditional opponents and thus the compounding and perpetuation of Canada’s current political gridlock and polarization on issues involving development and transportation of energy and natural resources.

<sup>15</sup> See page 9 for Appendix 1: *Potential Partners, Sponsors and Conveners of the BLUE DOT DIALOGUES*

builds a sense of ownership among key parties to it, by engaging them in shaping the design process.”<sup>16</sup>

Open questions should be used to encourage a creative, exploratory approach in preliminary discussions of our proposed Blue Dot Dialogues initiative—within DSF and with Blue Dot’s current partners and sponsors.<sup>17</sup> For example:

- What are the potential benefits and risks of a dialogic approach to promoting and supporting broad public engagement in the Blue Dot campaign?
- How should the issues be framed to engage the interest and support of the broadest possible cross-section of Canadians? (i.e. widely, narrowly, inclusively, provocatively ...)
- Who are influential champions and critics of constitutional protection of the environment and environmental rights in Canada?
- Should they be encouraged to participate in the Blue Dot Dialogues, and if so, how?
- What is the greatest challenge we face in facilitating dialogues that identify Canadians’ shared values regarding constitutional protection of the environment, and how can we best overcome that challenge?
- Who are potential conveners, funders, promoters and supporters of Blue Dot Dialogues, and what are the keys to earning their support?
- What unintended consequences might flow from such public dialogues and how could we best manage the accompanying opportunities and risks?

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<sup>16</sup>Pruitt, B and Thomas, P. 2009. *Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners*. 87. Stockholm: International IDEA. 78. At page 79: “[T]here are significant benefits to co-design:

- a stronger sense of ownership of and responsibility for the process—a basis for satisfaction on the psychological dimension
- a design that is informed by multiple perspectives and concerns—a basis for satisfaction on the substantive dimension
- clarity among the actors about the process and its underlying logic—a basis for satisfaction on the process dimension

A co-design process enriched by preparatory training can further enhance all these benefits. Training sessions can raise awareness about process issues such as the principles of dialogue and the dialogic approach. Dialogue participants tend to focus mainly on the issues. Raising their awareness of the role of process, while engaging them in designing a dialogue, can help develop capacities that may be critical to the immediate success of the dialogue initiative and to achieving long-term objectives for societal change.”

<sup>17</sup>Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. 2003. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*. Whole Systems Associates: Mill Valley, CA. Page 2: In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates as “Director of Fundamental Questions.”

## 5. Balancing People, Problem and Process: the Crux of Effective Dialogue Design

The success of the Blue Dot Dialogues will owe much to a balanced focus on three crucial aspects: the people, the problem and the process.<sup>18</sup> Here are a few thoughts on those design elements:

### a. The People (psychological issues)

- Hear people where they are, on issues that are locally grounded and relevant to the Blue Dot project
- Seek meaningfully diverse community representation
- Ensure that participants are included in post-dialogue evaluation and reporting
- Seek out participants who are:
  - ✓ keenly curious about views that differ from their own
  - ✓ vitally interested in issues at the intersection of economic development and environmental protection
  - ✓ highly motivated to turn ideas into action

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<sup>18</sup>Pruit and Thomas, *ibid.*, 74. “The ‘triangle of satisfaction developed by Christopher Moore of CDR Associates illustrates this point. Moore’s triangle is a tool for conflict analysis that distinguishes among the different interests that people have in the kinds of situations that dialogues are designed to address.” [People (Psychological), Problem (Substantive) and Process (Procedural)]

Page 75: “A good design addresses all of the following:

- **Psychological issues.** The people who are part of a dialogue process—as sponsors, conveners, participants and interested onlookers—have an emotional or psychological interest in feeling recognized, respected and heard. The design process determines who should be involved, and should do so in a way that meets the participants’ psychological needs.
- **Substantive issues.** The problem to be addressed is central to the content or goal of the dialogue initiative. The design must establish a clear purpose and clarify the scope of issues to be discussed, so as to meet the participants’ interest in securing results on the substantive issues.
- **Procedural issues.** The way in which the process unfolds helps determine whether people perceive the dialogue as legitimate, fair and worthwhile. Hence procedural elements must be considered carefully in the design process. Regardless of the context, the success of the dialogue initiative will depend largely on the extent to which its design and implementation satisfy all of these interests together. Failure to address one side of the triangle adequately in the design can undermine the chances for success of the overall process.’

### b. The Problem (substantive issues)

- Define the social purpose and strategic objective of the dialogues in terms that support open discussion framed by shared values, rather than positional debate driven by divergent ideologies
  - ✓ “social purpose” might be to encourage and enhance public understanding of constitutional protection of the environment and environmental rights as elements of “sustainable development”<sup>19</sup> or “ecofiscal policy”<sup>20</sup> rather than as aspects of “environmentalism” or “environmental policy”
  - ✓ “strategic objective” might be to support and sustain engagement of a broad (demographically, geographically and politically) cross-section of Canadians, in calling for the recognition of the right to a healthy environment in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
- Use open questions to frame the issues, making the discussion widely accessible and relevant – for example: how might constitutional protection of the environment affect:
  - ✓ economic priorities and performance?
  - ✓ business opportunity and employment?
  - ✓ public health and community well-being?
  - ✓ Canada’s international competitiveness and environmental reputation?
  - ✓ Canadians’ health and safety?

### c. The Process (procedural issues)

- Strive to build and conduct the dialogues such that the process earns and supports participants’ perception of the fairness, legitimacy and value of the initiative

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#I>, 1987. A/42/427: *Our Common Future*: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Chapter 2: Towards Sustainable Development, at Paragraph 15: “In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.”

<sup>20</sup> <http://ecofiscal.ca> “An ecofiscal policy corrects market price signals to encourage the activity we do want (job creation, investment and innovation) while reducing those we don’t want (green house gas emissions and the pollution of our land, air and water.”



- Align the dialogues' format and process with their purpose and objective
- Seek out dialogue convenor(s) widely respected for fairness, integrity and objectivity<sup>21</sup>
- Recognize the inevitable political conflicts and power imbalances among the Blue Dot Dialogues' partners, sponsors, supporters, critics, convenors and participants, and strive to address those conflicts and imbalances in designing and executing the process

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<sup>21</sup> For example, SFU Centre for Dialogue: <http://www.sfu.ca/dialogue/about-us/vision-statement.html>

## APPENDIX 1

### BLUE DOT DIALOGUES: Potential Partners, Funders, Sponsors and Convenors

#### 1. Potential Partners

- David Suzuki Foundation
- Ecojustice
- Dr. David R. Boyd
- City of Vancouver
- City of Richmond
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- Canadian Policy Research Network
- Canada's Ecofiscal Commission
- Canada 2020
- Environmental Law Centre, University of Victoria
- First Nations Summit
- Fraser Institute
- Pembina Institute
- Leadnow
- West Coast Environmental Law
- Alberta Climate Dialogues
- BC Law Institute
- BC Civil Liberties Association
- BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre
- Canadian Civil Liberties Association
- Canadian Bar Association
- Canada's law schools

#### 2. Potential Sponsors

- Canadian Bar Association
- Government of Alberta
- Government of BC
- SFU Centre for Dialogue
- City of Vancouver
- CD Howe Institute
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- Canada's Ecofiscal Commission
- Canadian Medical Association
- BC Medical Association
- Conference Board of Canada
- Fraser Institute
- Pembina Institute

- Leadnow
- BC Law Institute
- Canadian Bar Association
- Canadian law schools
- Canadian law firms
- Provincial law societies
- Federation of Law Societies of Canada

### **3. Potential Convenors**

- SFU Centre for Dialogue
- Canadian law schools<sup>22</sup>
- Canada's Ecofiscal Commission

### **4. Potential Funders**

- Law Foundation of BC<sup>23</sup>
- Other provincial law foundations
- Real Estate Foundation of BC
- Vancity Community Foundation
- Vancouver Foundation
- Tula Foundation

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<sup>22</sup> University of Victoria's Faculty of Law has confirmed its interest in participating as a convener.

<sup>23</sup> January 15 application deadline for a 2015 "Large Grant" (\$50,000).