



**Wade Davis is an award-winning Canadian explorer. (Adam Dillon)**

**The Canadian anthropologist, Wade Davis**, has spent a lifetime learning from the Indigenous peoples of the world, and their relationship with the planet we all share.

*Davis holds degrees in anthropology, biology and a PhD in ethnobotany from Harvard University. He has additionally received 11 honorary degrees, the 2009 Gold Medal from the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, 2011 Explorers Medal, 2012 David Fairchild Medal for botanical exploration, 2015 Centennial Medal of Harvard University, 2017 Roy Chapman Andrews Society's Distinguished Explorer Award, 2017 Sir Christopher Ondaatje Medal for Exploration and 2018 Mungo Park Medal from the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. In 2018, he became an honorary citizen of Colombia. \*Originally published on February 18, 2020.*

For him, the big question is whether we can learn from these "wayfinders" as he called them in his 2009 CBC Massey lectures. He believes that the future of humanity — and its present — depends on listening to Indigenous peoples: to what they know of the world, to what they have to teach us; and how they can help our species both survive, and thrive.

In his lectures, Davis described the myriad cultures on our planet as the "ethnosphere", by which he means the "sum total of all thoughts and

intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination."

Now, 10 years after he delivered his Massey lectures, the University of British Columbia professor looks back on what has changed on our planet — for better and for worse.

The following is an excerpt of his conversation at the Stratford Festival with psychiatrist [David Godbloom](#).

**You spoke in 2009 of the ethnosphere as humanity's greatest legacy. Tell us firstly what you meant by the ethnosphere and what's happened?**

Well, what I was trying to do is create an organizing principle that would draw people's attention to what was going on to the diversity of culture brought into being by the human imagination. And, you know, we hear so much about the erosion of biological diversity but even the most discouraged biologists would never suggest that 50 per cent of all animal and plant life is moribund, and yet that the most apocalyptic scenario in the realm of biological diversity scarcely approaches what we know to be the most optimistic scenario in the realm of cultural diversity.

And the key indicator of that of course is language loss. I mean the fact that when all of us were born there were 7,000 languages spoken on the planet, and by absolute academic consensus half of those aren't being whispered today into the ears of infants, which means we're literally living through an era in which by definition half of humanity's intellectual, social, ecological, spiritual knowledge is at risk. And that doesn't have to happen.

Boas at Columbia University. (Wikipedia)

I mean this tied really strongly into my conviction that the same forces that were affecting biological diversity were, of course, affecting cultural diversity. And I'm an anthropologist and the real purpose of anthropology

is — as Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas' great student, said — is to make the world safe for human differences.

Anthropology is the antidote to nativism. It's the antidote to Trump. You know, the real central lesson of anthropology is that every culture has something to say. Each deserves to be heard just as none has a monopoly on the route to the divine. The other peoples of the world are not failed attempts at being new, they're not failed attempts at being modern.

The 2009 CBC Massey Lectures, "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World"

### **Wade Davis: Light at the edge of the world**

Every culture has a unique answer to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and alive? And when the people of the world answer that question they do so in those 7,000 different voices of humanity. And those voices and those answers collectively become our human repertoire for dealing with the challenges we'll confront in the coming centuries.

When we were backstage, we were talking about the fact that the country you've just left (Colombia) that you've recently become a citizen of has gone through its own extraordinary transformation. Can you talk about your first time in Colombia, I think 45 years ago?

We had a teacher who had an air of a dandy, trailed clouds of cologne. But all of that was betrayed by a glass eye and a scarred face that marked the body blown apart in the war. He took six boys to Colombia one summer and my mother worked as a secretary in elementary school all year to afford for me to join that trip. I was 14 and by far the youngest of the group.

And by complete good fortune, whereas the other lads were billeted with very affluent families and spent most of the sweltering summer in the

country clubs of Cali, I was with a family high up in the mountains on the trails that ran west of the Pacific. I never saw the Canadians all summer

We in the West, with our way of thinking of the natural world, we are not the norm — we're the anomaly. Most societies around the planet have these extraordinarily rich relationships where they never see people as part of the problem, but part of the essential solution — because it's only people that can maintain the cosmic balance of the world.

Anthropology never calls for the preservation of anything. And when people often ask why did these other cultures matter, or why does ancient wisdom matter in the modern world? I answer that with two words: climate change.

Not to suggest we go back to pre-industrial past, but the very existence of these other alternatives, these other visions of life, so rich in their complexity put the lie to those of us in our own society who say that we cannot change, as we know we all must change the fundamental way we treat the planet.

And so I draw great inspiration from the diversity of ideas that we've come up with across a whole range of the human spirit.