

Toyota's Conversation with Dr. Jane Goodall

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By Kevin Butt, Regional Environmental Sustainability Director, TMNA

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Jane Goodall, the internationally acclaimed environmentalist, to discuss her work on building awareness about biodiversity, climate change and the need to inspire the next generation of young people to carry on the fight to save the planet.

Toyota has partnered with the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI) to support its Roots & Shoots program, supporting teenagers to work on projects that build awareness about the environment. This program, which began with 12 high school students in Tanzania 31 years ago, now operates in 62 countries around the world. Roots & Shoots has already trained a generation of activists, some of whom are now senior leaders in the conservation movement.

Dr. Goodall's career began famously more than 60 years ago with the chimpanzees she studied in eastern Africa. That turned into a focus to save the natural world inhabited by the chimpanzees. Now, she's doing everything she can to cut carbon emissions – a mission that aligns with our own. In our conversation, Goodall emphasized the urgency of actions to forestall climate change and stressed that the role of companies like Toyota can play alongside non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

“It's clear that business and corporations have to take the lead in this crisis time,” Goodall said. “Governments are handcuffed in a way — they've just got to do what their constituents want. ... There is a tendency for NGOs who are environmentalists or something like that to preach to the converted. It's really important to find those companies who have a CEO or somebody in your position that really do care.”

Part of this is trying to move in a new direction from the way companies have typically acted, Goodall said. That includes listening, being aware of the negative impacts manufacturing can have on the environment, and also partnering with NGOs – some of which have been on the other side of past political fights. It can all lead to a situation that benefits everyone, she said.

“We as an NGO can benefit from donations from a company like Toyota,” Goodall said. “The environment will win and the company will win. So, it's win-win-win. If we can't do more of this around the world, we're probably doomed. It's that urgent.”

I was struck by how many things both Toyota and Dr. Goodall have been working on at the same time. With that, I wanted to share more of this meaningful conversation, dividing the conversation into four areas where we are working in parallel with this world-renowned naturalist.

PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY AND REFORESTATION

I asked Dr. Goodall about how she conveys the importance of protecting ecosystems. It's been a theme of her work since her first studies of chimpanzees in what is now Tanzania.

What Jane Goodall said

“One of the tragedies of today's world is people's disconnect from nature. Not only are we part of the natural world, but we depend on it – for food, for water, for everything. But what we depend on are healthy ecosystems. I have come to see it's like a great tapestry. And it's happening more and more. Sixth-rate extinction. It's like a thread is being pulled from the tapestry. It hangs in tatters, and the ecosystem collapses.

“It's like the little insect. If it goes extinct, so what? But maybe a bird depends on that insect for its main food. Now that bird is going extinct. And maybe some other creature depended on the bird. This can lead to ecosystem collapse. All of these animals and plants have a role to play, and they make up this incredible tapestry of life. I learned about this in the rainforest of Gambia, when I was among the chimpanzees, the best days of my life.”

What We're Doing at Toyota

At Toyota, we're committed to operating in harmony with the environment and building healthy ecosystems. We want future generations to continue to enjoy the world's natural wonders. We aim to promote a culture of conservation, to proactively learn about local species and to study how to minimize the disruption of natural habitats.

Toyota is supporting the development of at least 26,000 acres of pollinator habitat in North America. That includes 375 acres and 18 pollinator gardens at different Toyota facilities in the U.S., Canada and Mexico and 1,547 acres developed through collaboration with Pollinator Partnership.

ON THINKING ABOUT CONSERVATION IN AN EXPANSIVE WAY

Dr. Goodall described to me how her work with chimpanzees quickly branched out into other missions. To save the chimps' habitat, she had to work to find solutions for the people who lived nearby. At Toyota, we long ago learned that to be a responsible steward of the environment, we had to do more than just make more fuel-efficient cars.

What Jane Goodall said

“When I began work in Gombe in 1960 with the chimpanzees, there was a great forest belt that stretched across Africa. By the late 1980s, it was just a small island of forest surrounded by bare hills. There were more people living there than the land could support, and they were too poor to buy food. People were struggling to survive. ... That's when it hit me. If we can't find ways for these people to support themselves without destroying the forests, we can't save chimpanzees, the forest or anything else.”

What We're Doing at Toyota

We have overhauled our factories, our buildings and our use of natural resources. It's not just about using less steel or conserving energy. It's about something as fundamental as water.

As a part of an industry that uses water intensively, Toyota has felt a special responsibility in conserving water resources. Toyota is committed to conserving water, protecting water resources, and raising community awareness about the importance of water conservation. By finding ways to improve water quality, increase water-use efficiency and protect water-related ecosystems, Toyota is helping to build a more sustainable future for society, business and the planet.

As part of Toyota's water conservation efforts, Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Indiana (TMMI) is saving an estimated 54 million gallons of fresh water per year by reusing wastewater during the paint pretreat process. This innovative technique is achieved through new microfiltration modules. In another example, our Plano headquarters campus features one of the largest commercial rainwater harvesting systems in the U.S. to provide a sustainable, on-site source for landscape irrigation.

THE URGENCY OF ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

For someone who has been working on these issues as long as Dr. Goodall has, it means a lot when she declares that the planet is in a state of emergency. But, that is where we find ourselves today. That's why Toyota views climate change as a priority management issue and supports the goals of the Paris Agreement, a pact adopted by 196 countries that commits to reducing GHG emissions in order to keep warming well below 2° Celsius, and to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5° Celsius.

What Jane Goodall said

“Some scientists think we have only a few years until we’re past the point of no return. I say we have a window of time. We do not know how long that window is. We have the answers to the problems we’ve created. We lack the will. There aren’t enough people who are willing to make sacrifice.”

What We’re Doing at Toyota

Toyota has ramped up its electrification efforts and is offering more hybrids, plug-in hybrids, battery-electric and hydrogen-powered fuel-cell solutions every year. Carbon emissions per mile for Toyota vehicles in North American have decreased 41 percent since 2010. In the U.S., Toyota has committed to 70 percent electrified new vehicle sales by 2030. As of 2022, 52 percent of Toyota and Lexus vehicles have an electrified option — and more are on the way.

To help build a carbon neutral future, we are working at every stage of the vehicle life cycle and throughout our operations – reducing CO2 emissions from the production of new vehicles, challenging our suppliers and dealers to minimize CO2 emissions and ultimately pushing towards a net positive impact.

Across our plants, offices and other facilities, carbon emissions are 20 percent lower than they were in FY2018. This is due to greenhouse-gas efficiency measures and increases in renewable electricity purchases. We are on track to becoming carbon neutral at our facilities by 2035.

ON EDUCATION

I asked Goodall about the importance of education in bringing about change, and how early we should start the conversation about the environment.

What Jane Goodall said

“The earlier the better. Because then you get the young mind thinking in the ways they need to think if we’re going to change the catastrophic direction we’re headed in now. We have scientists who say we have only so many years left ... but the young people who are in these programs who understand nature, they become passionate defenders of nature.”

What We’re Doing at Toyota

The partnership between Toyota Motor Manufacturing Canada (TMMC) and the Jane Goodall Institute has brought environmental education to students in nearby Kitchener ranging from fourth grade through high school. Twelve TMMC employees participated with the children in hands-on projects to remove invasive species and improve wildlife habitat in the Grand River Watershed. The group removed more than three tons of buckthorn, an invasive brush. They planted 80 trees and added 500 wildflowers to pollinator gardens.

Students also conducted “bioblitzes,” which are periods of intensive nature observation. Under the supervision of JGI environmentalists, students are trained to search for species that haven’t been previously observed in the area. Students record their observations in an app, and the data is shared with biologists and ecologists. The experience teaches the young participants about biodiversity, the variety of plants and animals in their own neighborhoods and empowers them to work toward sustainability. Toyota is hoping to expand its JGI partnership to more locations in North America in 2023.

ON PEOPLE-DRIVEN CHANGE

Finally, it struck me that Jane Goodall and Toyota have learned one of the most important lessons of all about making lasting, meaningful change: you can't do it alone. Dr. Goodall learned she needed to work with communities, first in Africa and then around the globe.

What Jane Goodall said

“The Jane Goodall Institute’s method is community-led conservation. We’re not just handing out crumbs to people because they’re doing things. We’re actually talking to people, saying what do you want?”

“It’s worked so well. It includes scholarships. Microfinance. People have risen out of poverty. The chimps are safe because land has been put aside as a buffer between the land and the villagers. The same program is in six other African countries. This is part of the importance of alleviating poverty if we want to save the planet.”

What We’re Doing at Toyota

Empowering people is one of the central cores of the Toyota Way, a business philosophy that makes the company a great place to work and has built the world’s second largest automaker. Toyota employees are empowered to suggest solutions and stop assembly lines on a moment’s notice. At Toyota, we have learned that empowering employees is the fundamental building block in making the world’s best automobiles and having the company lead as a global citizen.

I can’t say how much I appreciated the opportunity to sit down with one of the iconic figures of the past 60 years. This remarkable woman has been recognized as a Dame Commander of the British Empire, a United Nations Messenger of Peace, and a recipient of the Templeton Prize for science and spiritual curiosity. Toyota is honored to support the Jane Goodall Institute in nurturing the understanding of sustainability in young people all over the world.