Blue Zones: Longevity Lessons from the World's Oldest People Transcript

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Introduction and Guest Background

Everybody sit down or stand up. I'm standing. Lock in your seat. You're not going anywhere because you're going to be fascinated by our guest and, friend Dan Buettner.

Many of you have already said, oh, my God, it's damn beautiful. I always wanted to hear him talk. I've heard him talk over and over. Introduce him in a minute.

Reverse your Heart Disease Naturally, summit. And who knows more about longevity than Dan Buettner? Dan, thanks so much for taking the time to answer some questions on your take on longevity and heart.

It's such a profound knowledge that you actually, have accumulated so much more than most of us. But just in case you guys don't know, Dan Buettner, he's an explorer extraordinaire that could fill in our National Geographic fellow to say he's an award winning journalist, producer, and new York Times bestselling author is an understatement.

The books are amazing. Well, talk about a new one. And, he has worked now for 20 years. Dan, on the idea of discovering where longevity is abundant and why.

That's been about 20 years now, the over 20 years since 1999. Wow. And just look at him. He's 107 years old. Look how good he looks now is. He's a young man with a lot of energy and all, but he's taken the idea of studying longevity and translating it to partner with city governments, large employers, health insurance companies.

There are blue zones, cities all over America. He really is transforming American life and educating, American citizens on how to stay healthy out of a hospital, out of a clinic, without medication.

All these things are possible. But, you know, not everybody's doing it. And, born and raised in Minneapolis, coming to us via beautiful, sunny Miami. So thanks so much, Dan. I mean, I could go on forever.

Your your bio is insane, but thanks for the time. And that's what I've been. There might be, you know, a very large audience viewing this. There might be somebody that doesn't know the term blue zone.

And why don't we were talking off camera? Just tell me, on camera, you know, the kernel of the idea that you're going to go study and find where people live the longest, maybe the healthiest life span and health span.

And then this phone call down the street in Minneapolis to the famous, scientist doctor Ansel Keys. Just a couple of minutes on the very beginning. Yeah.

So the idea of Blue Zones was, in a sense, to reverse engineer longevity. And instead of looking for answers to live longer, better lives. And by the way, the average American could live about 14 extra years if they optimized their lifestyle.

Origins of the Blue Zones Idea

But instead of looking at a test tube or a petri dish, our idea was to find demographically confirmed populations where people were making it into their 80s, 90s and even hundreds without chronic disease.

And, there's a, well, accepted, assumption, that when it comes to longevity, only about 20% at the population level is dictated by genes. The other 80% is something else.

So if we can find populations that, you know, living a long time, we know what is in their genes, or at least that's a minority explanation. And, so, probably 2002, I had the idea and I cold called Ansel Keyes.

Now, Ansel Keyes is the guy most responsible for identifying the Mediterranean diet through his seven country studies, which followed cohorts of men from sin went down to Corfu at five year intervals and noticed that the men eating the least amount of animal products were having the lowest rate of heart disease. Now, at the time, you couldn't make such a, such a broad, statement because as a scientist, you were expected to find the micronutrients.

So, you know, he identified the correlation between, saturated fat, serum cholesterol and heart disease. But actually the original work was just with animal protein.

The more animal protein, the more heart diseases. And, but I knew he was famous for his work was very similar to the work I was proposing. He's 99 years old.

He. Listen, what I said, he said, that I'm too old. I love what you're doing. Fax it to me and I'll see what I can do. And he. He introduced me to Doctor Robert King, who was the dean of the School of Public Health in Minnesota.

So we're talking University of Minnesota, University of Medicine academic center, right? That's right. And it was with his endorsement and collaboration that I got the original funding from the National Institute on Aging to do the demographic work to identify these five areas where people are living statistically longest, the so-called blue zones, and one of the let's list in a second, the five.

Did you have a clue what was going to be five? Could have been two. Could have been nine. When you very much launched the project. No, I had no clue. Okay. No clue.

And I only knew one for sure, which was Okinawa, Japan. Right. And that's when you verified for some time now, largely thanks to the the Wilcox brothers.

Right. But, once I started digging into it, I found two more emerging blues. Well, one more emerging blue zones. And then I named Loma Linda, California, the Adventists, another blue zone.

And I wrote a cover story for National Geographic and the first blue zones book, which was a big success. And with the proceeds of that book, I went off to fund the discovery of the the second or the fourth and the fifth blue zone.

And which one didn't make it? I mean, there were the elderly women in Georgia, USSR, eating Dannon yogurt. I mean, people were dying 30 years ago. That was longevity.

And there were a full 120 year olds who drank a fifth of vodka, day, smoked two packs of cigarets, eight Dannon yogurt and had 40 year old girlfriends.

Never happened. Okay, what? Stalin? But during the time of Stalin, these villages wanted to, elude the draft for their young men. So these young men, bribed city officials into changing their birth, certificate birth dates to make them appear 40 years older.

So then when the, draft board came down from Moscow, they look at all these, you know, guys who were 60, who were really 20. And, later on, when National Geographic writer Alexander Leaf came down to, to, explore all these, you know, 101 hundred and 110 year olds, they were too afraid to admit that they had their birth records changed decades back, and they just went along with the ruse, a couple other places that didn't pan out.

The village of Burma, Valley of Ecuador, the Hunter Valley of Pakistan were both thought to be longevity hotspots. They're not we looked for a while at, New Finland among the Acadians who are long lived people in Canada, but not quite as long lived as the people we've identified.

So the longest of women are in Okinawa, Japan. The longest lived men are in the highlands of Sardinia, on the island of Ikaria. We have a population of 10,000 people who live about seven years longer than Americans, with half the rate of heart disease and one tenth the rate of dementia.

The Five Blue Zones and Longevity Findings

In the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica, we have a population that spends 1/15 the amount we do on health care, and they have half the rate of middle age mortality, which means your guys, like you and me, have about a two fold better chance of reaching a healthy age.

95, than the average American death. And then finally, among the seventh day Adventists in Loma Linda, California, a population of adherent Christians who are living about a decade longer than their North American counterparts.

So these are people who achieve the outcomes we want. They've lived a long time, probably the capacity of the human machine, without the the diseases that foreshortened our lives and my, my, the last 20 years of my, career focus has been trying to explain what and how they did it, and more importantly, is how we can do it.

And, the findings have been completely counterintuitive. They're not what people think. But it is a powerful set of data. And I believe a powerful answer for a country that's, very sick, spanning over $3.5 trillion a year on largely avoidable health care.

And, we ought to we got to start looking back, if we want answers and just to circle back to one statement, if anybody's listening and they're a history of medicine geek or history and nutrition like I am.

And I got to say, you are, Ansel Keyes and his team of experts around the world that produced this massive seven countries study. There always were seven countries study.

It was their team was the father. The Mediterranean diet, probably the most acknowledged healthy diet pattern in the world. And their teachings have proved to be long lived and accurate.

Despite an internet full of naysayers. And it just comes up in waves over and over. It's resurging now, but we'll shut that down. Tell us, you know, let's talk about the power nine, the blue zones, the nine findings.

But then real quickly, but maybe focus on what you observed in these five areas commonality of diet, commonality of nutrition lessons. People listening today can say, I didn't know that.

And I'm going to adopt more of the following 1 or 2 superfoods. Yeah, I'm not a big believer in superfoods, so let power nine actually hate that term.

But I said it once and it's stuck. But if that's really the nine common denominator. So no matter where you go in the world and you see long term people, you see the same factors occurring over and over.

And, you know, not going through all nine of them. But to start where I think you want to start is the diet. So we did a meta analysis. If you want to know what a 100 year old ate to live to be 100, you can't just ask them what they've been eating for one reason.

For one reason. It only reflects, you know, today. And the second reason is they don't really remember. You know, if I asked you what you had for lunch a week ago Tuesday, other than knowing it was vegan, you probably can't remember what exactly you ate.

So by the same token, you can't ask 100 year old what they're eating when they were little kids or teenagers or young adults or middle age or newly retired.

So to get at that, my team aggregated dietary surveys done over the past 100 years and all blue So the, we found 155 dietary surveys, dotted all five blue zones over the past 100 years.

And when you add it all up, they are 80, 90 to 100% whole plant based foods. Their diet is very, very highly focused on complex carbohydrates. You know, my paleo and keto brethren, they're largely afraid of carbohydrates and

indeed simple carbohydrates.

Your, your, cookies and white flowers and sugars and, and, high fructose corn sirup. Yes, they're all toxic, but the five pillars of every longevity died in the world are whole grains, greens, tubers, like sweet potatoes, nuts and beans.

And, the cornerstone of every longevity diet in the world seems to be about a cup of beans a day, which we believe adds about four years of life expectancy, if you could adopt that.

But, you know, they also have a strong sense of purpose. We know it conveys life expectancy. They have very, vibrant social lives surrounded by people who reinforce good behaviors but also care about them on a bad day.

They tend to be religious. They tend to be very family focused. They drink a little bit a glass or two wine a day, and they move naturally. They don't exercise in the way we think of exercise, which I know is often disruptive.

But, they, they, they live in villages where every time they go to work or a friend's house that occasions a walk, they have gardens out back. Their houses are not full of mechanical conveniences to do their work.

So they're eating bread by hand and, you know, sweeping floors by hand, etc., and all this adds up to movement every 20 minutes or so, which is keeping their metabolism at a higher level and burning far more calories than the average, person with a gym membership does.

Who in reality they think they're going to go 4 or 5 times a week. But if you look at the averages, it's closer to one once or twice a month. And well, that's fascinating.

So the five nutritional pillars of longevity and the five food groups. But I know I've heard you lecture about, you know, of those five, the number one, I think you kind of intimated it already, but which, you know, listeners right now say I want four years of life.

What do they need more of across the five blue zones? You know, lessons across the world, you know, if you okay. We all need protein. The average American, as you know, gets about twice as much protein as they need.

But especially as you get older, you need protein. And it's, my observation from blue zones that the number one source of protein is beans. And they're, they're getting that protein by combining a bean with a grain.

So in, Costa Rica, it'll be, corn tortillas and black beans.

Diet, Beans, and the Power Nine

And in Ikaria, it will be farro and, chickpeas and and in, Sardinia, it'll be a minestrone, which is almost always some barley, with 3 or 4 kinds of beans, including lentils and, and and and navy beans, and and also, sourdough bread.

But when you, when you have a grain and a bean and you mix them, you have all the amino acids necessary for human sustenance that will build muscle, that will, take care of your, your protein needs.

I appreciate that. So, the legume family, of course, we have a famous cardiac surgeon in Palm Springs, California. Six years ago. Gave legumes a bad name, without a science support, your 20 years of research on longevity zones would argue the opposite.

True. I can tell you, beyond a shadow of a doubt. If all you have to do is look into the academic literature. People in blue zones, their main source of protein for most of the last century has been beans.

Now, that's not to say they don't eat meat. They they eat meat as a Salvatore food no more than five times a month. In Okinawa, with less than 2% of their diet until about 1980.

On the seventh day Adventist, you have, the longest lived Adventist eat, eat no meat at all. So but, beans are, you know, they're the they they're, you can store them.

They're cheap. And they have these phenomenal recipes that make beans taste good. I mean, I think the one of the biggest longevity secrets that people in blue zones offer us is they know how to make beans taste delicious.

And we're kind of stuck in the, you know, Boston baked bean era or, you know, sprinkling them on salads, which aren't bad, but they're certainly don't represent the potential, the culinary potential of beans.

You know, I wrote this book, The Blue Zones Kitchen, that found 100 Recipes to Live to 100 and, actually went into the homes of these 80 and 90 year old women who then cook in the same way for a lifetime.

And it represents, in many cases, a millennia of food, wisdom. Almost every main meal has beans in it, and, they're phenomenal. So it's interesting you brought up protein.

Most Americans eat twice as much protein as nutritional experts would argue they need. You know, there's a movement right now called the muscle centric movement of longevity that more skeletal muscle, longer life, and the two ways to get skeletal muscle are to lift weights and eat an enormous amount of protein.

And most of these advocates for muscle centric longevity are talking about eating tons of animal protein. I mean, is that what you have seen in your 20 years in the blue zones, where there actually is longevity proven?

They've got weight machines all over and they've got, you know, butchers carving left and right to make sure you get 200g of protein a day. Well, I mean, they're not wrong.

And that muscle mass is important, especially as you get older. If you you know, we lose our muscle mass at 1 or 2% a year. And that can accelerate over time.

If you're not getting enough protein. But if you're eating 200g of protein, of animal protein, you're also getting the saturated fats and the, the hormones and the antibiotics and, and the aggregation of, of, toxins that, meat brings along with it.

So, people in blue zones have muscle mass not because they're going to the gym, but because they're doing daily chores all day long. Many of them are still, farmers.

They all have gardens out back, or they're working a couple of hours a day. They're they're, repairing their own homes. They're walking. So they are using, their bodies constantly, and they're using doing weight bearing lifting, which keeps their muscles.

But, the I believe the majority of their protein is not coming from meat. It's coming from plant based sources. Yeah. I mean, with the physical appearance of a room of people in their 90s in Sardinia be relatively thin.

I mean, they you wouldn't describe it as muscle bound, you know, average parents. I mean, they're they're also probably not obese on average. No they're not.

It's very rare to find that obese 90 year old in fewer than 1%, in the original blue zones. Right. They also won't be frail. The they will be active. And, you know, these places like Sardinia in Korea, guys are tough.

They're, you know, they'll they'll set up a handshake that feels like a vise grips. But it's not for eating meat, and it's not from going in the weight room.

Nobody has a gym in a blue zone. Not traditionally. Things are changing, and I know, you know, people will travel to modern day Sardinians, you know, see people eating pizza and French fries and burgers and say, damn builders wrong.

But, what our National Geographic Project did was capture what these people have done for most of their hundred years and for, you know, that 80, 90% of their time, no gyms, no hamburgers, no, no Coca-Cola's.

They're eating whole plant based food, and they're moving naturally to keep strong and, keep their cardiovascular, system in good shape. Excellent, excellent.

So, tell me about a new book, the Blue Zones American Kitchen. What did you accomplish? And why is everybody here? Need a copy in their kitchen right now?

If you want to eat, to live, to be 100, be like a centenarian. And what the blue Zones American kitchen is done is we found that diet here in America.

I work with an NYU researcher, and we know more or less what the dietary guidelines are. And we found that, not all Americans, but between about 1890 and 1920, African, Asian, Native and Latin Americans were essentially eating the blue zone diet.

And, National Geographic photographer David McLean and I spent three years traveling from Maine to Miami to Minneapolis to Maui. Finding these historian chefs who could reproduce this, you know, alternative standard American diet.

And, the book is 100% hopeful, plant based. But, there's more culinary genius, I believe, in this book than you'll see in any quote unquote cookbook. It's, you know, National Geographic photography and, it's also here it is right here.

You know, it's gorgeous photography, but it's also 100 recipes to look to be to be 100. And I'm very I think it's, been I think I saw, being there down.

Oh, you see beans and about half the recipes page though, the, its predecessor, Blue Zones, kitchen was a number one New York Times bestseller and a number one Wall Street Journal bestseller.

And I just think that, you know, we've arrived to a place in America where 72% of us are obese or overweight, and we're ready to try something new. And, you know, from my research, the old is the new new.

Blue Zones in America and Fort Worth Results

I mean, much of, much of this cooking, people who have grandparents or great grandparents will recognize, but it's inexpensive. It's fast to make, and it's, gradients are accessible to anybody.

And the a new meta analysis came out of, Norway this last February, fall, about 700,000 people for 30 years and found that people who are eating mostly a plant based diet with limited amounts of fish and meat, just halfway between a standard American diet and a Blue Zones diet.

Those people. For a 20 year old woman, it's an extra ten years of life expectancy. And for a 20 year old man, it's an extra 13 years of life expectancy.

And even at our age, eating a whole food plant based diet is worth about eight extra years, a life expectancy. So the value proposition is huge here, and we'll spend literally trillions of dollars on, pills and supplements and dietary plans and, and, gym memberships and superfoods and on and on and on.

And, completely overlooked that. The secret to our health lies in a bag of beans, some healthy grains, some fresh greens and some fruit. And if we could just learn how to make that taste delicious and set up our environment so it's easy to eat that way you're on your way to another half a dozen or even dozen extra years of of good life expectancy, powerful stuff.

And actually, it's Segways, the two questions I have, you know, somebody listening might say, well, that works in Costa Rica and it works in, Ikaria. But, I live in Peoria, Illinois, and maybe I actually, should pick a city in Iowa.

Give us one example of a city who has applied for, been approved, and has adopted a Blue Zones municipal plan and some of the outcomes for adults and children.

Pick any one town. And just a brief, report. It works in America. Yeah. So my day job for the past dozen years have been working with insurance companies in cities to not try to convince everybody in the city to eat a whole food plant based diet, though we try that a little bit.

But mostly the key insight from Blue Zones is if you try to change your behavior, you'll fail. What we need to do in America or as individuals is optimize our environment, our surroundings, so that our unconscious choices are better.

So our steady work involves working with City council to adopt policies that favor healthy food over junk food, and favor the pedestrian over the motorist.

We our teams. Then go in and certify restaurants, grocery stores, workplaces, schools and churches whose policies also favor healthy food over junk food and favor walking instead of driving.

And then we reach about 15% of the adult population. Also, to have them change their kitchen and their social circles so it's easier for them to eat plant based.

Now, I argue, one of the best and most powerful things you can do. If you want to eat more healthy, plant based food is make friends with the vegan or vegetarian because they're going to show you not only where to find this food, but more importantly, they're going to show you where to find delicious plant based food.

And at the end of the day, if you don't like it, you're not going to eat it. And most restaurants, as you're pointing out, they don't know how to make good plant based food.

So unless you're going to the right recipe, the right restaurants, or learning how to make it yourself, you're right. It's very hard to do it in America.

But making that effort to set up your ecosystem, learn a few plant based, recipes and incorporate it into your daily routine. The payoff is enormous. You can throw away a lot of your statins.

You can throw away a lot of your diabetes medicines. If you just adopt this way of eating early enough and stick to it, and you've shown that, you know, when you measure metrics in a whole city, that you can actually determine that.

Although there may be pushback and resistance in cities in the United States, there's enough change that weight and other, parameters have improved. I mean, I've read your phenomenal studies.

Okay, so one last question. So, so Fort Worth, Texas, just here we go. Give us far worth a fight. They worked with us for five years. We had a staff of 30 people there working full time for five years.

The rest of Texas over that time, their obesity rate went up in Fort Worth. The obesity rate went down by 30%. Their ranking and Gallup's well-being index went up about 50 points to the middle of the pack from the bottom.

And by their own calculations, they're now saving a quarter of $1 billion a year in health care costs because of the Blue zone project. And now those because what we implement is long term.

It has lasting savings. It has a long tail on it. So now I'm a big believer, and this is the type of direction we need to go rather than trying to mop up the problems, sicknesses after they've occurred.

Fantastic. Last question, Elon Musk calls you and says, I want to go visit one blue zone and have a good time. I don't want to put a, shadow on the other four.

You're not thinking, but, you know, where have you found it? To be the most festive or where would you go, today if you got that call? I'd probably take him to Kona, Hawaii or Hilo.

Naples, Florida is another, fun place to visit. Another big blue zone city. So those, I guess those three, the big cities of Los Angeles, they're another big success story with good surfing.

What about the original five, the, heritage blue zones? Oh, you know, Nicoya, Costa Rica. Really? Yes. It's got beaches. Delicious.

Best Blue Zone Destinations and Closing Remarks

You know, tropical fruit jungles, howler monkeys, you know, great ocean, great surfing. And, there's been a big kind of, I would say new age community, that has, grown up in a place called Nazare and now in the original Blue Zone, I believe largely because of my books, but, it's a, Yeah, it's a, a Mecca for health and well-being and not been destroyed by McDonald's and KFC and, Burger King.

Well, it's starting in the original city of Nicoya. Burger King and a Pizza Hut have come in and and not coincidentally, the diabetes rates and the obesity rates have, have taken off, and, life expectancy is already starting to plummet.

Tragic. But, you know, an important lesson. I think everybody's going to, benefit tremendously from our conversation. I personally want to thank you so much for taking time out of such a world changing schedule. You have is fantastic.

And, hope to catch up in person soon. But, much gratitude to you. Really. Thank you very much. Joke and keep, you know, you you're a doctor. People listen to you.

You walk the talk. You've been a powerful voice for advocating for this kind of, you know, it's actually not in your best interest to keep people healthy because they're not coming to you for, for your services, but yet you're you do more than, most any other doctors I know in, keeping people out of the doctor's office.

So I just want to salute you. I appreciate that, health does not happen in a doctor's office. It happens in a, blue zone new American Kitchen cookbook.

That's where it happens. So thank you. Get back to my treadmill desk. That's the closest I can get to being a, a, Sardinian farmer, bullying greens. But, have a great day.

All right. You're nice. Congratulations.