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THE GIRAFFE'S VIEW

Conversations on technology, risk, and innovation

John Kennedy on leadership and building nature-inspired tidal systems

A conversation with Srikanth Madani, Head of Innovation, EMEA

Conversation guest

John Kennedy

CEO, Caudal Energy

John Kennedy is the CEO and co-founder of Caudal Energy, an Oxford-based climate-tech startup developing a tidal-stream energy device inspired by the movement of a whale's tail. By targeting a broader range of tidal conditions, the company aims to expand where tidal power can be deployed and make reliable, predictable marine energy a more practical part of the low-carbon energy system.

Over the course of his career, John has held leadership roles across consumer brands, digital growth businesses, and deep-tech ventures, and has helped founders build, refocus, and scale companies. He holds an MBA from INSEAD and an MA from the University of Cambridge.

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A journey of creation: From engineering to entrepreneurship

Srikanth: *John, it's a privilege to have this conversation with you. Could you briefly introduce yourself?*

John Kennedy: I'm John Kennedy, based in Oxford, where I've co-founded a startup called Caudal Energy. We're designing and implementing a tidal-stream energy device to generate energy from the sea.

Srikanth: *I'm keen to hear more about the device, but could you first talk about your professional journey?*

John Kennedy: If I go right back to the beginning: as a kid, I loved making things. I got into woodwork, then welding, and that led me naturally toward engineering. What always appealed to me was the physicality of it — making things in the real world.

After university, I worked at Marlow Foods on a product that was going from a project to a recognizable consumer brand, Quorn. We were doubling turnover year on year, and there was that lovely chaos of trying to figure out what to manufacture ourselves and what to outsource. I loved being in startup mode.

After an MBA, I wanted more of that environment, so I joined the team that just bought organic chocolate brand Green & Black's from the founders. There were only five of us, and it was a brilliant experience. We grew quickly by combining a strong, asset-light business model with a clear understanding of what we wanted the brand to stand for.

There was also the passion that comes from feeling that you are making a real difference down the supply chain — as we did with farmers in Belize and the Dominican Republic.

Crossing sectors: From consumer brands to climate-tech

Srikanth: *That sounds like a formative period. From there, your career moved across quite different sectors?*

John Kennedy: Yes, I entered the internet space with an online furniture company, Wayfair. That was brilliant fun, with hyper-growth experience. After a career break, tandem cycling with my wife from Europe to India and Australia, I came back wanting to be more central to a business rather than simply setting up a country division. That led me to MOO, an online print business, with a lovely mix of creativity and entrepreneurship.

Then I looked for something a bit more engineering-heavy and got the opportunity to lead Adlens, which develops lenses that change focal length — deep tech with real potential, especially in augmented and virtual reality. After five years there, I started asking how I could combine my engineering experience, growth experience, and the climate space, particularly energy. That search, around Oxford where I live, ultimately led me to co-found Caudal Energy.

Srikanth: *Rather impressive, John. I'm curious: how did you get these roles? Was it applying to open positions? Was it word of mouth?*

John Kennedy: I think that standard applications can work for larger corporates, but in smaller growth businesses it's much more about going out, finding people, building relationships, and being visible when interesting things are happening.

For instance, when I moved into the online space, the opportunity came through someone I had worked with six years previously. They called me and said, "We're looking for a leader in the UK. Can you help me find somebody?". I said yes — and didn't look any further.

> "Opportunities arise when you go out, build relationships, and are visible when interesting things are happening."

Inspired by nature: The creation of Caudal Energy

Srikanth: *Good advice, John. I have to ask: is there a story behind the name of your firm, Caudal Energy?*

John Kennedy: There is. One of my co-founders, Adrian Thomas, is a professor of biomechanics at Oxford and has spent his life studying bird flight and how fish swim. He is passionate about the animal kingdom, and that is really where the design comes from. Our device is a fin that moves up and down in the water, inspired by how fish swim, and in particular by whales and porpoises. So, it seemed fairly obvious that we should credit them with the invention.

Unlocking the power of tides: The case for marine energy

Srikanth: *Let's now dive into your core offering. What is your device and how does it work?*

John Kennedy: Our device is a nature-inspired oscillating hydrofoil designed to operate in medium tidal flows and capture energy from the sea more efficiently. In simple terms, it is a wing-like structure that is moved back and forth by the water, and that motion drives a generator.

The core idea is that our device can vary its angle of attack depending on the flow. In other words, it can adjust how it meets the moving water. In slower flow, you can use a higher angle of attack to move the arm more aggressively; in higher flow, you can keep it lower, so you don't overstress the structure. That allows you to maintain a high level of efficiency across a broader range of conditions.

People have tried oscillating hydrofoils before, but they often actively drive the main joint. That takes a lot of energy. Also, crucially, when turbulence comes along — waves or anything irregular in the flow — the structure fights it, and that gets absorbed into the stresses.

Our design uses an elevon, essentially a flap at the end, like you see at the far end of an airplane wing, to control the angle of attack, while the main joint is free. That makes it more efficient because you are only turning the elevon. It's also more resilient because the structure rides the turbulence rather than fighting it.

Srikanth: *What are the engineering considerations around placing the device in the water?*

John Kennedy: On the surface, you are really dealing with flotation — a pontoon-type arrangement. You keep it low and flat on the water. From an engineering point of view, that is generally simpler than mounting a device on the seabed. We usually use anchors to stop the pontoons from drifting away.

Also, we want our structures to be discreet. If people are looking out from a coastline, it's very nice if our installations disappear into the vista.

Srikanth: *Predictability is often cited as one of tidal energy's major strengths. Why does that matter so much?*

John Kennedy: As we move toward an energy system that is not only cleaner but potentially cheaper than fossil fuels, wind and solar are brilliant technologies — but they are connected to the weather and the sun. What the grid still needs is a certain amount of highly predictable electricity.

That is where tidal energy becomes very interesting. Tides are driven by the moon and its relationship to the earth. The output rises and falls, of course, but it is completely predictable.

Overcoming the waves: Challenges in scaling tidal energy

Srikanth: *What role do governments play in helping technologies like this get off the ground?*

John Kennedy: There are several layers. First, there is planning and consent. These are large projects, and governments need frameworks that make deployment possible. In the UK, authorities have identified specific coastal areas they expect to be used for tidal energy.

Then you need test and demonstration facilities. Governments in France, Canada, and the UK — including sites in Orkney and Anglesey — have backed centers that already have grid connections in place, so companies like us can test devices at smaller scale and sell electricity into the grid. That is hugely valuable.

Coupled with that is the UK's CFD mechanism, or Contracts For Difference, which is a premium for new technologies. Instead of selling electricity only at market price, you receive a government top-up. That recognizes the reality of learning curves. You can't expect a new technology to compete immediately with one that has had 25 years to scale.

Srikanth: *Grid access is obviously essential. How does that affect commercial deployment and pricing power in practice?*

John Kennedy: The answer varies by country, because market structures differ. Usually, the grid operator is separate from the actual purchaser of electricity, so it can be a fairly complex setup. If there is limited grid availability, then of course that creates constraints.

There are also interesting situations where marine energy can help because people are grid-constrained. Ports are a good example. In many places around the world, ports own a lot of land and would like to add manufacturing capacity or play a role in greening the blue economy. Ships coming in increasingly want more electricity, but the ports may not be able to get that additional grid capacity for ten or 15 years because of planning bottlenecks. If you can bring in marine energy, then you can add local generation much as someone might put solar panels on a roof. That is often a very practical commercial entry point.

Srikanth: *Environmental impact is a major topic in marine energy. How is your solution different from a more traditional turbine from a wildlife perspective?*

John Kennedy: One of the key differences is speed. Because of the way our fin works, it moves relatively slowly while still generating meaningful power. We are able to keep fin speed under eight meters per second, which means fish in their normal movement mode can get away from it.

My co-founder Adrian, who has studied fish swimming for many years, is very clear about the importance of staying within that limit. From a permitting point of view, we will obviously need to demonstrate that properly with video and evidence, as you would expect with any marine installation. We are confident that the system avoids many of the biological risks that other technologies might face.

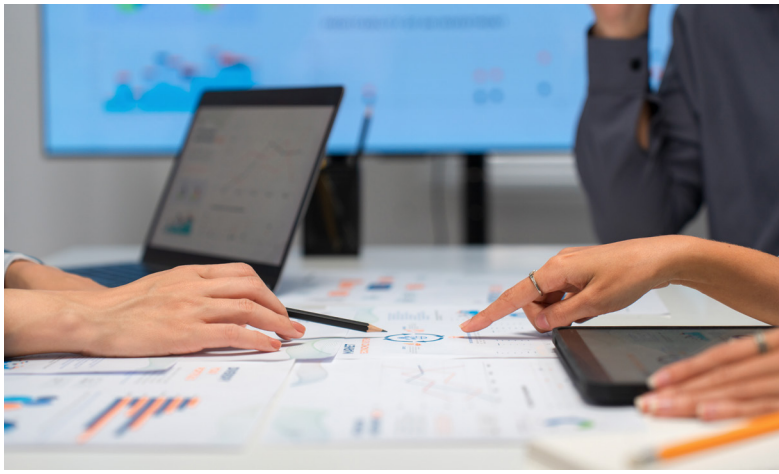
From idea to impact: The road to commercialization

Srikanth: *You emerged from stealth mode in 2025. How was the journey — from the genesis of the idea into something worth commercializing?*

John Kennedy: Adrian had been thinking about generating energy from the tide for some time. He had even worked on a separate idea involving a drone that could recharge its batteries in the water. So, the underlying notion of using a fin to generate energy was something he had been nurturing for years.

When I first encountered it, I was skeptical. The obvious questions were: why hadn't this been done before? Hasn't tidal already seen a lot of investment? Hasn't this been talked about for fifty years?

To help us with that, I brought in our third co-founder, Hilary Struthers, who spent 25 years at Shell and has a strong renewables background, and together we looked hard at what we really meant by "tidal" in terms of flow speeds and water depths.



The real Eureka moment came when we realized the system could work in medium flows — peak flows of around three to five knots. That changes the picture dramatically. Suddenly you are not limited to a few isolated sites around the world; you are looking at very large stretches of coastline. At that point, it becomes possible to imagine a genuinely scalable and impactful business.

Srikanth: *What gave your investors confidence that Caudal Energy was worth backing?*

John Kennedy: Marine energy is hard and investors have lost money in both tidal and wave technologies before. The question is: why is this different?

To start with, we are addressing a large-scale market.

Second, we have put a great deal of thought into mechanical reliability and simplicity, and our device is modular. The physics actually work in our favor here — making one huge device is not necessarily the right answer. Lots of smaller devices allow you to move down the learning curve faster, test for less money, and improve more quickly.

Finally, we were able to show that the path to demonstration and ultimately to attracting larger infrastructure funds is much easier now than it once was. That combination helped us raise money.

Srikanth: *How are you thinking about protecting your intellectual property?*

John Kennedy: There is definitely patent protection involved, but it is not just about a single patent. We have one core patent and are building a web around it. Part of that relates to the movement of the device and aspects of the shape, while a lot of know-how sits inside the company.

There is also a first-mover element, because every seabed, site, and flow regime is different. A great deal of that learning becomes company know-how.

Srikanth: *How do you decide what to build yourself versus what to source from existing components?*

John Kennedy: It's really important in any business to look at where your core innovation and your core competencies are. I suspect as entrepreneurs we always underestimate the complexity and the cost and the amount of time of creating something new. In many cases, the odds of success go up massively if you can use bought-in components.

Of course, we have to be sure that a component can withstand the marine environment and is genuinely appropriate for the job. But I'm a very big fan of recognizing that there are other people who've put a great deal of thought into manufacturing. So, where we can, our philosophy is to partner.

Leading with purpose: Building teams for success

Srikanth: *You're leading a team with very different disciplines and expertise. How do you keep people aligned and engaged?*

John Kennedy: For me, there are two key themes. First, does everybody know the goal? What are we actually trying to do?

And second, do we have a culture of trust? Do people trust each other to do their jobs? Do we respect each other? Trust matters especially because in a business like this, I do not understand every detail of my team's work as well as they do.

> "As a CEO, two things matter to me: does everybody know what we are actually trying to do, and do we have a culture of trust?"

At our current size, being mostly on one site, communication is relatively easy. We do the classic stand-ups and all-hands-style briefings. That helps the culture. If somebody does not fit the culture, then you have to deal with that rather than letting it drag on.

Passion, purpose, and progress: The heart of leadership

Srikanth: *My last question, John: What gets you motivated about coming into work every day?*

John Kennedy: Oh, it is a lovely mix of people, purpose, and progress.

I love working with people and doing something together around a very focused goal.

We are lucky that what we do is easy to get excited about. You can talk about it with friends or down at the pub and people immediately see why it matters.

And as our product is a physical device, you see progress very clearly. You get a piece of kit arriving in the mail that I had seen my team model on a computer screen. When that new piece fits with other components, that moment — when something digital becomes physical — gives you a real joy.

> "People are motivated when ideas become real. In our world, that may be a component that once existed only on a screen suddenly arriving in physical form — but the principle is universal."

About The Giraffe's View

The Giraffe's View is a long-form leadership conversation series on technology, risk, and innovation, featuring investors, founders, academics, and corporate leaders.

Each conversation has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

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