

Aiming for extinction



By Nate Smelle

AS BEINGS THAT are shaped by the state of the environment and times in which we exist, everyone of us is a product of history. Whether it is our intention or not, we are biologically, genetically, and communally committed to investing everything we are in the future. Not only do we pass on our genes, we also leave behind our values in the physical and psychological traces of our decisions. In theory, from generation to generation, by means of this exchange, we should be establishing a better world and a safer future. Through the process of trial and error, our intelligence as a species - a combination of our natural and social awareness - has the potential to evolve as we learn how to apply it at the right time. Keeping in mind the importance of personal time management, the fact that I am writing this on my cell phone, while watching a flock of Canadian geese from the bridge in Bancroft's Millennium Park, could be seen as a sign of progress. That is of course if we conveniently forget the embodied energy and resources used to manufacture this annoyingly distracting and useful device. Nevertheless, the point here is not to debate the pros and cons of cell phones and their ability to both engage us with, and distract us from the moment-at-hand. Despite the mountain of scientific discoveries and technological advances we have accumulated throughout our history, somehow we have managed to wander away from the path to progress. Instead, we now find ourselves lost in an ever-growing concrete jungle; running in circles, as we trample the ecosystems that give us life. Why is it that we repeatedly insist on fighting wars - a war against the planet, a war on the poor, and all the wars of terror we wage around the world - when we know in the end, everyone loses? As I sit here on the bridge, watching the geese do what they have been doing for the past 10 to 12 million years, I am reminded of an event I helped to organize in St. Catharines 15 years ago, where Dr. David Suzuki shed some light on our ability to learn from our mistakes. Reminding the audience of how rich Earth's biodiversity was more than 100,000 years ago, Dr. Suzuki invited us to imagine that we were part of a crew of scientific observers from another planet, hovering above the Serengeti in Africa. While conducting this exercise, he encouraged us to imagine how the scientists would have looked down and seen: herds of elephants, wildebeests, and gazelles; rivers packed with fish, hippos, and crocodiles; and skies filled with a 'blur of birds' of every colour, size and shape. Focusing in more closely Dr. Suzuki pointed out how they would have noticed that there were also little clusters of two legged, fur-less animals - 'naked apes'. Acknowledging how these would have been our ancestors, he said it is highly unlikely that any scientist looking down on the Serengeti at that time would've said, 'Those are the ones! Watch them, they are going to take over the world!?' There weren't that many of us,' added Dr. Suzuki. 'We weren't very big. We weren't very fast - an elephant can outrun the fastest human being on earth. We weren't very strong - a chimpanzee of 100-pounds can beat the hell out of anyone of us. We didn't have claws, or fangs; we didn't have special senses with our eyes, or ears, or noses, and we sure as hell weren't as beautiful as a flamingo or a gazelle.' Noting how at first glance, humans at the time did not appear to have much going for us, Dr. Suzuki said if those scientists would have looked even closer, they would have noticed that our behaviour revealed something unique - our intelligence. 'It was that two kilogram organ, locked deep in our skulls that was our key to survival,' explained Dr. Suzuki. 'We weren't that impressive physically, but boy, we had that organ up here; and that organ compensated for all of our lack of size, strength, and speed. The

human brain endowed us with a tremendous memory. I don't think there is any animal on the planet that has the capacity for memory as we do. The human brain made us incurably curious about what is going on in the world, and we were very inventive. Those were really critical for us to compensate for our lack of other things. Dr. Suzuki explained further how our memory, our curiosity, and our inventiveness came together to create something absolutely unique to our species - the concept of a future. Because of this invention of ours, he said we became the only animal on the planet to realize we can change the future depending on what we do today. They figured out that there are a number of options and choices that lie before us; and, depending on which choices we make, it will affect the future that we go to, Dr. Suzuki said. Providing an example of how our memory, curiosity, and our invention of the future has aided our survival, he highlighted how a human being living at that time might have come to a point where [they said] 'I remember when I went down that way two years ago, and there were some yummy plants to eat. And the last time I went down that other trail I remember that there was a sabertoothed tiger, so I am going to go that way.' That's what we did. We looked ahead, we recognized where the opportunities were, where the dangers were, and we chose the best path to get us into the future, and it worked. It got us to where we are today. We have all this amplified brainpower of scientists, computers, engineers, and telecommunications. We are much smarter with all of this stuff all around, but for the last 20 to 30 [35 to 45 years], those scientists have been telling us, we are in danger. We are going down the wrong path. Well, here we are almost half a century in the 'future', still following in the paw-prints of the sabertoothed tiger, aiming for extinction.