

Editorial

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Given the fact of evolution – no longer a ‘theory’ as our textbooks still call it – we as humans are naturally curious about our origins. While Darwin had broadly indicated the apes, the line of descent need not have been direct – the fossil record must speak. But evolution has a way of erasing its own tracks – a transient intermediate stage may leave little evidence behind. It requires extraordinary circumstances to create fossils, and extraordinary efforts to unearth them.



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This issue celebrates two heroic figures of this quest – Louis and Mary Leakey. Their discoveries pushed back our origins by millions of years, and decisively into the African continent. These conclusions lie at the basis of more modern work, which has filled in many details with DNA analysis playing a fundamental role. One striking conclusion is that our survival hung by a slender thread at one time. Who has not heard of ‘Eve’, a unique woman ancestor who lived between one to two hundred thousand years ago? All our mitochondrial DNA seems to point to her. We were very close to becoming extinct – a dead end on the evolutionary tree.

Extinction is an inevitable part of evolution – survival of the fittest implies extinction of the others. Mass extinction is another matter – it would seem to require a spectacular cause – perhaps even from the heavens, like an asteroid impact. The two books reviewed in this issue deal with two aspects of a mass extinction occurring right now under our noses. Geologists use terms like ‘Pleistocene’ to describe periods characterized by distinct fossil and other signatures. The term ‘Anthropocene’ has been coined to describe the present, where human activity has driven so many species to extinction. This story is told in *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. The second book, *Hope for Animals and their World* deals with efforts to help endangered species to survive – against overwhelming obstacles created by *Homo sapiens* himself. This self awarded title, ironically, translates as ‘the intelligent man’. Time to rename our species?

