

use them as a source of food. Farmer ants secrete antibiotics to control other fungi that might act as 'weeds', and spread waste to fertilise the crop.

It was once thought that the fungus that ants cultivate was a single type that they had propagated, essentially unchanged from the distant past. Not so. Ulrich Mueller of Maryland and his colleagues genetically screened 862 different types of fungi taken from ants' nests. These turned out to be highly diverse: it seems that ants are continually domesticating new species. Even more impressively, DNA analysis of the fungi suggests that the ants improve or modify the fungi by regularly swapping and sharing strains with neighbouring ant colonies.

Whereas prehistoric man had no exposure to urban lifestyles – the forcing house of intelligence – the evidence suggests that ants have lived in urban settings for close on a hundred million years, developing and maintaining underground cities of specialised chambers and tunnels.

When we survey Mexico City, Tokyo, Los Angeles, we are amazed at what has been accomplished by humans. Yet Hoelldobler and Wilson's magnificent work for ant lovers, *The Ants*, describes a supercolony of the ant *Formica yessensis* on the Ishikari Coast of Hokkaido. This 'megalopolis' was reported to be composed of 360 million workers and a million queens living in 4,500 interconnected nests across a territory of 2.7 square kilometres.

Such enduring and intricately meshed levels of technical achievement outstrip by far anything achieved by our distant ancestors. We hail as masterpieces the cave paintings in southern France and elsewhere, dating back some 20,000 years. Ant societies

existed in something like their present form more than seventy million years ago. Beside this, prehistoric man looks technologically primitive. Is this then some kind of intelligence, albeit of a different kind?

Research conducted at Oxford, Sussex and Zürich Universities has shown that when desert ants return from a foraging trip, they navigate by integrating bearings and distances, which they continuously update in their heads. They combine the evidence of visual landmarks with a mental library of local directions, all within a framework which is consulted and updated. So ants can learn too.

And in a twelve-year programme of work, Ryabko and Reznikova have found evidence that ants can transmit very complex messages. Scouts who had located food in a maze returned to mobilise their foraging teams. They engaged in contact sessions, at the end of which the scout was removed in order to observe what her team might do. Often the foragers proceeded to the exact spot in the maze where the food had been. Elaborate precautions were taken to prevent the foraging team using odour clues. Discussion now centres on whether the route through the maze is communicated as a 'left-right' sequence of turns or as a 'compass bearing and distance' message.

During the course of this exhaustive study, Reznikova has grown so attached to her laboratory ants that she feels she knows them as individuals – even without the paint spots used to mark them. It's no surprise that Edward Wilson, in his essay, 'In the company of ants', advises readers who ask what to do with the ants in their kitchen to: 'Watch where you step. Be careful of little lives.'