

in its genetical make-up, and it will not be able to reverse these quickly enough when the crunch comes. If the gum-tree forests were swept away the koala would perish. If an iron-mouthed killer developed the ability to munch up porcupine quills, the porcupine would become easy prey. For the opportunist the going may always be tough, but the creature will be able to adapt rapidly to any quick-change act that the environment decides to put on. Take away a mongoose's rats and mice and it will switch to eggs and snails. Take away a monkey's fruit and nuts and it will switch to roots and shoots.

Of all the non-specialists, the monkeys and apes are perhaps the most opportunist. As a group, they have specialised in non-specialisation. And among the monkeys and apes, the naked ape is the most supreme opportunist of them all. This is just another facet of his neotenuous evolution. All young monkeys are inquisitive, but the intensity of their curiosity tends to fade as they become adult. With us, the infantile inquisitiveness is strengthened and stretched out into our mature years. We never stop investigating. We are never satisfied that we know enough to get by. Every question we answer leads on to another question. This has become the greatest survival trick of our species.

The tendency to be attracted by novelty has been called neophilia (love of the new), and has been contrasted with neophobia (fear of the new). Everything unfamiliar is potentially dangerous. It has to be approached with caution. Perhaps it should be avoided? But if it is avoided, then how shall we ever know anything about it? The neophilic urge must drive us on and keep us interested until the unknown has become the known, until familiarity has bred contempt and, in the process, we have gained valuable experience to be stored away and called upon when needed at a later date. The child does this all the time. So strong is his urge that parental restraint is necessary. But although parents may succeed in guiding curiosity, they can never suppress it. As children grow older their exploratory tendencies sometimes reach alarming proportions and adults can be heard referring to 'a group of youngsters behaving like wild animals'. 114