

# **FROM NAKED APE TO SUPERSPECIES**

A personal perspective on  
humanity and the global eco-crisis

DAVID SUZUKI AND HOLLY DRESSEL

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interest, historically and in actual fact, not capitalism, is what is tied to the rise of democracy. Public interest is tied to the rise of the idea of citizenship, and to the whole idea of responsible individualism. Self-interest was what democracy was trying to *combat*.”

## Sharing the Pie

*An economy is a little like a human child. When it's born, it has a tremendous appetite for raw materials, and it clamours for them. The more raw materials it consumes, the more waste and pollution it creates and the more its appetite grows. This persists, but only until the child matures. Then, all of a sudden, the phase of physical growth levels out for good. That doesn't mean the growth of that person has come to an end. On the contrary. The richest and most protracted phase of growth is just beginning — mental, intellectual, emotional, spiritual growth. Somehow, we have to get our economies out of this adolescent phase into a more mature adult phase. It won't be easy, but we can do it. We have to do it, because the growth economy we've had over the last few decades simply cannot continue.*

— NORMAN MYERS

Herman Daly, a highly respected mainstream economist, is one of a growing number of thinkers who believe we have to reassess the entire purpose of economics. He says, “I think that economics should be about sufficiency as much as it's about efficiency. But it's not.” Daly and others are beginning to challenge the idea of limitless growth, for the very good reason that nothing else on this planet is able to grow without limits — except cancers, and even cancer has limits set by the death of its host. That there are limits to growth is a simple law of hard sciences, like math and physics, but it hasn't penetrated soft ones, like economics. Where did this idea, which has no echo in the natural world or in human experience, come from? Daly says, “We built the modern economy around the idea of growth, I believe at least partly, in order to avoid facing up to the problem of sharing. If you don't continue to grow and you still have poverty, then you have to redistribute. You have to share

in order to cure poverty. How do you cure poverty without sharing? Well, the only way we've been able to come up with is by growing."

How does growing avoid sharing? Well, it involves that old assumption that the rising wealth of the elite will somehow lift up everyone else. There will be that famous "trickle-down" to the poor. "Number one," says Daly, "that generally doesn't happen. But even if it did, it's still a substitution of growth for sharing, to avoid the moral problem of sharing. We find moral problems too difficult. So we convert them into technical problems of just growing faster. Then we won't have to deal with them."

The problem with continuous growth is that, as the science of physics tells us, we live in a closed system with respect to matter. We can't have a systematic deterioration of the productivity of nature — of species diversity, for example — and still maintain the ecosphere's abundance. And in order to have a chance of acting sustainably, we need a society that is just, equitable and distributes resources fairly. Without such a society, some people will take far too much while others become so desperate that they will chop down the last trees or use up the last drop of water.

Paul Hawken, a businessman and author of the best-seller *The Ecology of Commerce*, developed a concept he calls natural capitalism. This notion maintains that we need to see nature as the true capital on which our lives and economy depend. And if we learn to value nature, our real wealth, we'll take better care of it. He says that our economic system "works for practically no one, except maybe the one percent at the very top. Our system wastes the environment. It wastes people. And it's very, very expensive. We need a radical change in how we relate to resources and people and the environment."

It's plain that if we are to survive on Earth, we have to make some fundamental changes in our economic value system. Growing forever and not sharing hasn't worked, and we're now stretching the limits of the natural envelope that sustains us all. As Herman Daly says, "We got away with that approach, growing and not sharing, for a long time [because] we were living in a relatively empty world with abundant resources and plenty of space. Now that we're in a full world with much tighter limits, I don't think we can get away with that strategy any longer. And maybe, in some way, that'll force us to face up to the moral issue at long last."

Conventional economics suggests that with steady growth, life will get better and better. But even in industrialized countries, rising GDP and more material consumption have been accompanied by family and community breakdown, pollution, atmosphere change, depleted resources, violence, alienation and drug abuse. It is time to look for different goals and other ways to assess progress. As an example of how we can change, Hazel Henderson points to Jacksonville, Florida, which has had its own indicators of quality of life and progress since the 1980s. "The citizens get together, and if they're doing well on their school and education indicators, for example, they'll say, 'Okay. Let's move the goalpost now. We're ready to achieve higher standards here.' Then they do the same with water quality. They have a feedback component from the citizens, a huge kind of forum, and the media picks this up. This is a living, breathing process. It's part of a new system of collective decision making."

If Jacksonville can do these things, so can many other cities. Henderson says, "For 98 percent of our experience, we have lived in nomadic tribes of twenty-five or so, as gatherers and occasional hunters. We got quite good at living in villages. We had to develop these kinds of feedback systems to run our affairs. And then we moved into towns and cities, and we now are living in mega-cities, and they're new to us. We have absolutely no experience of how to manage our affairs in these big arenas. These well-being indicators are a rudimentary form of social intelligence. I see them as real social learning and cultural evolution, which is really what has to happen right now."

We have made changes before. In fact, that's what humans are best at — adapting to new conditions and change. And we've had the paradigm of growth economics and corporate power for only about a hundred years, which is a brief moment of our evolutionary past. As Hazel Henderson says, "We're talking about cultural development and full development of the human being, not just economic development. Basically, haven't we all been talking about the evolution of the human species?"

I once flew into a village of 200 people in a remote part of British Columbia. I was met at the dock by most of the villagers, and that night went to the community centre for a feast. Everyone was there, and the tables were overflowing with delicacies from the sea, aromatic fruits and wild vegetables. After dinner, the tribal leader began his speech to me by saying, "We are poor. We need development." He then went on to

explain why it was necessary to allow forest companies to log. When it was my turn to speak, I began by saying, "I live in a city called Vancouver, which is highly developed. In the one block where I live, there are probably three times as many people as there are in this village, yet I know only ten or fifteen of my neighbours. At night, I lock the car and my house because we've been broken into several times. My children can't play in a nearby park at night for fear of deviants or drug users. We buy our water in bottles for more than the price of a similar amount of gasoline. We have to stay inside when there's a smog alert because the air is so bad it harms our health. I could never put on a feast like the one I've just eaten here. To me, you are far richer in community and resources than anyone is in Vancouver."

On my way out of that place, I realized that it is our idea of economics and progress that actually impoverishes people. Those village folk had a rich, productive ocean and forest and a vibrant community. Yet they believed they were poor, and people like me seemed rich in comparison. Our current use of economics forces us all to destroy the very things that sustain us. Of course, those people in the villages want many of the things that we take for granted in cities: books, doctors, even TV and running shoes. But must they come at the cost of vibrant societies and rich ecosystems? We need new ways to measure wealth, ones that put value back onto community, air, water and the richness of life around us. Some people have already started finding out how to do this. They are shifting their priorities and setting up institutions and agencies to pursue that kind of wealth. We've done that before, when we founded democracies to strive for the common, not the particular, good. We can do it again.