

## Houston & Texas News

A three-dimensional model of the 3.2 million-year-old hominid known as Lucy is to be on display at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The exhibition opens Aug. 31.

PAT SULLIVAN: AP

Aug. 27, 2007, 2:05AM

# Lucy gets here safely, but debate over display rages

By ERIC BERGER

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Though Lucy already has safely traveled from Ethiopia to Houston, the controversy over whether the world-famous fossil should have made the trip hasn't ebbed.

Earlier this month, the Houston Museum of Natural Science was accused of exploiting Lucy for ticket sales and taking the fossil out of Ethiopia under the cover of darkness.

Last week, however, the Houston museum got a boost from Lucy's discoverer, Donald Johanson, when he endorsed the educational benefit of exhibiting the 3.2-million-year-old fossil for the first time outside Ethiopia.

"While I cannot overemphasize my personal concerns for Lucy's safety, a broader exposure of Lucy to the public does have great educational value," said Johanson, director of the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University.

"Seeing the original Lucy will surely heighten public awareness of human-origins studies, particularly at a time when the validity of evolution has come under fire in our schools."

Scientific reaction to Lucy's exhibition, which opens Friday, was mixed after the deal to bring her to Houston was announced last year.

Several U.S. museums, including the Smithsonian, turned down the opportunity to host the Lucy exhibit. Some leading paleoanthropologists said they were concerned about potential damage to the irreplaceable fossil.

They cited a 1998 UNESCO agreement that allowed the transport of fossils from their origin countries only for purposes of scientific study, not public display.

Since Lucy's 1974 discovery, scientists have found older members of the human family tree. But she remains an icon in the search for human origins.

Famed fossil hunter Richard Leakey offered, perhaps, the sharpest criticism of the Houston museum two weeks ago in an interview with the Associated Press from his office in Nairobi, Kenya.

"It's a form of prostitution. It's gross exploitation of the ancestors of humanity, and it should not be permitted," Leakey said of Lucy's travel to the United States.

Leakey's comments came shortly after Lucy was quietly taken from her home at the National Museum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and flown out of the country late at night.

"I was really intrigued by the public reaction to that story," said Joel Bartsch, president of the Houston museum.

"On one hand, everyone is very excited that we provide world-class museum security (for Lucy's travel). But on the other hand, there were people who thought we should have sent out a press release on when we were going to move this rare, irreplaceable fossil. The real reason Lucy was taken out at night is the flight leaves at 11 p.m."

Transported by Ethiopian Airlines, Lucy did, indeed, arrive safely in Houston. She was packed in two specially designed museum suitcases with cavities cut into foam for each of her bones.

She was both packed and unpacked by Ato Admassu Alemu, keeper of the hominid fossil collection at the Ethiopian National Museum. He has supervised the handling of Lucy for more than 20 years.

"When he unpacked the bones in Houston, they were in the exact same condition," said Dirk Van Tuerenhout, curator of anthropology for the Houston museum.

The bones have become mineralized over the ages and are like stones. The Houston museum notes that Lucy is not as fragile as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which traveled here as part of a national tour of museums.

Early indications suggest Lucy's exhibition will be a blockbuster for the museum.

Advance ticket sales, about 3,000 so far, are on par with Body Worlds 3, the museum's most popular exhibit ever. The Lucy exhibit costs \$20 for adults.

In his comments on the propriety of Lucy's appearance outside the United States, Johanson also said he recognized she was the property of the Ethiopian government, with whom the Houston museum negotiated.

"I know that the Ethiopian government fully considered the risks when making the balanced decision to tour her as a way to increase awareness and raise significant money to better safeguard all of Ethiopia's paleoanthropological treasures," Johanson said.

"And, I know that they have taken, and will take, every reasonable precaution to ensure Lucy's safety, as they know that future generations have much yet to learn from her."

Chronicle reporter Anne Marie Kilday contributed to this story.

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