

The Hassles of Having Lucy in Houston

By Andrea Dorfman

The world's oldest rock star is coming to Houston. Starting Aug. 31, the 3.18 million-year-old hominid skeleton known as Lucy (so dubbed because researchers were blaring the Beatles' *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* the night of her discovery) will headline the Houston Museum of Natural Science's (HMNS) new exhibit, "Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia" — only her third public appearance in nearly 30 years, and the kick-off to a planned six-year nationwide tour. But while HMNS curators celebrate Lucy's arrival, some famed paleontologists are grumbling that the rare opportunity simply isn't worth the risk or the hassle.

The venerable skeleton, which is about 40% complete, normally resides in a vault at the Ethiopian National Museum in Addis Ababa. To borrow her, HMNS agreed to pay the Ethiopian government an undisclosed fee — estimates range from \$300,000 to several million dollars — plus part of the proceeds from ticket and museum-store sales, money that the government has promised to Ethiopian museums. Ethiopian officials are also hoping that Americans who come to see Lucy in Houston or on tour might come to see Ethiopia too. But scientists say that argument is wrongheaded. "People will go to Ethiopia to see Lucy, but why should they travel to Ethiopia if Lucy has come to their local museum?" says paleontologist Richard Leakey. "Sending Lucy or any other original fossil to America will bring status to second-level U.S. museums. It will do nothing for Ethiopian tourism or for science. It sets a terrible precedent. It is exploitation of the worst kind."

Why the fervid objection? For starters, moving Lucy will undoubtedly injure her. No matter how carefully she is handled, scientists say, the bones will invariably be damaged, if only microscopically. "This iconic fossil is a unique biological specimen that should never be placed at risk: travel, packing, unpacking and handling exposes the skeleton to dangers that are unacceptable," says Leakey. "The decision to send Lucy on tour to the U.S. and perhaps elsewhere is to be deplored by any right-minded person." Researchers also argue that risking an original, one-of-a-kind artifact is senseless, especially when a replica could do the job just as well. Indeed, dozens of museums all over the world — including the one in Addis Ababa — already have casts of Lucy on display.

Nonetheless, HMNS president Joel Bartsch insists that even a perfect replica is no substitute for the real thing. "I'm a museum person and I believe in the importance of putting authentic artifacts on display," says Bartsch. "They resonate with viewers in a different way." He adds that "museums all around the world ship fragile, irreplaceable, priceless objects every day" — far more delicate items like the Dead Sea Scrolls and China's terra-cotta soldiers have been carted to and fro repeatedly without harm. Ian Tattersall, with New York City's American Museum of Natural History, agrees that the Houston exhibit has value. "You can make the same intellectual point with replicas, but I don't think you can make the same emotional point," says Tattersall, who is currently working on a comprehensive document of the human fossil record. "The original fossils have a presence that casts just don't have."

Even Don Johanson, who discovered Lucy (the new species *Australopithecus afarensis*) in Hadar, Ethiopia, in 1974, musters some support for putting her on display. In his first public comment about "Lucy's Legacy," he tells TIME: "While I cannot overemphasize my personal concerns for Lucy's safety, a broader exposure of Lucy to the public does have great educational value. 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."

If education is the ultimate goal, say critics, then Lucy ought not leave her homeland; her grand North American tour will only serve to put the brakes on research. "Scientists who use Lucy for comparative studies will definitely be affected negatively by [her] absence, and I am one of them," says Ethiopian paleontologist Zeresenay Alemseged of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. "Six years is really too long!" Without "a compelling national interest" and "unique and exceptional benefits," Lucy — and, indeed, all similarly rare and valuable objects — should stay home, Alemseged says. If she absolutely has to travel, he adds, the tour should be limited to no more than a year.

Still, a few scientists may get the chance to examine Lucy while she is in the U.S. A team headed by anthropologist John Kappelman, of the University of Texas at Austin, has requested permission to conduct a high-resolution CT scan of the bones. By scrutinizing their internal architecture, "we can study the ways in which [Lucy's] skeleton was designed for various types of movement and posture," Kappelman explains. Researchers already know that Lucy is likely a direct ancestor of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, stood about 3.5 ft. (1 m) tall, weighed about 60 lbs. (27 kg) and walked upright on two legs, though she may also have spent time in trees. Lucy's remains include portions of the arms and legs, so researchers will be able to compare her limb movements with those of, say, modern humans and chimpanzees.

Scientists like Leakey aren't the only ones who object to the impending exhibit. The Ethiopian Community Organization in Houston (ECOH), which represents some 6,000 area residents, has voiced concerns about the Houston museum's willingness to deal with the Ethiopian government, which the ECOH calls a corrupt and repressive regime. Although museum officials have met with ECOH several times, the outreach effort failed and ECOH now

openly opposes the show. Bartsch, for one, thinks that's unfortunate. "Lucy is a goodwill ambassador; she represents the neutrality of science," he says.

The ongoing controversy may have impacted Lucy's future travel plans as well. Additional venues for her tour have yet to be announced and at least two prominent institutions — the natural history museums in Washington and Cleveland — have refused to host the exhibit. Meanwhile, in 2008 the National Museum in Ethiopia plans to inaugurate a new building dedicated to research, conservation and storage of antiquities, including fossils — but its star attraction won't be there.

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