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### Lucy gets 1st party in 3 million years

**Remains of adult human ancestor found in 1974 are starring in a public tour that begins in Houston, but the show is not without controversy.**

By William Mullen

Tribune staff reporter

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As the sun went down on Nov. 30, 1974, jubilant young scientists in a lonely desert mountain camp in northeast Ethiopia celebrated around a little pile of bones found earlier in the day. Under the stars they drank beer after beer, talked excitedly and hooted and hollered into the wee hours of the morning.

They named the bones after a Beatles tune that played on a tape recorder that night: "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds."

The skeleton named Lucy would become famous, provoking high excitement not only for scientists but for the public, kindling a continuing fascination about human origins and the meaning of being human.

Yet very few humans have actually looked upon her bones, as Lucy has spent most of the last 33 years locked in museum and laboratory vaults. That will change this week in spectacular fashion when "Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia," opens Friday in the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

A surprising amount of hope, anxiety and controversy surrounds the exhibit, which is supposed to visit 10 American museums in the next six years, though the other nine have not been named. Officials at the Field Museum in Chicago say a run is penciled in for November 2009 to Easter 2010, but a contract has not been signed.

The Ethiopian government's idea is that Lucy will have superstar drawing power, pulling in much-needed cash for cultural and scientific projects. American museums, too, are hoping for a windfall, but they also see in Lucy a chance to teach lessons about science at a time when polls show 50 percent of Americans subscribe to creationist theory over science-based evolution.

Yet many scientists in the field have been protesting the tour of Lucy's bones since the

idea of the exhibition emerged three years ago, saying they are too valuable to risk traveling and to be off limits to science for six years.

"It's a form of prostitution, it's gross exploitation of the ancestors of humanity and it should not be permitted," paleontologist Richard Leakey angrily told the Associated Press the day after Lucy left Ethiopia.

Lucy, who belongs to the early hominid species *Australopithecus afarensis*, lived 3.2 million years ago and stood barely 3 1/2 feet tall, with a small brain in a head the size of a softball. Her skeleton was 40 percent intact, the most complete remains of an adult human ancestor ever found. The discovery would change the prevailing theories of how, when and where human ancestors climbed out of trees and began walking upright and using tools.

Donald Johanson, the paleoanthropologist who found Lucy in 1974, said her exhibition should have important payoffs in teaching children and adults about science.

"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," said Johanson, now the director of the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University, where he continues to do research but also has become a popular educator on human evolution through books and lectures.

"A broader exposure of Lucy to the public does have great educational value," he said.

Many of his most famous scientific compatriots, however, vehemently disagree with him and have been protesting the tour of Lucy's bones since the idea of the exhibition first emerged three years ago.

Leakey, part of a famous family that has been making monumental hominid discoveries in Africa for 50 years, was the most prominent voice to speak out. Other big names in the paleo-sciences to oppose the tour include Bruce Lattimer and Yohannes Haile-Selassie of the Cleveland Museum, Bernard Wood of Washington University and Rick Potts of the Smithsonian Institution, and other prominent scientists have attacked it from behind the scenes.

The objectors are furious that the Lucy fossil will be unavailable to scientists for analysis for the six years she is on exhibit. They are concerned that the bones will be vulnerable to damage in the constant moving from museum to museum.

And they say her exhibition violates a 1998 non-binding UNESCO resolution against transporting hominid fossils out of their home countries. The resolution recommends "use of replicas of hominid fossils" instead to promote understanding of human evolution.

The Houston museum acknowledges the Lucy fossil will be out of scientific circulation while on tour, but in Houston the bones will undergo a new CT-scan analysis unavailable

in Ethiopia -- a procedure that will provide pictures of the bone interior that may yield secrets of how she walked and grew.

"Lucy has been available to study for more than 30 years, and must be the most studied fossil in the world, so it is difficult to say we are impeding scientific progress in any way," said Joel Bartsch, president of the Houston Museum.

The idea of using replicas in place of a real fossil in an important exhibit like Lucy's is anathema to museum professionals, like trying to get people to line up to see a copy of the Mona Lisa or a fake collection of the British crown jewels.

"Anyone can make a copy," said Bartsch. "But the experience of standing before a historical artifact, whether ancient parchments or multimillion-year-old fossils, is a call to the intellect, to discover more about the world and perhaps even more about yourself."

Ian Tattersall, a renowned theorist on human evolution and anthropology curator at New York's American Museum of Anthropology, somewhat agrees. "There is a sort of magic that you get from the real thing that you don't get from a secondary copy, a lump of clay," he said.

In 1984, Tattersall's museum put on a memorable hominid fossil show of its own called "Ancestors," bringing in 50 fossils from 19 nations. It proved popular both with the public and with scientists, as the exhibition included a three-day symposium that drew international scientists who were anxious to see and compare the famous fossils side-by-side.

"It was a wonderful experience, but it was a one-shot deal. When it was done, the fossils went home," Tattersall said of the five-month exhibition. A six-year tour, he concedes, "is a long, long time."

Johanson acknowledged the possibility of damage, but said he was satisfied that the Ethiopians have taken every precaution against it.

For his part, Bartsch said concern for the safety of the fossil and other unique artifacts in the exhibit is understandable but museums have vast experience in moving such objects.

"Every important museum in the world does this on a routine basis," he said. "Lucy is fragile, and I am not diminishing that, but Lucy is not too fragile to travel. We had the Dead Sea Scrolls on display here a while back, and there are few objects in the world as valuable to humankind as those very fragile parchment pieces, but they went on tour without incident."

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