

TEACHERS CORNER: RESOURCES FROM THE SI HUMAN ORIGINS PROGRAM

by Briana Pobiner



In the previous article, Curator Rick Potts discussed the new *David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins*. He noted that, not unlike scientific inquiry itself, the exhibition's theme is a question rather than an answer: *What does it mean to be human?* This theme is even more prevalent on the new web site, www.HumanOrigins.si.edu. On this site, we have the opportunity to share the wealth of evidence for, and current research about, human evolution with millions of people from around the world. While the website was created with diverse audiences in mind, one of the primary audiences is teachers. This Teachers Corner summarizes the resources currently on the human origins website of interest to teachers and other educators. The website is designed to be easily expandable as we continue to add new content and features. We welcome feedback on the website; please email your suggestions and comments to HumanOrigins@si.edu

HUMAN ORIGINS WEBSITE:

Education

A variety of teacher and educator-specific resources are assembled in the Education section of the web site: <http://humanorigins.si.edu/education>. These include:

- 1) A downloadable, PDF "Educators Guide" to the exhibition hall, specifically designed for class field trips. In lieu of offering tours for school groups, the Educators Guide is designed with pre-, during, and post-visit activities for students in grades 5-12. There are data collection sheets for students to fill out during a visit and hot links within the

PDF connecting to other areas of the website. These sections correct common misconceptions about human evolution and offer further readings (books and websites).

- 2) Links to lesson plans on human evolution for use in the classroom. Borrowed from the "Understanding Evolution" website (University of California Museum of Paleontology), all these plans have been tested and vetted by teachers.
- 3) A private discussion forum for educators, where teachers can discuss ways to best use the website in the classroom, exchange ideas about teaching human evolution, etc.
- 4) Information about the HopEdNet (Human Origins Program Education Network), a nascent large-scale, long-term effort to bring educators and scientists together to focus on teaching and learning about human origins.
- 5) A section for college-age students with links to summer field schools.
- 6) Fun Facts— short tidbits about human evolution that are great ways to get students thinking about the topic.

Resources

The resources section of the web site <http://humanorigins.si.edu/resources> also has a variety of useful areas:

- 1) A general introduction to human evolution.
- 2) A human evolution glossary. Definitions of terms also are available by hovering a mouse over those terms anywhere on the website.
- 3) A section on "What's Hot in Human Origins?" keeps visitors up-to-date with the latest key discoveries in this dynamic field of research.

- 4) Links to all the site's multimedia resources—podcasts (audio), videos, and photograph slideshows.
- 5) A “How Do We Know?” section, which uses material from the exhibition to outline some examples of how we know what we know in the science of human origins (a great example of scientific knowledge in general).

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

Hidden in the top right corner of the website is a FAQ section <http://humanorigins.si.edu/faq>, which features a growing list of Frequently Asked Questions about human evolution—and their answers. Some examples include “How do scientists know the age of fossils?” “How does evolution explain complex organisms like humans?” “How are humans and monkeys related?” and “Can the concept of evolution co-exist with religious faith?” In adding to this list over time, we will be drawing from the Evolution FAQ kiosk in the Hall of Human Origins, where visitors can type in their questions about human evolution.

Human Evolution Evidence

While many of this section's resources will likely be useful, including a lightbox feature for large format photographs of fossils and artifacts, three particular sections can be highlighted:

- 1) Human Evolution Evidence is one of the most unique and popular features of the website with a 3D Collection <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/3d-collection>. This collection features rotatable, 3-dimensional scans of hundreds of fossils and artifacts, most of which are found in the *Hall of Human Origins*. One of the most useful features of this teaching collection is that each object is available in a 3D PowerPoint slide. These rotatable objects can be used as part of your own presentation!



- 2) Building on this 3D collection is our Mystery Skull Interactive <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/mystery-skull-interactive>, where students become scientists! A mystery skull is presented. Comparison to other known skulls can help determine what species it belongs to—in 3D. Hints for each mystery skull are available to help students learn how to look at skulls and make comparisons among them.

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3) Also in this area of the website are detailed summaries of each early human species. (Please note that the term “early human” is used instead of “hominin,” following on the terminology used in the exhibition.) <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species> includes an audio pronunciation guide, a reconstruction of what the species may have looked like, information about when and where fossils of that species have been found (and when it was first discovered), estimated height and weight, and information about the species’ unique adaptations. Short bibliographies are available for students writing reports or papers.

Human Evolution Research

This section goes into more detail about the research that the Human Origins Program team is undertaking. Over time this section will feature research by some of our research associates and other interesting projects. Similar to the Human Evolution Evidence section, some pages feature more concise information, while others have more detail, including bibliographies. There are also three interactives in this section:

1) **Ologesailie: Adventures in the Rift Valley** <http://humanorigins.si.edu/research/east-african-research/adventures-rift-valley-interactive>. In this interactive, students again get to be the scientists – this time, on a field expedition to Ologesailie, the Smithsonian’s research site in southern Kenya. Students search for evidence across the landscape at Ologesailie to answer a variety of research questions, keeping a notebook to track their findings along the way.

2) **Fossil Forensics** <http://humanorigins.si.edu/research/fossil-forensics-interactive>, where students can see how scientists ‘read’ bones for forensic-style clues.

3) **Timeline Interactive** <http://humanorigins.si.edu/research/climate-research/timeline-interactive>, which features clickable links to early human species, fossils specimens, human evolution milestones, and climate change evidence, all in the context of a timeline with a zoom feature so students can explore particular times in human evolution that they find most interesting.

Broader Social Impacts Committee

On the Home Page is a section called “Human Evolution: Religious Perspectives,” which links to the pages about the Broader Social Impacts Committee <http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/bsic>. Recognizing the challenges posed by evolution, and especially the topic of human evolution for some people, the Human Origins Program has assembled this committee, comprised of people from diverse religious and philosophical communities from around the United States. The committee is assisting in public communication and dialogue surrounding the exhibition *What Does It Mean To Be Human?* and helping promote outreach efforts in human origins. The committee also is continuing to develop web-based resources, which teachers may find useful in the classroom.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Become a fan of the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Program on Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/smithsonian.humanorigins> and follow us on Twitter <http://twitter.com/HumanOrigins> to keep up with even more of the latest discoveries in, and conversations about, human origins research.

Briana Pobiner is Education & Outreach Specialist, Human Origins Program.

[See the article, “Teaching Human Evolution: Websites,” by B. Pobiner in the Fall 2008 issue of *AnthroNotes*, p. 14.]