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Oct. 14, 2009

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New Exhibition Hall Devoted to Human Origins to Open at Smithsonian's Natural History Museum in March 2010

A new exhibition hall dedicated to the discovery and understanding of human origins will open next year at the [Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History](http://www.si.edu). Based on decades of cutting-edge research by Smithsonian scientists, the David H. Koch (pronounced "coke") [Hall of Human Origins](#) will premiere March 17, 2010, which also marks the 100-year anniversary of the museum's official opening on the National Mall.

The \$20.7 million exhibition hall will be complemented by ongoing human origins research and education programs, which are all key components of the museum's broader initiative, "Human Origins: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" The initiative focuses on the epic story of human evolution and how the defining characteristics of the species have evolved over 6 million years as its ancestors adapted to a changing world. The museum will launch a compelling new Smithsonian Human Origins Web site and a revolutionary virtual experience hosted on the Blue Mars 2150 virtual Web site. It will include a complete reproduction of the physical exhibition plus additional features visitors can only experience on the Web.

"The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins uses Smithsonian science as a foundation to help appreciate our own unique development as human beings," said Cristián Samper, director of the museum. "The opening of this hall represents one of the most significant public and scientific achievements in the 100-year history of the museum. Our goal is to provide visitors and online guests with an exciting educational experience that will encourage them to explore for themselves the scientific discoveries about what it means to be human."

The hall is named for David H. Koch, a pre-eminent American philanthropist, chemical engineer and executive vice president of Koch Industries Inc., whose gift has enabled the museum to create the new hall. “Remarkable advances in the understanding of human evolution are taking place at the Smithsonian Institution as part of the Human Origins Initiative,” said Koch. “The program has the power to influence the way we view our identity as humans, not only today, but for generations to come. I am happy to offer this gift as an indication of the importance it holds in my own life and the significance I feel it offers the whole of humankind.”

“Human Origins: What Does It Mean to Be Human?” furthers the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History’s unique contributions to understanding the environmental basis of human evolution and makes this knowledge exciting and accessible to visitors of all ages, according to Samper. The exhibition and related programming will advance the work of leading scientists and research institutions around the world by making their research more readily available.

In addition, the generous support and visionary commitment of Peter Buck, a Connecticut-based physicist and co-founder of Subway restaurants, to the museum’s scientific study of human evolution created the Peter Buck Chair in Human Origins for ongoing research efforts and helped the museum to initiate the education and outreach program.

More than 50 U.S. and international scientific research and education organizations, such as the U.S. National Academies of Science, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Museum of Kenya and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and more than 70 distinguished scientists and educators are collaborating with the Human Origins Initiative’s research, education and outreach programs.

Visitors to the 15,000-square-foot Hall of Human Origins will be immersed in a unique, interactive museum experience illuminating the major milestones in the origin of human beings and the drama of climate change, survival and extinction that have characterized humans’ ancient past. On entering the exhibition from the Sant Ocean Hall, visitors will travel through a dramatic time tunnel depicting life and environments over the past 6 million years. Visitors will also engage with life-size forensically reconstructed faces of early human species, all designed to provide visitors with a sense of personal connection as they look into the eyes and faces of their distant ancestors.

Other key features in the exhibition include interactive snapshots in time using the actual field sites where research is being conducted, a display of more than 75 skulls (cast reproductions) and an interactive human family tree showcasing 6 million years of evolutionary evidence from around the world, a “One Species Living Worldwide” amphitheater show and a special “Changing the World”

gallery, in which visitors can address pressing questions and issues surrounding climate change and humans' impact on the Earth.

“The study of human origins is among the most vibrant fields of science and one that draws much public curiosity,” said Rick Potts, director of the Human Origins Program and curator of anthropology at the museum, whose research and vision is the foundation of the Smithsonian's Human Origins Initiative. “Our hope is that the exhibition will expand knowledge and understanding about our defining cultural and biological characteristics and how those traits emerged during the past 6 million years—one of the most dramatic eras of environmental change in our Earth's history.”

Potts is the lead author of a new book, “What Does It Mean to Be Human?” to be published by National Geographic. The book will highlight studies from around the world on human evolution, including more than 20 years of Potts' own extraordinary field research. As a companion to the exhibition, the book will delve deeper into the discoveries that link the evolution of human traits to dramatic climate change over millions of years of Earth's ancient history, and provide enriched context for the Human Origins Initiative's many program elements.

To assist with public engagement around the exhibition, the museum has assembled the Broader Social Impacts Committee, with members from a range of cultural perspectives, to support dialogue about science and religion. The committee is co-chaired by Connie Bertka, a research scientist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington and a lecturer in contemporary issues in science and religion, and Jim Miller, an official with the Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology and the Christian Faith.

On Oct. 29, the museum will host the premiere of an exciting PBS NOVA three-part series developed in conjunction with WGBH-TV Boston, “Becoming Human: Unearthing Our Earliest Ancestors,” featuring Potts and airing in November. The grand opening celebration planned for the hall next March will include a variety of special events, a human evolution and climate change symposium, educational outreach with resources for students and teachers and other activities for visitors of all ages.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W. in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 7 million visitors in 2008, making it the most visited museum in the United States. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free. More information about the museum is available at www.mnh.si.edu or by calling (202) 633-1000, TTY (202) 633-5285.

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