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New Exhibition Hall Devoted to Human Origins Opens at National Museum of Natural History

A new exhibition hall dedicated to the discovery and understanding of human origins opens March 17 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Based on decades of cutting-edge research by Smithsonian scientists, the David H. Koch (pronounced "coke") Hall of Human Origins will open to the public in a special preview from noon to 3 p.m. Wednesday, March 17, which also marks the 100-year anniversary of the museum's official opening on the National Mall. A second preview will be held from noon to 3 p.m., Thursday, March 18. The exhibition hall will be open during regular museum hours (10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) beginning March 19.

The hall is named for David H. Koch, executive vice president of Koch Industries Inc. and well-known philanthropist, whose \$15 million gift has enabled the museum to create the new hall.

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 human species have evolved over millions of years in response to a changing world. The initiative also features a compelling new Smithsonian Human Origins Web site that offers engaging interactive experiences, 3-D renderings of many of the human fossils on display and special features visitors can only experience on the Web.

"The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins represents one of the most significant public and scientific achievements in the 100-year history of the museum, and so it is appropriate for the hall to open on the day of the centennial," said Cristián Samper, director of the museum. "The hall offers the opportunity to explore the scientific finds that shed light on one of the really significant sparks to human curiosity—our own origins. Our goal is to provide visitors and online guests with an exciting

educational experience that will encourage them to explore for themselves what science can tell us about what it means to be human.”

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 lifelike forensically reconstructed faces of prehistoric human relatives, all designed to provide them 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 based on the actual field sites where research is being conducted, a display of more than 75 skulls (exact replicas), 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 questions and issues surrounding climate change and humans’ impact on the Earth.

“The theme of the exhibition, ‘What Does It Mean to Be Human?,’ is one of the most profound questions humans have asked over thousands of years and is informed by philosophy, religion and the arts and sciences,” said Rick Potts, director of the Human Origins Program and curator of anthropology at the museum, whose research and vision is the basis of the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Initiative. “Our goal is to provide a solid foundation for the public to explore the scientific contributions to answering this question.”

“It is our hope 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 said.

Potts is also the lead author of the new book *What Does It Mean to Be Human?* with co-author Christopher Sloan, 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 it will also provide enriched context for the Human Origins Initiative’s many program elements.

“Human Origins: What Does It Mean to Be Human?” furthers the museum’s unique contributions to understanding the environmental basis of human evolution—work that will continue due to Peter Buck, a Connecticut-based physicist and co-founder of Subway restaurants, who

contributed \$15 million to create the Peter Buck Chair in Human Origins and to provide for ongoing research efforts and educational and outreach programs in human origins.

More than 60 U.S. and international scientific research and education organizations, such as the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Museums of Kenya and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, as well as more than 70 distinguished scientists and educators, are collaborating with the Human Origins Initiative's research, education and outreach programs.

Visitors can dig deeper online through the Human Origins Web site, <http://humanorigins.si.edu>, which features the Human Origins research program, collections and field sites—including podcasts and diaries from the field. They can engage onsite and online with science and scientists and go behind the scenes into the field, the lab or a unique, interactive museum experience that illuminates the major milestones in the origin of human beings.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W. in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 7.4 million visitors in 2009, making it the most-visited museum in the United States. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 7:30 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. In addition to the Web site, learn more about public programs, get the latest updates and access to insider videos and images via [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#).

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