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Leakey Shares Passion for History of Humanity


Leakey represents the third generation of renowned fossil hunters within her family. Like her parents, Richard and Meave Leakey, and her grandparents, Louis and Mary Leakey, Louise focuses her research on the evolution of early human ancestors. She and her team have undertaken groundbreaking expeditions, unearthing deep insights into what it is that makes us human. She is credited for helping discover a 3.5 million-year-old skull and partial jaw, in 1999, believed to belong to a new branch of early hominids- *Kenyanthropus platyops*.

During the night’s lecture, Leakey discussed the process of searching for fossils in the land of Eastern Africa, particularly in the Rift Valley and at Lake Turkana, where she and her parents, in collaboration with Stony Brook University, have established The Turkana Basin Institute.

Searching for fossils “is like looking for a needle in a haystack; looking for small bone fragments within the pebbles,” said Leakey. “The chances of us missing something are very high.”

In discussing the timeline of our early ancestors, Leakey said we evolved into early people (hominids) around 7 million years ago; began making and using tools about 3.4 million years ago; developed into the modern body type (homo erectus) nearly 1.8 million years ago; and had larger brains (homo sapiens) just 600,000 years ago.

“What we know from these fossils is that we all came from Africa, evolved in Africa and left Africa as homo sapiens,” said Leakey.

According to Leakey, this has all occurred within a relatively short time frame. Up until 50,000 years ago, she said there were at least four different species of early humans existing together.

“Our past has an important role in making us think about our future,” concluded Leakey. “It’s extraordinary that we know as much as we do about human ancestry. We by no means have all the answers, and we never will.”
Leakey’s appearance is the latest segment in the 2012-13 Voyages of Discovery Lecture Series, sponsored by the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences. The next speaker in the series is Colonel Eileen Collins, the first woman to pilot and command an American spacecraft, who will discuss “Leadership Lessons from Apollo to Discovery,” on Nov. 13 at Wright Auditorium.

For additional information about the Voyages of Discovery Lecture Series, visit the series’ website at [http://www.ecu.edu/voyages](http://www.ecu.edu/voyages).

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