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## New center will study evolution of humans

**By Scott LaFee**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

**February 17, 2008**

LA JOLLA – For more than a decade, local scientists and researchers from around the world have occasionally gathered in San Diego to discuss and debate the singular question of how humans became human.

“The whole thing has been under the radar,” said Dr. Ajit Varki, a professor of medicine and molecular biologist at the University of California San Diego who helped found and organize the meetings. “It was strictly an intellectual exercise for scientists.”

Now, however, the effort is going public. Varki, along with Salk Institute neuroscientist Fred Gage and Margaret Schoeninger, a professor of anthropology at UCSD, have announced the creation of a center to study the origin of humans. It will be based in existing buildings at UCSD and at the Salk.

The Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny will be “trans-disciplinary,” said Varki, who will be co-director with Gage and Schoeninger. (Anthropogeny is the study of human evolution.)

“It will be more than multidisciplinary,” he said. “CARTA will transcend disciplines, bringing together biologists, social scientists, neuroscientists, chemists, medical specialists – anybody who can bring insight into the question of where we come from.”

Said Schoeninger: “The center will allow us to move well beyond the bounds of any given field of study. Looking at the biological and cognitive links between humans and other primates or other animals – and doing so not only with the breadth afforded by different disciplines, but also with the depth offered by an evolutionary perspective – will give us a richer picture of the past and of today.”

CARTA already counts 80 to 90 local scientists as members, Varki said, with perhaps 150 more associated researchers and advisers around the world. Over the next three years, aided by \$3 million in funding from the New York-based Mathers Foundation and support from UCSD, the UCSD School of Medicine and the Salk Institute, CARTA's creators hope to accomplish an ambitious set of goals:

- Develop an archival Web site and online museum.
- Arrange scientific access to tissue resources related to great-ape research.
- Housing, maintenance and research of serum and skeletal collections donated by the Primate Foundation of Arizona.
- Create undergraduate and graduate courses and programs in anthropogeny at UCSD, including within the School of Medicine. “We need to train the next generation of scholars,” Gage said.

■Develop a peer-reviewed journal, *Anthropogeny*.

Gage described the effort as similar to what happened with neuroscience 30 years ago.

“There really was no such discipline back then,” he said. “There was neuroscience embedded in other disciplines, but nothing that brought all of that knowledge together. The first annual conferences of the Society for Neuroscience attracted maybe a few hundred people. Last year's conference in San Diego had maybe 36,000 neuroscientists.”

CARTA organizers don't envision anything so grandiose anytime soon. There will be at least one annual public symposium, but Varki said the center will studiously skirt the evolution-creationism controversy and issues of religion and philosophy.

“We want to deal only in facts – what is scientifically provable,” he said. “These other things are important, but they can be left to others. They would be distractions.”

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