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“Fossil Exhibit Sparks Controversy”

From The Daily Texan

For a 3.2 million year-old fossil, Lucy has certainly created quite a stir in her old age.

The Ethiopian artifact, viewed by some as the elusive missing link between humans and animals, is now on display to the public at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The fossil is part of a larger exhibit on Ethiopian history, but there's no question that 3.6 ft Lucy is the star of this show.

Not everyone is pleased with Lucy's Houston engagement, however. Scientists and Ethiopians alike have criticized the decision to transport and display such a rare artifact, claiming that the risk of damage is too great. As a result, several American museums have refused to host Lucy and Ethiopian groups in Houston have called for a boycott of the exhibit.

According to Dr. John Kappelman, a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas who has done extensive field work in Ethiopia, the exhibition of Lucy was the culmination of years of behind the scenes planning and careful study on the part of scientists and the Ethiopian government to ensure her safety.

“The decision to display the fossil was one that was based on a lot of background research,” Kappelman said. “The Ethiopian government brought together a number of conservators...to assess whether [Lucy] was in a condition where she could actually be safely transported and safely put on display. The consensus of that group was that Lucy was fully fit for this kind of travel and for this kind of exhibit. I am convinced that if that assessment would have come back that Lucy was too fragile for display, Lucy would still be in Ethiopia.”

Kappelman said that the work of museum curators and others involved with the safekeeping of rare artifacts is often overlooked by the public and the press.

“Because the people who put these exhibits on...are so very good at their job, we don't really understand that there's this entire population out there of people who do this work and make it look seamless,” he said. “In this particular case with Lucy, I know for a fact that this has been in the work for six years and that every possibility or question of possible damage or injury to the specimen has been assessed. These people are professionals....They work so quietly behind the scenes that most of the public doesn't understand what's involved in putting an exhibit like this together.”

Kappelman said that Lucy previously traveled to the United States in the 1970s shortly after her discovery in Ethiopia, though she was only made available for scientific research and was not on display to the public at that time. He also pointed to past exhibits - including the 1984 “Ancestors” display at the American Museum of Natural Science in New York – which have safely offered the public a glimpse of other extremely rare fossils.

As the museum registrar at the Harry Ransom Center, Debbie Armstrong is responsible for the safekeeping of valuable artifacts including the Gutenberg Bible and the world's first photograph. She said that the public display of any rare historical materials, whether fossils or photographs, involves weighing the educational benefit against any possible risk that might follow.

“We're here to share what we have with everyone,” Armstrong said. “That's our mission statement...but we are here to safeguard the materials as well. It's a balancing act – you decide, is the exposure going to be worth the potential harm? But generally we do not take any risks with the materials, because we do not loan to places that aren't appropriate for the materials to be displayed in.”

For Kappelman, there is no doubt that Lucy is in good hands at the Houston museum.

“The Ethiopians were very methodical and careful,” he said. “That's what has not been picked up in the regular press. This was a very cautious decision. It would be analogous to us deciding to display our Declaration of Independence in another country - it's not something we would do without lots and lots of research ahead of time. And the Ethiopians did that.”