

At home with human origins

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Doing fieldwork in a place like Turkana, Kenya, can be both wonderful and difficult. The remoteness and beauty are unparalleled, and that landscape is inhabited by a large and growing population of Turkana pastoralists. In their eyes, the most meagre scientific budget and basic camp facilities are equivalent to unmeasured wealth. Where the daily wage might be less than £2 per day, even simple material goods are a luxury. So a constant dilemma for those who go to such places for the scientific and archaeological potential discoveries they have is how to help, or at least, in some way contribute to the very immediate needs of the surrounding populations.



Archaeologists and palaeontologists have, of course, contributed in many ways over many years. Recruiting local people as field assistants and camp helpers provides both income and training, as well as giving important links to the local community. Even buying goats regularly can inject income locally, and *ad hoc* medical facilities have long been a part of archaeology camp life. At this personal and local level much can, and has been done.



The question posed in Turkana, where the fossil remains are an international glory, is whether more can be done at an institutional level. The Turkana Basin Institute was founded by Richard Leakey to see whether large scale activities could make a serious difference. The main mission of the Turkana Basin institute (which has facilities at Turkwell and Ileret) is to promote the highest level international science, but it is also to make sure that it is embedded in the hopes of the local communities. Large-scale building programmes provide construction and maintenance employment; the laboratories for the international teams lead to opportunities for training in much needed skills, even with poor educational backgrounds. For example, Christopher Kiarie is training young Turkana in fossil preparation. Drivers, cooks, fossil hunters, all become potential careers. With TBI also comes a much more visible awareness of local needs, and active outreach involving the scientists.

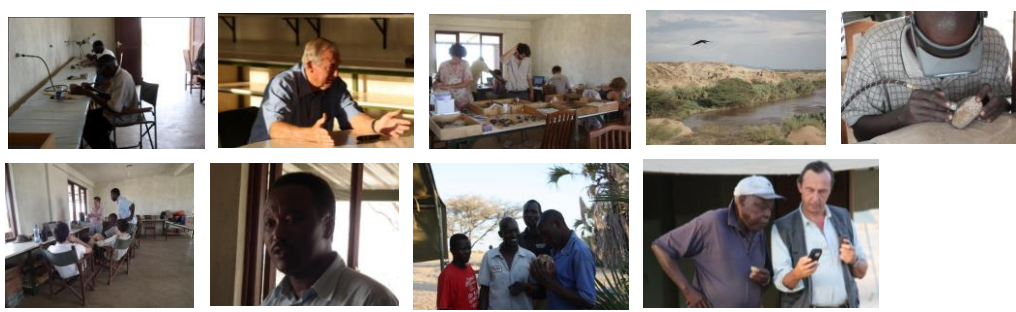


While TBI can provide a broader context for outreach activities, in the end for individual projects it is a question of seeking out opportunities to help. Needs in the area are the core ones of any under-developed region – water, environmental degradation, education and health. Our team has decided to focus on education. School facilities in Turkana are extremely limited, and the schools, while led by hard-working and enthusiastic teachers, have very little. Pens and pencils are a rarity; even the classrooms are mud brick and degrade rapidly. Helping equip local primary schools, and teaching the children about the past, has been one of the most rewarding aspects of our fieldwork.



But, ultimately the sustainability of both large institutions such as TBI, or particular field projects such as ours, depends on a shared belief in the importance of the past, whether it is the remote evolutionary history of mankind or the recent heritage of the Turkana. The Museum at Lodwar currently provides a small platform for this, but it is massively under-resourced. As part of our activities we have been exploring how the Museum – or Museums might develop by finding out what local people think about the flurry of archaeology and palaeontology that has, and continues to take place around Lake Turkana.

Marta Mirazon Lahr & Robert Foley, September 2010

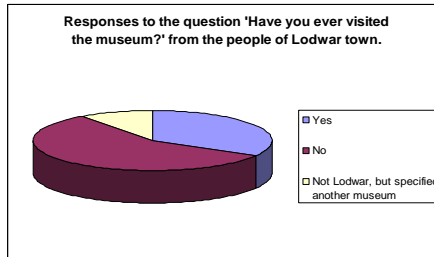


Talking Origins: Turkana 2010

Exploring the knowledge, understanding and presentation of Human Evolution in West Turkana

To the paleontological community, the Turkana region of Northern Kenya is a goldmine. Rich in heritage, sites in the area span many of the most important events in the history of human evolution. Therefore, study of these areas is paramount to our understanding of the subject. To this end, the region sees many academic teams use the area for fieldwork, highlighted by the construction of two bases of the 'Turkana Basin Institute' by Richard Leakey. These bases, one in the east at Illeret and a western station situated on the river Turkwell, play host to a wide range of archaeological teams and has made research in the area more accessible. With sites such as Eliye Springs in the vicinity, the Western side of Lake Turkana has become an area of interest for many academics in the field. Currently, an expedition led by Dr. Marta Lahr and Professor Robert Foley aims to map the later quaternary archaeology of the Kerio river area in this region.

Despite this rich heritage, whether the indigenous Turkana people of the area are engaged with this deep and long history has never been delineated. In West Turkana, the principal city of Lodwar contains a local museum, part of the National Museums of Kenya, without any evidence of the evolutionary heritage of the area. The museum is, instead, an important testament to the time Jomo Kenyatta spent imprisoned and is situated in one of the buildings where he was incarcerated. Although this is undoubtedly of major importance in Kenya's history, surely the rich, deep history of this area deserves a place in the local museum and in the minds of the local people.



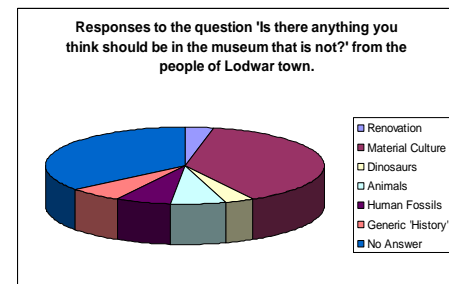
Due to this heritage, during the expedition of Dr. Lahr and Professor Foley, two surveys were carried out in different regions of Western Turkana; Lodwar, the principal town, and the village school in Nakoret. These aimed to understand what level of knowledge and interest people have in the discovery and display of fossils and artefacts of evolution from the area. I hope that my research will show that there is a substantial interest and some basic knowledge of the archaeological process and deep history that is all around the people of Western Turkana and, if this is the case, the information can be used to argue for greater funding, promotion and prioritisation of display and access to artefacts for the people of the area.

The method of study for the questionnaires and survey in the Turkana region had to be carefully designed to be both understandable through not one, but two language barriers (Turkana and Swahili) and simple enough for children of school age to understand. The questions also attempted to be transferable to another culture, so the same questionnaire could be used in both Kenya and England - so that the information would be comparable. Two different questionnaires were designed: one for the people of Lodwar town and one for the schoolchildren in Nakoret. The Lodwar questionnaire, due to the museum in the vicinity, was mainly based around visiting the museum and the role and function of museums in society. It also aimed to understand what the Turkana people thought about their own history and past- and if they saw themselves in an evolutionary paradigm.

Questions included:

- Are humans animals?
- Where do the Turkana come from?
- Have you ever visited a museum?
- Do you know of Richard Leakey?
- Do you know any famous fossils?

In terms of results, the questionnaires have so far provided many interesting and unexpected answers. These range from a desire to see dinosaurs in museums to an overwhelming desire for Turkana material culture to be displayed. However, the general trend seems to support the idea that many people have a basic understanding of the heritage of their area and are keen to see it displayed and promoted. Preliminary analysis suggests two strong trends: Turkana people wish to see more cultural items in the museum and people mainly associate fossils with the remains of animals rather than humans. In an interview with the Curator of the Lodwar museum, Justus Edung, it was clear that before new artefacts for an education programme were acquired, he required funding, more space and general renovation of the premises. As result, the attendance of the public in the Lodwar museum is poor. See Fig 1.



Overall, it could probably be said that there is a much greater awareness of the fossil record than expected- therefore-strengthening this basic understanding would be a cause worth pursuing. However, these studies merely scratch the surface of peoples' understanding. Further study in English groups will provide valuable comparative data to further the usefulness of the study. Correlation between education standard and answer types will also be a useful tool to see how far the basic understanding of evolutionary heritage has filtered down without schooling. Hopefully, full analysis will further suggest that promotion of evolution in the public domain is a priority in both Kenya and England.

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