

# Museum unveils exhibition details for origins: Fossils from the cradle of humankind

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Skulls of *Australopithecus sediba* (left) and *Homo naledi* (right). Credit: Brett Eloff, University of the Witwatersrand

The Perot Museum of Nature and Science, in partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) and the National Geographic Society, has revealed details regarding the world-exclusive exhibition—Origins: Fossils from the Cradle of Humankind. The limited-run exhibition, which runs Oct. 19, 2019 through March 22, 2020, will feature the actual fossils of two recently discovered ancient human relatives, *Australopithecus sediba* and *Homo naledi*.

Origins will mark the first and likely only time these fossils will be on display in the U.S. and will be the first time that ancient hominin fossils have been transported for public display in North America since "Lucy" (*Australopithecus afarensis*) toured the US between 2007 and 2013.

The bilingual (English and Spanish), 5,000-square-foot exhibition will tell the stories of these amazing discoveries, from a young boy's stumbling upon the first specimen of *Au. sediba*, to the breathtaking journey of six female scientists—dubbed the "underground astronauts"—who excavated the bones of *H. naledi* from a deep and dangerously narrow cave complex in the Rising Star Cave System near Johannesburg, South Africa.

Acclaimed paleoanthropologist, University of the Witwatersrand Phillip Tobias Chair in Human Origins and National Geographic Explorer at Large, Professor Lee Berger, led the groundbreaking discoveries of both *Au. sediba* (2008) and *H. naledi* (2015) that have provided further evidence for the complex and nuanced processes of human evolution.

"Origins: Fossils from the Cradle of Humankind will be a historic opportunity to explore our shared human history by coming face-to-face with the actual fossils of our ancient ancestors," said Dr. Linda Silver, Eugene McDermott Chief Executive Officer of the Perot Museum. "The Perot Museum of Nature and Science is proud to be part of the discovery story that is shaping our understanding of the roots of

humanity. We are committed to facilitating dialogue about and sharing the latest research on human origins, as well as other topics of global importance."

Origins will bring to life years of scientific research and dynamic partnerships tied to the Perot Museum's recently launched *Center for the Exploration of the Human Journey*, a global hub for education, communication and research dissemination in the study of human origins, for which Berger serves as Distinguished Science Advisor. The Perot Museum's partnership with Wits University, the official custodian of the fossils, cultivates projects that strengthen international scientific and academic cooperation.

"It is our pleasure to share these South African national treasures with the people of Texas and the rest of the world. Science should have no boundaries, and our collective knowledge should be made available to the entire human community," said Professor Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Wits University. "These fossils are evidence of our common origins, and the research and knowledge thereof must transcend boundaries so that they mark a path to a collective future defined by human solidarity. Our partnership with the Perot Museum is built in this spirit, and we look forward to enhancing it in the coming years."

In the exhibition, guests will have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view the newly discovered fossil skeletons of *Au. sediba* and *H. naledi* and encounter a first-ever, hyper-realistic, life-size sculpture of *H. naledi*. Captivating National Geographic photos of the South African caves located in the heart of the Cradle of Humankind UNESCO World Heritage Site will be on display, as well as an interactive "challenge" illustrating how scientists must fit into tiny spaces to reach underground bones like those of *H. naledi*.

"National Geographic has been instrumental in funding research on [human origins](#) for decades," said Kathryn Keane, Vice President for Public Experiences at the National Geographic Society. "Lee Berger's unprecedented discoveries, over many years, have greatly advanced our understanding of the story of humanity."

The exhibition will also feature a simulated excavation site that will provide an immersive, hands-on experience for visitors of all ages and abilities to role-play using the same ground-penetrating technology that paleoanthropologists and archaeologists rely upon for fossil exploration. The final gallery will transport visitors to southern Africa with a display of native animal taxidermy, including a rare white rhinoceros, cheetah, African lion, spotted hyena and klipspringer.

A glass-encased visiting scholar lab within the exhibition will provide research access to the fossils for scientists who might not otherwise have an opportunity to study them—and guests will enjoy a rare opportunity to view this research in real time. The Museum will also create professional exchange and development opportunities for early career scientists from Africa and across the world.

Additionally, a special *Treasures of southern Africa* display will celebrate the various discoveries and innovations of the lower continent, including the world-class research center at Wits University and other African contributions. A variety of items—such as a sculpture gifted to President Bush by President Nelson Mandela, on loan from the George W. Bush Presidential Center, a fossil of an Early Triassic *Thrinaxodon*, rock art and exquisite garments inspired by both modern red-carpet fashions and traditional Basotho blankets—will be showcased throughout the Museum.

Provided by Perot Museum of Nature and Science

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