

## 6-Million-Year-Old Man

A scientist from France claimed last week to have found the oldest hominid remains yet discovered—6-million-year-old bones in Kenya's Great Rift Valley. Scientists are excited by the discovery, which could cast light on the time when the human line veered off from the chimp one. But many are unhappy about the discoverer: Martin Pickford, a maverick anthropologist whose methods have gotten him into trouble with the Kenyan government and some of his colleagues.

Pickford announced the find at a 4 December press conference in Nairobi. In October, he and his partner, Brigitte Senut of France's National Museum of Natural History in Paris, found bones of a chimp-sized individual that apparently manifest the major hallmarks of humanness: a large femur indicating the ability to walk upright; reduced canine teeth; and large molars, indicating that the diet included fare other than the soft fruits favored by chimps. Pickford says he plans to publish a "preliminary" paper



Brigitte Senut displays legbone of upright walker.

on the find by mid-2001 in the French journal *Contes Rendus de l'Académie des Sciences*.

"If what they say is true, this pushes back the earliest evidence for bipedalism by 2 million years," says anthropologist Brian Richmond of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

But the circumstances of the discovery are "extremely unfortunate," says Bernard Wood of

George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Pickford, Wood notes, had a collecting permit withdrawn by Kenyan officials in 1998 due to a lack of proper authorization from the National Museums of Kenya, where he once worked. And, in March, the government charged Pickford with two counts of hunting for fossils without a permit, then suspended the case. Pickford has countersued the museum and others.

Pickford and Senut also found the bones in an area Yale researchers have been exploring for the past 20 years. Pickford's presence there is "highly irregular," says Yale expedition leader Andrew Hill, who adds: "If he knows the date, it's because of our work." Hill and others also consider it unusual that the fossils, which are government property, are now in the care of a little-known private group, the Community Museums of Kenya. But while Pickford may be on the outs with some researchers, he's apparently favored by President Daniel arap Moi. He says he met with Moi, who encouraged him to publicize the find, saying it would "put Kenya on the map."

## Demanding Less

Discrimination? Meekness? Whatever the reason, biomedical research grants to men are 22% larger than those going to women. Newly released figures from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) show that, for 1999, the average size of research awards was \$306,472 for men and \$250,838 for women.

The data show that men are more likely than women to be center heads and to receive large, center-type grants. Vivian Pinn, head of NIH's Office of Women's Health Research, also says that "women ask for less money"—\$30,000 less on average. "Maybe it's because they don't have mentors to show them how to structure budgets," she speculates. Nancy Andreason, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, and a 2000 National Medal of Science winner, says she's not surprised by the disparity: "Women are generally more modest, and men are generally more aggressive."

Whatever the cause of the gap, it's not confined to NIH. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women life scientists applying to the National Science Foundation also ask for less money, says Mary Clutter, head of NSF's biology directorate.

NIH officials are quick to note that success rates for women are on a par with men at NIH, and that applications from women rose by 36% in the 1990s compared with only 2.5% for men. But regardless of the advances, the guys still have it by a big margin: Men received \$8.6 billion in extramural funding last year, compared with \$2 billion for women.

A little over a month ago, three amateur divers were about to ascend from exploring a reef in Sodwana Bay, off South Africa, when one caught the glint of "a large greenish eye" in his underwater light. Looking more closely, he found it to be the eye of a 2-meter-long coelacanth—an extinct-looking fish with a 380-million-year lineage—alive and well 104 meters deep south of Mozambique. Coelacanthophiles the world

over have been thrilled at the news.

## Major Coelacanth Sighting

Coelacanths had been thought to have died out with the dinosaurs 70 million years ago until one was

sighted off South Africa in 1937. Since then, rare individuals have showed up off Indonesia and Africa's east coast, usually in fishers' catches. About 180 have been caught on the volcanic slopes of the Comores Islands, off Mozambique.

In a manuscript submitted to the *South African Journal of Science*, Phillip Heemstra, an ichthyologist at the J.L.B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology in Grahamstown, and colleagues report that on a second visit, divers were able to film three animals, 1 to 1.8 meters long. But a price has already been paid for this latest discovery: One diver, Dennis Harding, died from an uncontrolled ascent.



Dim but unmistakable profile of a coelacanth on the go off South Africa.