

## **“Becoming Human” Explores Where We Came From**

LINCOLN, Neb. (Oct. 21, 2009) -- Where did we come from? What makes us human?

The first in-depth televised investigation documenting an explosion of recent discoveries, “NOVA’s” three-part special, “Becoming Human: Unearthing Our Earliest Ancestors,” examines what the latest scientific research reveals about our hominid relatives -- putting together the pieces of our human past and transforming our understanding of our earliest ancestors.

Premiering Tuesday, Nov. 3, at 8 p.m. CT on NET1 and in high-definition on NET-HD, “Becoming Human” will continue at 8 p.m. CT on Tuesdays, Nov. 10 and 17. The programs will also air on NET2 on the following Thursdays at 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. CT and Saturdays at noon CT.

Featuring interviews with renowned scientists, each program unfolds with a “CSI”-like forensic investigation into the life and death of a specific hominid ancestor. “Becoming Human” was shot “in the trenches,” where discoveries were unearthed throughout Africa and Europe. Dry bones spring back to life with stunning computer-generated animation and prosthetics. Fossils not only offer clues to what early hominids looked like, but, with the aid of ingenious new lab techniques, how they lived and how we became the creative, “behaviorally modern” humans of today.

The first program examines the factors that caused the split from the apes. The film explores the fossil of “Selam,” also known as “Lucy’s Child” -- an amazing, nearly complete child fossil that helps shed light on our ancestors’ early development and how we began to depart from that of chimps.

“NOVA’s” cameras capture the unveiling of the face, spine and shoulder blades of the oldest known child fossil, 3.3 million years old, also taking viewers “inside the skull” to show how our ancestors’ brains had begun to change from those of the apes.

In gripping forensic detail, the second program in “Becoming Human” (Nov. 10) investigates the first skeleton that really looks like us -- “Turkana Boy” -- an astonishingly complete specimen of *Homo erectus* found by the famous Leakey team in Kenya. These ancestors are thought to have developed key innovations such as hunting, use of fire and extensive social bonds.

The final program (Nov. 17) examines the roots of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, which new evidence pinpoints to southern Africa some 200,000 years ago. What led to the birth of fully modern humans and our unique capacities for culture and creativity? How and why did our species leave Africa and take over the world?

New discoveries are upending old ideas and suggesting that our exodus was far earlier than previously thought. A nightmare period of intense cold climate may have played a key role, at one point reducing the entire human population to perhaps only a few thousand or hundred.

But the world into which modern humans slowly spread around 80,000 years ago was not empty. There were other ancient human species already there, and they were destined to become extinct. The best known of them are the Neanderthals, our European cousins who died out as modern humans spread from Africa into Europe during the Ice Age. Did modern humans interbreed with Neanderthals and/or exterminate them? The program explores crucial new evidence from the recent decoding of the Neanderthal genome, which until just a few years ago was thought to be an impossible technical feat.

As for today, we have planet Earth to ourselves, but that's a very recent and unusual situation. For millions of years, as far back as science can take us, many different kinds of hominids co-existed and shared the globe simultaneously, and there was no guarantee that any of them would survive the many threats along the way. For example, at one time Homo sapiens shared the planet with Neanderthals, Homo erectus and the mysterious "Hobbits" -- three-foot-high humans who thrived on the Indonesian island of Flores until just a few thousand years ago.

"Becoming Human" examines why "we" survived while those other ancestral cousins died out. And it explores the question: In what ways are we still evolving?

NET1 and NET-HD are part of NET Television, a service of NET. For a complete program schedule, visit NET's Web site ([netNebraska.org/television](http://netNebraska.org/television)).

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NET Television: NET1 is Nebraska's first public television broadcast service and includes PBS and award-winning, locally produced public television programming; NET2 offers live coverage of the Nebraska Unicameral, and other news and public affairs programming; NET3 is a 24-hour channel featuring the most popular how-to, travel and lifestyle series; and NET-HD presents high-definition digital broadcast programming displayed in a wide-screen format.