

4 Field Colloquium: An Update on Australopithecus Based on New Lab and Field Work

Speaker: Zeresenay “Zeray” Alemseged

Host Department: Anthropology

Date: 02/23/2015

Time: 1:00 pm

Location: 411 West Hall

Description: The study of early hominins is one of the most exciting and highly debated issues in paleoanthropology. Since humans and chimps separated around 6 million years ago, myriad transformations have occurred in the two groups. While there remains a dearth of information about the chimpanzee lineage, our knowledge regarding the hominins has improved extensively over the past three decades, in large part owing to the proliferation of fieldwork across Africa. Integrating paleoanthropology with novel approaches that allow for the investigation of both old and freshly acquired data in a non-traditional manner has also played a critical role in accelerating our knowledge of our early ancestors. In this presentation, I will discuss the time period between ca. 4.5 and 2.5 Ma and demonstrate how my current laboratory and field research is enabling us to garner new data about variation, locomotion, ontogeny, behavior and the environmental context of early hominins. Furthermore, I will show how these data have contributed to reconnoitering some of the key evolutionary issues, including phylogeny, mode of evolution, species diversity and temporal trends. Specifically, I will provide an example of how our knowledge of a given early hominin taxon has improved thanks to an endeavor put in place by an international and multidisciplinary research team.

Dr. Zeray Alemseged is a Senior Curator of Anthropology & Chair, Department of Vertebrate Zoology and Anthropology at the California Academy of Sciences, Adjunct Professor at UC Davis and a Research Professor at San Francisco State University. His broader research interest includes human evolution and paleoanthropology. He undertakes extensive fieldwork and employs cutting edge imaging techniques to investigate the evolutionary process and mechanisms that led to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.

He has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, specialized human evolution journals, and has contributed to several high-profile journals including *Nature*, *Science* and the *PNAS* on the subject of human evolution in Africa. Zeray is a founder and director of the Dikika Research Project (DRP), and also the new Mille-Logya Project (MLP). He is most well known for his discovery of Selam (Dikika Child), the almost complete skeleton of a three-year-old *Australopithecus afarensis*, often referred to as “the world’s oldest child”.

To engage the public with his vital research in this regard, Zeray helped develop and implement exhibits in the USA and Africa.

Zeray, who is a fellow of the AAAS and explorer with the National Geographic, is also the co-founder of the East African Association for Paleoanthropology and Paleontology, which brings scientists conducting research in Africa together and strives to bridge the gap between scientists and local policy makers.

Zeray’s work has been disseminated prominently in both print and electronic media: on CNN BBC, NOVA-PBS among hundreds of other TV, PODCAST and Radio shows.