

*Archaeology*

# Oldest Fossil Footprints Of Man Uncovered By UCSC Professors

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A scientific expedition led by a UCSC professor and a former UCSC professor found what are believed to be the oldest fossil footprints made by a direct ancestor of man.

The 1.5-million-year-old tracks were uncovered along a lakeshore in northern Kenya by an expedition led by Professor Leo F. LaPorte of UCSC and Professor Anna K. Behrensmeyer, who is now at Yale University after leaving UCSC in 1977, according to the Associated Press.

The footprints are "Alex Haley's 'Roots' — a little further back in time," said LaPorte this morning. He called the discovery "the kind of thing that's interesting and exciting. It doesn't contribute to the energy crisis or the release of the Iranian prisoners — it's just pure interest."

Also on the expedition were UCSC students Hilda Schwartz and Jeff Mount, according to the UCSC public information office.

The seven footprints probably were made by *Homo erectus*, whose evolutionary path leads straight to modern man, the National Science Foundation announced Sunday, it was reported by AP science writer Warren E. Leary.

Scientists say the footprints appear to have been left by someone between 5 and 5½-feet tall, weighing about 120 pounds. The individual apparently walked from a very wet, muddy area onto drier mud because some of the prints are larger than others.

The discovery was made in sedimentary deposits along the northeast shore of Lake Turkana, about 350 miles north of Nairobi. Three prints were uncovered in August 1978, while a trench was being dug. Four more prints were found last July, bringing the total to seven.

Behrensmeyer told the AP that at the time the footprints were made, there were two known forms of hominids, or human-like creatures. Along with *Homo erectus*, there was *Australopithecus*, whose skull bones were heavier, but whose brain was small. Both walked upright.

Both types are believed to have come from a common ancestor, but *Australopithecus* died out along the way.

"Both of these forms of hominids are potential candidates for the maker of the tracks we found," Behrensmeyer told the AP, "but the case is stronger for *Homo erectus* because its fossil bones are preserved in nearby strata, but not the bones of *Australopithecus*."

Hippopotamus tracks also were found in the vicinity, but LaPorte discounted speculation that the hominid was hunting the hippo.

"They were probably both just wandering around in the water," he said.

Behrensmeyer reported to the AP that the expedition also found tools made of pebbles and cobbles in the same sediment beds and that some had sharp edges and others were like choppers and hammers. She attributed them to the tool-making skill of *Homo erectus*.

"The footprints were more alive than the bones and artifacts that are usually found," according to LaPorte. "They actually recorded behavior, even if it was as simple



*View of footprints of the hominid discovered by two UCSC professors.*

as wading in a shallow lake."

Calling the discoveries "H.G. Wells Time Machine stuff," LaPorte said the findings were "hard to believe, even if you intellectually know that they're footprints of an ancestor a 1½ million years ago."

"The environment is still there," he went on. "It's probably as close a reproduction of what landscapes were like 1½ million years ago. As you stand there looking at the vegetation and habitat and experiencing the climate, you begin to get a sense of ancestry."

He reported that the study which led to the discovery of the footprints is still under way, with scientists trying to work out the details of the environments and reconstruct the landscapes the hominids saw.

A research group led by Dr. Mary Leakey earlier found 3.6 million-year-old hominid footprints at Laetoli in Tanzania which are believed to belong to an older, more primitive relative of man — perhaps in the *Australopithecus* family.

Little difference in the footprints of modern man and the Kenya and Tanzania footprints was noted by scientists; however, in size the *Homo erectus* prints are closer to modern man's.

The expedition was a project of the National Museums of Kenya, supported by the National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society.