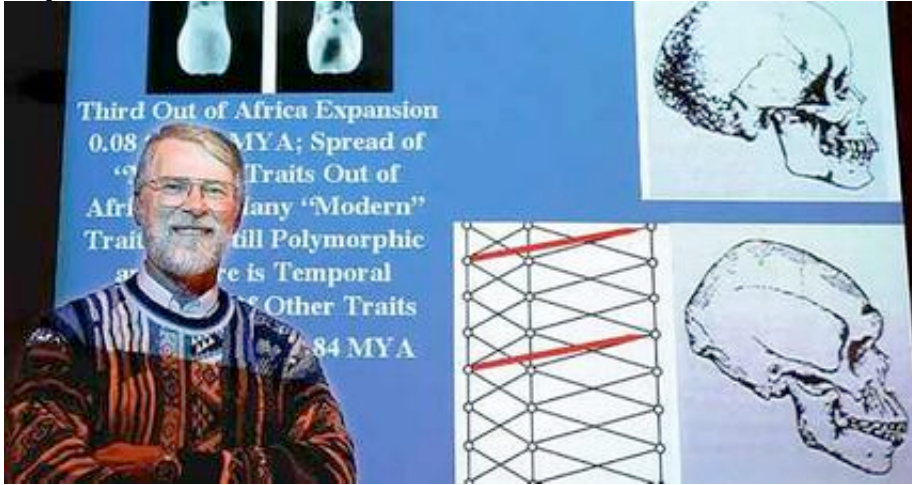


## A plea to lose the race

July 15, 2004



Alan Templeton studies how humanity has evolved, and how we live now.

Picture: *Cathryn Tremain*

**An American geneticist and statistician argues that when it comes to analysing differences between people, race is a red herring. Catharine Munro reports.**

The 51st meeting of Australian geneticists is hardly the place to go looking for Neanderthals.

But American scientist Alan Templeton likes to tease his Australian colleagues by suggesting that's just what some of them look like.

"Many of you are not anatomically modern; you can look around and make a guess at who is not," he told his colleagues at the conference this week.

The physical features of a primitive human being - the sloping forehead and the heavy brow - can be found everywhere in the 20th century.

That's true even among this seriously clever gathering of scientists at Melbourne University, according to Templeton, a professor of biology from Washington University in St Louis.

The taunt about Neanderthals reflects the fruits of the 57-year-old's career as an evolutionary biologist.

He has combined a PhD in genetics with a masters in statistics in order to analyse the characteristics of the DNA of people, plants and animals from all over the world.

He looks at the very minute in order to talk about the stuff of life on the grandest scale - the mass migration of humanity and biodiversity in ecological hotspots.

There is an astonishing array of contemporary applications for his analytical programs that include the study of heart disease and the preservation of the salamander lizard in Galilee.

When it comes to looking at genes to decide how humans evolved, complex maths is needed to analyse the DNA of up to 60 groups of people at a time. Each group can contain up to 1000 people, and Templeton looks at as many as 10 regions of the human genome that contains around 40,000 genes.

His conclusion? We're all the same. And not only are we all the same, we've got lots of similar characteristics to our forebears of 1.7 million years ago.

He hopes his work will put to bed once and for all the idea that there's a scientific basis for racism.

He hopes his work will put to bed once and for all the idea that there's a scientific basis for racism.

The Holocaust might have dealt a blow to attempts to use science to prove racial differences but plenty of people still believe there are fundamental divides.

He argues that when it comes to studying the characteristics of human beings, differences are still overlaid.

And that starts with research on primitive man.

Palaeontologists in search for the fame associated with discovery have been too zealous in their efforts to distinguish between different classes of primitive man, such as Cro-Magnon, Homo sapien and Neanderthal.

Instead, we're closer to primitive man than we thought, Templeton argues.

"I can find living humans whose DNA is more different from each other than Neanderthals is different from mine," Templeton asserts.

Templeton claims that we didn't wipe out our evolutionary predecessors but instead bred with them.

"For my generation it was make love not war. That's what's really going on when people go into new areas, they interbreed, they don't wipe everybody out."

But Templeton is hardly the love child of San Francisco hippies. He is the son of a Midwest coal miner who used to take his children on camping trips to the Ozark Mountains of Missouri.

"Ever since I was a kid I always would be one to go out and collect snakes," he said.

He gravitated to biology through his love of naturalism and remains devoted to the Ozarks, where he uses the analytical programs he has developed to study forest fire management there.

Washington University, where he has worked for 27 years, is nearby.

In testing scientific claims that racial differences exist, Templeton has applied statistical analysis to DNA samples of people and found that unlike the chimpanzee, there are no genetic differences between populations of humans.

But what of physical characteristics such as dark skin or slanted eyes?

Templeton argues they can appear in two populations where races are supposed to be different. There are more differences that occur between individuals than between "races".

During Templeton's lecture, which is laden with the incomprehensible language of geneticists and maze-like diagrams of DNA, he challenges his students to pick the Fijian from the African, people from supposedly different races.

Later, he recalls being reprimanded by a Japanese friend for not being able to tell the difference between someone from the island of Okinawa and other Japanese citizens.

"Somehow hairy forearms become important for Okinawans," he said doubtfully.

And he recalls high embarrassment when his clearly black colleague from Brazil declared that he was white.

He later discovered that while in the United States, racists would say that "a drop of blood" would make someone black, the Portuguese colonists in Brazil dictated the opposite. A drop of white blood made a person white, even if they appeared black.

People are trained to attach importance to certain characteristics, he argues.

But such artificial categories have prevented scientists from reaching a true discovery.

For example, sickle-cell anaemia was once thought to be a disease of black Africans. However, it was later discovered that it's a disease associated with malaria and has its highest incidence amongst the marsh Arabs.

Again, geography rather than race is the determining factor.

"We understand more of it when we stop thinking in terms of races and start thinking in terms of the local environment, and ignore racial thinking in its entirety."

A public forum entitled *Melbourne Conversations - Genes, race, money and the law: the genetic future shock?* will take place tonight at 6pm at RMIT's Capitol Theatre. Speakers include Professor Peter Singer.

**More news**

- [Blokiness accepted by chief of Antarctic station](#)
- [My ecological footprint](#)
- [Kakapo doing a dodo](#)

[Home](#) > [Features](#) > [Science](#) > Article

Copyright © 2004. The Age Company Ltd.