For the attention of: The Commissioning Editors; Introduction to Physical Anthropology

From: Simon Bearder, Professor Emeritus in Biological Anthropology, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Dear Sir/Madam,

You may be aware that there is a deep divide within the heart of physical anthropology concerning the various hypotheses that are put forward to help understand how and why we evolved the differences in structure, physiology and behaviour that separate us from our closest living relatives, the common chimpanzees. For example, why did we become bipedal and relatively naked with a layer of subcutaneous fat, and how did we develop a large brain, a descended larynx and sexual signals on the chest, to name but a few of these differences.

There is a set of ideas that plausibly addresses all of these distinctions, namely what was originally called the Aquatic (or Amphibious) Ape Hypothesis (AAH). It was first elaborated by Elaine Morgan in 1972 and later developed by her and various independent scientists over the years. Today, these ideas are perhaps best referred to (in the plural) as “waterside hypotheses of human evolution”, one of which is the “wading hypothesis of the origin of hominin bipedality”. Yet, curiously, any reference to this body of work is conspicuously absent in any of the 15 editions of your popular student textbook ‘Introduction to Physical Anthropology’ that I have seen. I understand that you are simply following the advice of peer reviews, but the effect of this form of censorship is to prevent any open discussion of the topic by generations of undergraduates, as well as going a long way to explaining why, whenever the subject is broached in academic circles, it is either treated with ridicule or met with raised eyebrows and a deafening silence.

I am not suggesting that there should be special pleading for a poorly thought out idea that is not supported by respectable scientists (which is untrue) but, irrespective of its relative merits, it is strange that it is absent from the Table of possible factors influencing the evolution of bipedalism on page 281 of the 15th edition of your textbook. Yet several other influences are included that have been largely discredited, such as the Hunting Hypothesis, the Surveillance Hypothesis and Male Provisioning. What is the reason for excluding a perfectly well-argued idea, and why are none of its proponents listed in the Bibliography? It seems un-academic that a student textbook on human evolution makes no mention in the Index of words associated with this hypothesis, including aquatic, amphibious, wading, waterside, hair loss, naked, swimming, diving, descended larynx or subcutaneous fat. These are all important ways that humans differ from chimpanzees but their evolution is not discussed.

It strikes me that you may have come across this issue previously and discussed it with the authors and reviewers, only to receive their strident assurance that they do not want anything to do with the idea. Many of my colleagues are reluctant to raise the issue for fear of repercussions such as losing approval of research grants or having their articles rejected by the higher rated journals. But the questions remain. Why is there such hostility within professional anthropology to an unbiased forum for discussion? What is wrong with an ecologically based hypothesis that our first steps towards humanity were water-based – providing support for hind limb wading and swimming, shifting the diet towards sea food and selecting for hair loss and the development of subcutaneous fat, among a suite of other adaptations? My fear is that what has been happening in this field for the last 50 years is the suppression of academic freedom for those willing to raise their heads above the parapet.

I am writing in the hope that you will enlighten me on your perspective on this subject and I would be happy to speak to you by phone or Zoom. My number is +447717810688.

With thanks in anticipation of your response and kind regards,

Simon Bearder