

New fossil finds challenge story of human evolution

A discovery of fossils more than a million years old in Kenya 'changes the story' of human evolution, showing that two human species coexisted rather than succeeded one another, palaeontologists have said.

The discovery of a 1.44-million-year-old Homo Habilis jaw and a 1.55-million-year-old Homo Erectus skull challenges the conventional view that the former gave rise to the latter, by suggesting that the two species lived at the same time in East Africa, for almost half a million years.

'Homo Habilis never gave rise to Homo Erectus. For a long time we believed that but now these two discoveries have completely changed that story,' palaeontologist Frederick Manthi said Thursday.

Manthi had found the fossils east of Lake Turkana, northern Kenya, in August 2000.

The palaeontologist explained the new twist in the story of human beings as akin to chimpanzees and gorillas living at the same time period but in different habitats, which meant they were not in direct competition for survival.

'The fact that they stayed separate as individual species for a long time suggests they had their own ecological niche, avoiding direct competition,' said Idle Farah, director of the National Museums of Kenya, which made the discovery along with the Koobi Fora Research Project led by renowned palaeontologists Meave and Louise Leakey.

Conventional views suggest that Homo Erectus, which existed from about 1.7 million to 200,000 years ago, evolved from Homo Habilis, which lived from about 2 to 1.6 million years ago.

The theory was published in the Aug 9 issue of the science journal Nature.

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