

## **HOW IMPORTANT WERE LARGE MAMMALS, ANIMAL PROTEIN, AND DHA IN HOMININ EVOLUTION? PALEOANTHROPOLOGY STILL AIN'T HEARD THE NEWS**

---

John Speth

Professor, Department of Archaeology and  
Curator of North American Archaeology in the Museum of Anthropology  
University of Michigan

**Wednesday, March 19, 2008**

**3:30 PM College of Design North, Room 60**

**School of  
Human Evolution & Social Change**

It is widely accepted in paleoanthropology that encephalization forced hominins to increase their acquisition of "high-quality" foods in order to underwrite the substantial metabolic requirements of this costly organ. In fact, many paleoanthropologists see animal protein acquired through the hunting of large game as the principal "high-quality" food that would have been available to early hominins, thus continuing to reaffirm the "man the hunter" perspective that has dominated the field since its inception. In this talk I briefly trace the many arguments that are built upon the "animal-protein-as-high-quality-food" perspective, from Darwin's original feedback model to several more recent views such as the hunting-scavenging debates of the 1970s and 1980s and the influential "expensive tissue hypothesis" in contemporary paleoanthropology. I then look at how protein came to hold its unassailable position at the pinnacle of the nutritional hierarchy, a situation one public health official referred to as the "great protein fiasco," and conclude by questioning our discipline's myopic focus on animal protein, and more recently on animal-derived essential fatty acids, as the pivotal driving forces in human evolution.