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Groundbreaking horse domestication study wins 2024 Newcomb Cleveland Prize

Award celebrates cross-cultural research between western and indigenous scientists

University of Cape Town (UCT) academics are part of an interdisciplinary study by indigenous and western scientists from around the globe selected as recipient of the 2024 Newcomb Cleveland Prize “involving \$25,000” for the authorship of a publication that traces the domestication of horses in North America.

The award was handed out on Friday, 16 February 2024 at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) for the paper *Early Dispersal of Domestic Horses in the Great Plains and Northern Rockies*, published in the *Science* journal in the spring of 2023. This award, the oldest and most prestigious bestowed by the organisation, is given annually to recognise an outstanding publication in the field of Science.

The paper combined archaeozoological study of ancient horses from archaeological sites and museum collections across the continent with cutting-edge genomics, and traditional indigenous scientific knowledge, and helped rewrite the story of people and horses in North America – showing that horses had deeper antiquity in native societies across the region than could be gleaned from European or American historical records.

Most importantly, the research demonstrated the enhanced research experience and scientific power that comes from thoughtful cross-cultural partnerships based on equal footing.

The strontium isotope data used in this project to assess the geographical origin of the horses was obtained in the world-class isotope analytical facility in the Department of Geological Sciences at UCT under the direction of Dr Petrus Le Roux. The multi-collector inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry facility (MC-ICP-MS Facility) at the department has a global reputation for excellence in the specialised field of radiogenic isotope analysis. This is especially true for novel scientific applications.

“It was a privilege to be involved in this multi-disciplinary project, bringing together researchers from such diverse backgrounds and with a central role for traditional indigenous knowledge,” said Dr Le Roux.

“Walking the earth as Lakota is to protect, sustain and advocate for all life. This global collaboration, and those to come, are what is necessary for ourselves and all peoples to protect their traditional lands, relations and lifeways for the sustainability of grandmother earth and all life. The time is upon us,” said Chief Joe American Horse, an indigenous scientist, knowledge keeper and study co-author.

The funds from the award will be donated to create a new endowment at the University of Colorado, named in memoriam for late study co-author and elder, Knowledge Keeper and cultural educator for the Sicangu Lakota People, Sam High Crane. The endowment will help support research and training for indigenous perspectives and young professionals in archaeology, archaeogenetics, and the museum world. This donation is the first step in a larger partnership between leaders from the Global Institute for Traditional Sciences (GIFTS), the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the Paul Sabatier University of Toulouse, and the University of Colorado.



Horses are an active part of life for the Lakota and many other Plains nations today

Photo: Jacquelyn Córdova/Northern Vision Productions

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