Evolutionary Anthropology Society

Mary K Shenk, Contributing Editor

U of Connecticut Graduate Program: Focus in Ecology and Evolution

By James Boster (EAS Secretary/Treasurer)

The University of Connecticut's Department of Anthropology established a focus in ecology and evolution beginning in 1998. It is divided into two main subgroups: Old World prehistoric archaeologists (Adler, McBrearty, Munro, and Smith) and human cognitive and behavioral ecologists (Boster, D'Andrade, Handwerker, and Sosis). Other faculty members whose research relates to this focus include Kevin McBride (New World settlement ecology); Igor Ovtchinnikov (anthropological genetics, ancient DNA, human and ape evolution); and Robert Thorson (the geology of archaeological site formation). Graduate students interested in ecology and evolution generally specialize in one or the other of these branches. But students and faculty in both groups are united in the conviction that evolutionary theory allows them to integrate the understanding of human biology and culture.

The Old World prehistoric archaeology program at UConn is one of the best in the country. Daniel Adler's interests include human evolution, human behavioral ecology, and Neanderthal-modern human interactions. An important recent research finding is that Neanderthals were just as skilled hunters as their modern human contemporaries and exploited the same species with the same apparent success. Sally McBrearty's main interests are in human evolution, the origin of hominids and *Homo sapiens* in particular, and in the use of lithic technology to make inferences about human cognitive and cultural change. She is presently engaged in a research project exploring the archaeology and paleoenvironments of the Kapthurin Formation, in Baringo, Kenya. Natalie Munro's interests span the Pleistocene–Holocene transition from human hunting and foraging ecology to the origins of agriculture and early agricultural societies. She is especially interested in population and behavioral ecology and human hunting strategies. Her research focuses on the evolutionary ecology of human-prey interactions, in particular interactions with small game and gazelles from southwest Asia. Alexia Smith's interests include ecological anthropology, climate change and landscape use, and archaeobotany. She is currently developing models to integrate archaeological plant and animal data and assess regional patterns in ancient agriculture and is involved with projects examining the collapse of the Akkadian Empire in northeastern Syria.

The human cognitive and behavioral ecologists apply an evolutionary perspective to longstanding problems in psychological and cognitive anthropology, medical anthropology, and the study of religion. My (James Boster) interests in this focus are two-fold. One line of research argues that human cognition has evolved to interpret and discriminate other products of evolution and shows that although the resulting capacity has domain-general applicability, it retains signs of its domain-specific origin. The second line of research concerns how religious systems and emotions are employed to allow humans to honestly signal their commitments to social contracts. Roy D'Andrade's interests in this area are also two fold: He has argued that language and the capacity for bearing and transmitting culture exerted a powerful selection pressure for increasing brain size through the course of human evolution. He has also analyzed patterns of similarity in mitochondrial DNA lineages to support the claim of African origins of modern

humans. Penn Handwerker's interests are in the evolutionary ecology of culture and in population and political ecology. His research focuses on human sexual and reproductive behavior and interpersonal violence with on-going field projects in the US. Richard Sosis' research on human sociality and cooperation has employed an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, economics, sociology, and anthropology. His earlier research examined the ecological conditions that favor the emergence and stability of cooperative resource acquisition. He is now exploring the relationship between religion, trust, and intra-group cooperation in Israeli kibbutzim.

Faculty members in the ecology and evolution focus have strong ties with UConn's departments of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, Molecular & Cell Biology, Psychology, the Cognitive Science Program, and the School of Public Health. Students are encouraged to broaden their perspective by taking courses and engaging in research in these related fields. The Ecology and Evolution focus is the most important area of common interest in the UConn Anthropology department and is one which we expect to grow in the future.

Announcement: As a benefit of membership in EAS, members are eligible for subscription discounts to Human Nature. Please see the EAS website at for full details: www.evolutionaryanthropologysociety.org.

Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to Mary Shenk, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB# 8120 University Square, 123 West Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-2524 or to mshenk@unc.edu. Suggestions of or details on gradate programs related to the interests of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society are especially requested. EAS columns are archived at www.evolutionaryanthopologysociety.org.