

## Lee Berger Receives 2023 Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Biology Teachers



**July 30, 2023** - The National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) is proud to announce that paleoanthropologist and explorer, Dr. Lee Berger, has been named the recipient of the [2023 NABT Distinguished Service Award for Enhancing Education through Biological Research](#).

"Dr. Berger's career is one of important discoveries, science communication, and adventure. He epitomizes so much of what NABT stands for in life science teaching: curiosity, exploration, openness, excellence, and growth. We are honored to give him this award," said Dr. Tara Jo Holmberg, president of NABT.

The *NABT Distinguished Service Award* was established in 1988 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the association. This award recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to biology education through their research, writing, and teaching. [Notable recipients](#) include Lynn Margulis, Francis Collins, E.O. Wilson, Sean Carroll, Neil Shubin, Rita Colwell, Temple Grandin, Bonnie Bassler, and Jeff Corwin.

Dr. Lee Berger is an award-winning researcher, explorer, author, and speaker. Since finding a fossilized femur of an early hominin as an undergraduate, Lee has become one of the most successful (and recognizable) paleoanthropologists in the world. Born in Kansas and raised in rural Georgia, the South African-based National Geographic Explorer in Residence often draws comparisons to another leather hat and jacket-wearing professor/explorer. However, Lee Berger is the real deal.

Berger's decades of research on human origins in Africa, Asia, and Micronesia have resulted in numerous new discoveries, including the discovery of two new species of early human relatives – *Australopithecus sediba* in 2008 and *Homo naledi* in 2013. Recognized by the Smithsonian as among the ten most important scientific discoveries of the decade in 2020, Berger's work at the Rising Star Cave System in Africa's Cradle of Humankind continues to inform our understanding of human evolution.

One of the most important aspects of Berger's work is to communicate what we know about human evolution to the widest possible audiences. Berger is an internationally-recognized champion for open sourcing and open access science. In the early days as department chair at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Berger made the university's entire collection of hominid fossil specimens available to qualified researchers, a move that was considered controversial at the time. He has authored more than two hundred scholarly papers and popular works, including several academic and popular books on paleontology. In 2015, PBS aired the two-hour Nova and National Geographic documentary, "Dawn of Humanity" about the discovery of *H. naledi* by Dr. Berger and a team of six women paleoanthropologists nicknamed the "Underground Astronauts." The film was described as "thrilling" by *The New York Times* and

garnered an Emmy nomination. In May, it was announced that Netflix will highlight Berger's work in the Cradle of Humankind during its third film in the "Unknown" series. "Unknown: Cave of Bones" will be available to stream July 17<sup>th</sup>. Most recently, Dr. Berger and his team released [preprint articles](#) outlining their discovery of symbols and burials that suggest *H. naledi* engaged in funerary practices before modern humans and Neanderthals.

"With great awareness of where this award originates, it is with humility and appreciation that I accept the National Association of Biology Teachers *Distinguished Service Award*. As an explorer and scientist, I am keenly aware that if, as I often predict, we are in the midst of the greatest age of exploration, then it is science teachers, such as the members of this great association, that stand in the vanguard of ensuring that this generation, and the next, is prepared to seize the arsenal of weapons of discovery and knowledge transmission that are at their disposal, and evolving in front of them, and do good. However, to truly capitalize on this moment and make the planet a better place for all its current residents, we require quality science education and quality educators, such as this society promotes. Such tools, in a thus informed society, can also ensure we recognize the wondrous contributions of the past," wrote Lee regarding his award. "Through exploration and discovery, we can use the knowledge gained about history not only for conservation and preservation, but through awareness and understanding, and ultimately education, the past can teach us lessons to plan for a better future. By learning from these lessons from the human and non-human record alike, we ultimately make the world a better place for all. Thank you for this honor. Never stop exploring!" he added.

The NABT Distinguished Service Award will be presented to Dr. Lee Berger at the [2023 NABT Professional Development Conference](#) in Baltimore, Maryland. After the award presentation, Berger will give the closing general session and Q&A on Saturday, November 4<sup>th</sup>, at 4:00 PM Eastern.

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**About NABT:** Since being established in 1938, the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) has been the recognized "leader in life science education." Thousands of educators have joined NABT to share experiences and expertise with colleagues from around the globe, keep up with trends and developments in the field, and grow professionally. For more information about NABT, please visit [www.NABT.org](http://www.NABT.org).

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