

Utah researcher hopes to build global DNA database

Indigenous people: Using samples gathered in Mexico and other places, the study will create a genetic profile of the planet

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Riding in the Veracruz governor's helicopter and armed with a half-gallon of mouthwash, Utah genetic researcher Ugo Perego in late August prepared to meet members of an isolated, indigenous Mexican tribe.

Perego, who is part of Salt Lake City's nonprofit Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation, was collecting 200 DNA samples while he still had permission. The final term for Gov. Miguel Alemn Velazco, who agreed to the project, was about to expire.

The researcher happened to be in Veracruz on a trade mission with Utah Gov. Olene Walker. Veracruz officials were intrigued by the foundation's mission to collect DNA samples from around the globe.

Representatives for the Mexican governor and minister of health helped gather the needed supplies to collect the DNA samples from the village of Filomeno Mata, populated by people known as the Totonac, Perego explained.

Each participant swishes mouthwash around for 45 seconds. The alcohol in the mouthwash removes enough cheek cells to get a DNA sample, he said. Each sample helps collect information that may improve genealogical research.

The Utah trade mission is an example of how Sorenson Foundation researchers prefer to move into new areas.

Usually, groups of this kind have someone who is knowledgeable about local laws and customs, making it easier to find volunteers.

Since mouthwash samples can be dropped in the mail, they can easily be collected anywhere. The foundation tries to find local researchers who can help recruit participants.

Perego explained the local help made it easier to get genetic samples from the Totonac.

"They don't even know what DNA is," he said of the tribe.

Perego and company had little trouble finding 200 volunteers from the village of 11,000. The government volunteers explained that the Sorenson foundation wanted to preserve the memories of their ancestors.

While not an exact translation of the foundation's mission, the genetic samples will be used to include the Totonac in a worldwide genetic database.

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A nearby archaeological site, known as El Tajin, was home to a population divided by civil war. Historians believe that centuries ago half the population headed for the coast and the other half moved into the mountains.

Perego said if authorities allow DNA to be extracted from bones found at El Tajin, it could be compared with current residents of Filomeno Mata.

While an interesting project, to the foundation it is a mere branch on the world's vast family tree.

Scott Woodward, chief science officer for the foundation and a Brigham Young University researcher, said the foundation initially focused on rounding up samples from places where many Utahns can trace their roots, such as western Europe and the United Kingdom.

Mexico and Africa are new areas for Sorenson.

"This is part of our greater plan to expand our collection," Woodward said.

After four years of research, with lab work taking place at BYU in the beginning, the foundation has amassed 42,000 DNA samples.

The foundation, founded by Utah inventor and entrepreneur James LeVoy Sorenson, Jr., hopes to collect tens of thousands more.

"We feel that 500,000 samples spread evenly around the world would probably give us a pretty good understanding of the genetics of the Earth," Perego said.

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