

Oct 10th 2006, a research report was released and substantially publicised by the national media. In a survey of European nations, Great Britain proves to have the greatest rates of obesity. Our fattest citizens living in Boston, Lincolnshire, and our thinnest in Saffron Walden, Essex. Male mortality figures suggest that men die on average 8 years sooner in the North West than on the South Coast. Child obesity rates are consistently soaring with an estimated 20% of the under 13 population to be classified obese by 2010.

Winter 2006 The WHO recognise that AIDS, SARS, Bird Flu are not going to be the primary destructive health concerns facing our global population. Obesity with it's associated medical conditions of type 2 diabetes, glaucoma, high blood pressure, renal failure and vascular disease will claim more lives and present vast financial challenges to even the most affluent nations in the coming decades.

The Evolution of Homo automobilis

So we are officially the fattest nation in Europe. Funny old thing...most of me felt suitably appalled by this news, but a little bit of me felt faintly proud of our victory and the blinder the stout men of Boston played. In truth we shouldn't get too hung up as statistics are, as ever, one decimal point away from being disappointingly inconclusive. In truth we are a smidgeon broader than the average German and a little tubbier than your everyday Frenchman. What isn't in doubt however is that we are bigger than ever before...all of us. All of us in Europe, in much of the Americas, in Australasia and large swathes of Asia. We are getting bigger, and as part of this process we are getting fatter. Now we can't blame Tesco's for all of that can we?

Blame culture does dictate that we find something to pin it on though. Pretty much everyone will go for the usual suspects: tv, the automobile, sedentary jobs, lack of PE in schools, fast food chains, hydrogenated fats, Turkish delight...blether blether, and more airtime for some experts on the a.m.t.v. sofas. Easy targets but totally missing the bulls eye. We are big, and rapidly getting bigger, because of the big Eezzees...evolution and environment. These are the big guns...you can have your "out-of-town one stop retail parks" argument, your "no one walks to school" disagreements, and your "tv dinner couch potato generation" fracas...these are just petty squabbles when it comes to taking on evolution and environment. The big problem is you will never win an argument with these two guys, you cannot. Evolution and environment make us what we are...they are our Genesis.

But isn't evolution all about fossils and eras and epochs and sort of imperceptibly slow, and generally found in dusty British Museum cabinets and the Galapagos Islands? Nope, evolution is as reactive and adaptable as that most reactive and adaptable of animals...Homo sapiens. Evolution is in a race it can never win, but one it will never give up. It is chasing the Environment.

Thankfully evolution is the simplest of all the sciences. It has only one rule... "adapt and thrive". The hominid (pretty much take that as human) has been thriving for some 6 million years now. Our best guess is that the current "recognisable" model of the hominid (that's me and you) has been around for the last 300,000 years. But its all a bit irrelevant really as evolution can only ever be a concept. Evolution has no idea what species are, it doesn't have a clue about phyla (phone a friend...preferably your

old biology teacher), and it certainly has no respect for time. All evolution does is stalk the environment. It has to. If it doesn't then whatever is evolving will not thrive.

Getting back on message, why are we getting fatter? Because we are absolutely brilliant at evolving. We are born to evolve (which I bequeath as my cheesy epitaph). We can't stop evolving, you are doing it right now. But the thing is you are doing it faster than ever before in our extraordinary natural history. A natural history that has become rapidly un-natural. When it comes to adapting to environmental change, in general this process has been pretty slow. Glaciers take hundreds of years to get from Inverness to Birmingham, and the average hominid could definitely outrun them. Climate change and temperate swings are not biblical catastrophes, but more likely creeping global certainties. Thousands of years ago our tribal and family groups just went with the flow, followed our prey, moved our shelters, pulled on a few more furs, ate different fruit, adapted. We did this for hundreds of thousands of years, doing a bit of "evolution" when it was needed. Short, squat and hairy with less skin surface area to get cold nearer to the freezing ice caps. Taller, lean and hairless with more skin to cool down closer to the burning tropics. Our form reflected our environment. Brilliantly adaptable and ferociously omnivorous we can make fire and clothing to control our body temperature, and we have a digestive system that can eat anything...absolutely anything. If it moves, if it grows above or beneath ground, if it has legs or fins, if it is a fungus or a mould, or an animal or a plant we can eat it...ask those skinny Frenchmen.

It is at this point that we come to the primary reason why we are fat...spades. The agricultural revolution was the biggest cultural and, unbeknown at the time, evolutionary leap that mankind has ever made. Turn soil over and you bring the good stuff to the top considerably faster than worms can. Put fruit pips, seeds and nuts in this good stuff and find one of the many different ways that "inventive" man has found to put water on this combination and they will grow. Take the results down to the local valley and swap them for goat-skins and you have a market. Let this market stew for probably no more than 8000 years, which is a blink in our developmental timescale, and it will become a supermarket.

We have become victims of our species un-swerving adaptability and it's associated "inventive" thinking and culture. The agricultural revolution meant that we were no longer reacting to our environment, but we had found a way to mould it. The environment wasn't blazing its slow but relentless trail ahead of us, we had finally found a way of pegging it back. Evolution was catching up.

And then damn it we had to be the only animal to absolutely nail language...leave that to stew for a few thousand then it becomes the internet. Log combustion becomes internal combustion. A hole in your tepee becomes air-conditioning. We have become the most dangerous thing possible to our own species...masters of our environment. But here is the thing, the timescale for these changes has become ever more compressed. For million of years we were opportunist omnivores, for hundreds of thousands of years we were hunter gatherers, for hundreds of years we have been subsistence farmers physically toiling with our patch, for 50 years we have been food purchasers. We no longer climb the trees to get to the honey, we reach to the middle shelf were we find it processed and refined so it pours out of user friendly squeezable containers that are unlikely to sting us. This is why we are fat.

Now a short paragraph for those of you familiar with the evolutionary term "natural selection". If you were both European, obese and alive 1000 years ago it was because you were an extraordinarily good shot with a bow and arrow, if not you would be slow, and useless at spear-sticking boar, and you and your family would die (note to

reader...in Botswana and tropical Brazil these rules still apply today). The obesity “tendency” or “fat” gene lived on with these tubby archers who had the patience to teach their tubby sons how to be good shots...all the other guys with spears were skinny and fast.

In the last 30 years it has been possible to be both obese and unfit yet still be able to chase down a hamburger. In the last 15 years if you physically struggle with this task then it is just as easy to hunt one down with a drive-through technique. Both the potential genetic tendency towards being overweight, and the socio-cultural skills that you employ to forage your food will be passed on to your offspring. This is where “next generation” evolution puts its foot on the throttle and plays catch-up with this bizarre and un-natural environment that we have so rapidly created for ourselves.

We are fat because our species has reached a crescendo of innovation, invention and adaptation in the last 50 years. And we are fat because we are rapidly evolving to match the demands of this new environment. The phrase “survival of the fittest” is synonymous with evolution, conjuring up images of the biggest, strongest “fittest” stag passing on its genes via triumphant rutting. Nothing can be further from the truth as the word “fittest” is being used completely out of context. In evolutionary terms this phrase means that your species form and behaviour most closely “fit” the habitat/environment that you live in, i.e. the sea cucumber “fits” it’s environment as a spineless, slow moving, jelly-like blob as this is the most successful “form” that could inhabit dark crevices under coral shelves...they just “fit” into this particular habitat perfectly like a square peg in a square hole. They thrive in this environment.

Slow moving, jelly-like blobs...where have I seen those? We have evolved to become fat in response to our manipulation of our environment and habitat. There is only one choice for us as a species if we are to become thin again...evolution. We need to change our environment and then good old evolution will try and catch up. Our habitat needs to be more physically demanding, physiologically challenging and ask more of us as the species we once were...Homo sapiens as opposed to Homo automobilis.

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