

February 24, 2020 | By Michelle Franklin

## UC San Diego Professors Donate More than \$1M to Transdisciplinary Study of the Origins of Humankind

**Gift from Nissi and Ajit Varki will help support the UC San Diego/Salk Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny (CARTA)**

The University of California San Diego announced a major gift made by Nissi and Ajit Varki, both professors at the university. The gift, made in 2017 of founder shares in SiaMAb, a company started by the Varkis, has been initially designated for the Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny (CARTA) to support a broad range of activities, including scholarly studies of the origins of humankind. After the company was sold, the gift matured into a cash value in excess of \$1.1 million. In the coming years, depending on future progress and revenue, the gift could provide additional millions that may be directed toward CARTA and/or other transdisciplinary activities that the Varkis have been involved with at UC San Diego during the last four decades.



*Ajit and Nissi Varki. (Photo courtesy of La Jolla Light)*

Nissi Varki is a professor of Pathology at UC San Diego's School of Medicine. Her husband, Ajit Varki, is a professor of Medicine and Cellular & Molecular Medicine and is founding co-director of CARTA. During 35+ years at UC San Diego, the couple have often found ways for their research to overlap in complementary ways.

Over two decades ago, the Varkis and colleagues discovered the first known functionally significant biochemical difference between humans and our closest evolutionary relatives, the chimpanzees: a CMAH gene deletion in humans, which chimps still possess. Since that time, the couple and their collaborators have shown many examples of how this and other related, uniquely human mutations affected human evolution and disease risk, ranging all the way from the origins of our genus Homo and our greatly improved ability to run long distances, to our unique propensity for developing heart attacks due to atherosclerosis, and even a likely explanation for why eating excessive red meat increases the risk of certain cancers and heart disease only in humans.

Dedication to such studies, supported by state and federal grants as well as the Mathers Foundation of New York, led the Varkis to look for a meaningful way to give back. Their work is just one example of the research conducted by CARTA members investigating the origins of humankind. CARTA brings together local, national and international experts from a wide array of scholarly backgrounds, including medicine, physical science, social science and the humanities. The Varkis emphasize that this kind of transdisciplinary collaboration would not have been possible in many scientific institutions other than UC San Diego and the Salk Institute.

The primary mission of CARTA is to seek answers to the oldest questions of humankind: “Where did we come from? How did we get here?” In practical terms, this knowledge can have an impact on issues related to medicine and biology, how societies are organized, how children are raised, and how humans interact with one another and our environment—in contemporary terms, this might mean investigating the impact of social media and artificial intelligence on the human mind or how global climate disruption can impact society.

UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla praised the Varkis for their commitment to the university. “We are very fortunate to not only have Nissi and Ajit doing incredibly important work here, but now we will also benefit from their tremendous generosity. There can be no greater quest than investigating the origins of humankind and through this gift, the Varkis have provided much-needed support of that quest.”

Salk Institute President and CARTA Co-Director Fred Gage commented that “The remarkable generosity of Nissi and Ajit is a reflection of their commitment to academic research and training in understanding the origins of the human species. Their own scientific discoveries in this area have added enormously to this endeavor, but this gift allows the center they helped develop continue to have an international impact.”

Pascal Gagneux, CARTA associate director added that “Nissi and Ajit’s many discoveries have highlighted a true hotspot of human evolution with numerous ramifications for the human condition in health and disease. With unwavering support by leaders of UC San Diego Health Sciences and the Salk Institute, CARTA has reached out to scholars across the world, who now exchange diverse perspectives on human origins, sparking new research on how our species came to determine the fate of all other species on the planet.”

“We are honored the Varkis have chosen to support CARTA’s transdisciplinary mission of understanding our human origins,” said Vice Chancellor for Health Sciences David Brenner. “This transformational gift will ensure generations of scholars from diverse fields have the opportunity to explore one of history’s greatest mysteries.”

This gift of securities contributes to the [Campaign for UC San Diego](#) – a university-wide comprehensive fundraising effort concluding in 2022. Together with philanthropic partners, UC San Diego will continue its nontraditional path toward revolutionary ideas, unexpected answers, lifesaving discoveries and planet-changing impact. To learn more about how to lend your support the Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny (CARTA), please visit [carta.anthropogeny.org](http://carta.anthropogeny.org) and click on “Support.”

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#### MEDIA CONTACT

**Michelle Franklin**, 858-534-8564, [m1franklin@ucsd.edu](mailto:m1franklin@ucsd.edu)

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