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Decade of the Mind stresses importance of brain, mind research for everyday Americans

Research with apes and monkeys one key to understanding the human mind

Des Moines, Iowa – May 20, 2008 – Nine internationally recognized scientists working with great apes and monkeys told an audience of 200 earlier this month how their research unlocks some of the secrets of the mind, findings that could lead to better treatments for brain diseases accelerating at a dramatic and costly rate and the development of “intelligent” machines, among other innovations potentially fueling the U.S. economy.

Together, the speakers at Great Ape Trust of Iowa’s **Decade of the Mind III: Emergence of Mind** symposium, held May 7-9, made a compelling case for 10-year, \$4 billion federally funded research program, said Dr. James Olds, developer of the proposal. Olds is director of the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study, a center at George Mason University involved in studies of the mind, brain and intelligence, and the host of the first Decade of the Mind symposium in May 2007.

“This symposium crystallized the importance of investing now in a \$4 billion Decade of the Mind initiative,” he said. “By bringing together the world’s best ape and monkey researchers into the unique venue that The Trust offers, the organizers helped move America’s heartland to ‘going all-in’ with the 21st century equivalent of the Moon

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Shot.”

Olds believes the Decade of the Mind initiative holds the same power as America’s race to the moon to unleash a scientific and technological revolution. He warned that if American scientists do not lead the inquiry and drive the science, foreign competitors will surpass the United States in scientific discovery and reap the benefits of what he calls “a powerful accelerant for economy.”

But first, it’s important to make the inquiry top-of-mind for the vast majority of Americans who are non-scientists, Olds, a neuroscientist, said in his address during the first full day of the symposium. “This will only amount to something if we get it out from inside the Beltway and into America, where we can persuade Americans this is something worth investing in,” he said. “As scientists, we need to drop the jargon and speak in English and common sense.”

In non-scientific terms, the proposed scientific inquiry involves “reverse engineering the mind” to discover how qualities such as memory, language, rational thought, symbolic thought and self-awareness emerge and are deployed. “Take it apart, figure out how it’s put together,” Olds said. “If we are ever going to understand the brain and mind, we are going to have to be able to reverse-engineer it.”

Such an understanding could lead to, among other innovations, targeted therapies for Alzheimer’s disease, a host of mental illnesses and other burdensome public health issues; “intelligent” machines potentially reducing highway fatalities and combat casualties; and new high-tech, high-wage jobs that would help plug the “brain drain” in Iowa and other Midwest states.

The proposed Decade of the Mind initiative is still in its infancy, having been proposed only a year ago. Already, a group of the world’s “scientific superstars” have already reached consensus on disciplines that should be included in the inquiry, Olds said, and lobbying efforts have begun with key players to build support for “investing in the most complex machine we know of in the universe.”

Olds said he is pleased with the initial response among congressional officials and agency heads that might help administer the program, and he and his colleagues are optimistic that the first round of funding – at a rate of about \$400 million a year – will be included in the new administration’s budget proposal.

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Great Ape Trust scientists Dr. Rob Shumaker and Dr. Karyl Swartz, co-organizers of the symposium, said one of its hallmarks was the scientific credibility of the presentations, which together demonstrated the type of research that might be funded through Decade of the Mind.

“The Decade of the Mind initiative has the potential to be a powerful force for change in terms of understanding the mind,” Shumaker said. “The opportunities that this presents are profound, and Great Ape Trust is proud to endorse this effort. Through research that compares the mental processes and abilities of humans and great apes, our organization can play a significant role in the important job of reverse engineering the mind.”

Swartz said the presentations explored distinctly different areas of scientific research, but were complementary when viewed as a whole. “Each presentation was outstanding by itself,” she said, “but the integration of diverse perspectives that became apparent in the overall program speaks to the transformational nature of research outcomes that would be funded under a Decade of the Mind initiative.”

Those attending the symposium came from diverse backgrounds and included scientists, academicians, medical professionals, students and others interested in primatology and related topics.

To view symposium presentations, [click here](#). For a slide show of the event, [click here](#). For background on Decade of the Mind, [click here](#).

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust

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of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes