

# "Mapping the Human Genome"

If you think it's hard to read a map of the Interstate Highway system, just wait until you can download your own copy of the Human Genome. Science finally cracked the secret code of life, charting the biological map for the 3 billion pair of chemicals within our DNA. Think of it as the assembly plan for our species.

The scientific community compared this breakthrough to Galileo's discovery of the solar system, the invention of the Gutenberg press, and the almost infinite number of uses for Velcro.

They estimate we each contain somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 genes. I guess the more overweight you are, the more genes you are potentially able to hold. How genes combine determines your hair color, diseases that may be available to you, and whether or not you are ever likely to attend a tractor pull.

Surprisingly, we all share about 99.9 percent of the same genetic code, and the majority of human genes are identical to those in all of God's other creatures as well. So next time you think about calling someone, say your attorney, a weasel, understand that on the cellular level, you are not very far from the truth.

Researchers had to first break down the DNA into its billions of tiny pieces. The bigger challenge was to reassemble them again in the right order, and not end up with a bunch of pieces left over. You can only imagine how daunting a task this is, especially if you have ever tried assembling a patio grill.

Still, there are gaps in this giant gene map, so they're calling this initial version the first of many drafts. Think of it as Shakespeare sitting down early on at his desk and jotting down the words...."To be...or...whatever."

But, I'm troubled because one research team based the universal genome on the DNA of a single unidentified male. He's now saddled with the awesome responsibility of representing our entire species as the genetic role model. I fear that male will turn out to be someone like my cousin, Milt Greenwald, an abrasive, balding, petty little man. Trust me, we do not want him as the template determining our evolutionary fate.

More frightening however is the mad rush by biotech firms to patent the very genes we've carried inside us for the past 100,000 years. Like most concerned Americans, I worry that someday I will be required to pay a monthly fee because some company somewhere now technically owns my kidneys.

Others say this work means we are only 40 or so years away from immortality. Sure, it would be nice to live forever, but by then, I'll be forced to live through eternity as an 87 year old man, whose days will be limited to sucking the moisture out of fresh fruit.

I'm the 10 trillion cells known as Chuck Goldstone, for Marketplace.

© Copyright 2004. Chuck Goldstone. All Rights Reserved