



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2014

### H118 The U.S.-Mexico-Central America Border Project: The Search for Missing Migrants

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand factors leading to increased migrant deaths since 2000, obstacles to reaching identifications in these cases, and approaches used to improve exchange of information as well as possibilities for identifications.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing collaborative cross-national forensic practice, with the potential to significantly reshape forensic practice in some places regarding unidentified remains thought to correspond to missing migrants.

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team's (EAAF's) Border Project, begun at the end of 2009, plans to create a Regional Committee on Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains to significantly improve the identifications of migrants among unidentified remains in the region. The project affects the southern United States border, Central America, and Mexico. This multiyear project responds to: the growing number of unidentified remains thought to correspond to migrants in the region; the need to improve in some cases the quality and number of identifications of remains; the reliance in many instances on an *ad hoc* case-by-case approach by forensic personnel, law enforcement, and consulates to reach identifications as opposed to a regional, coordinated forensic system to exchange information on a massive scale; and the frustrations sometimes experienced by both Mexican and Central American families searching for missing migrants. To this end, EAAF is pursuing two parallel programs.

The first is a pilot project for the creation of forensic data banks on missing migrants in migrant communities of origin, containing case files with all available information on missing migrants, including antemortem and background information for each case and genetic profiles from relatives. Data banks have governmental and non-governmental partners working together and have begun to develop as autonomous and sustainable institutions, collaborating at a regional level. So far, data banks have been created in El Salvador, Chiapas, Honduras, and an initial mechanism in Guatemala. Select cases have been included from Costa Rica and other Mexican states. In total, these data banks include nearly 500 cases of missing migrants, as well as almost 1,400 genetic profiles from relatives. Case information is compared against unidentified remains in U.S. and Mexican morgues that may correspond to missing migrants for identification purposes. Working with consulates and local morgues, EAAF has determined the identification of 43 migrants at this point in time, twenty-eight from El Salvador, nine from Guatemala, three from Honduras, two from Chiapas, and one from Costa Rica. Twenty-two of the remains were recovered in Texas, seventeen in Arizona, three in Mexico and one in California.

The second program consists of a strategic planning project to improve regional governments' responses and public policies regarding cases of missing migrants, working toward the founding of the Regional Committee on Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains. The strategic planning project involves: meetings among Mexico-United States border forensic institutions, state prosecutors' offices, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and other relevant institutions to discuss accessing and crossing of information on unidentified remains and missing migrants, the treatment of families searching for missing migrants and, where needed, improving local standard operating procedures for investigating cases of missing persons and unidentified remains; presenting a regional approach at relevant conferences and hearings, such as those arranged by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; and, finally, presenting information before intergovernmental bodies like the Organization of American Studies (OAS) and United Nations (UN) on the challenges and obstacles posed by inadequate governmental responses.

To date, the Border Project has contributed to reaching new identifications that would not have previously been made, many involving cold cases, as well as the use of scientific evidence in identifications that may previously have relied solely on circumstantial evidence. In addition, evidence collected from identifications are contributing in some cases to processes of accountability and justice for families of migrants, and to reform government policy regarding forensic involvement in the identification of migrants. Significant challenges remaining for the Border Project include reaching agreements with further national, state, and local agencies to access information on unidentified remains, and in the context of the data banks, maintaining project continuity during governmental administrative transitions. EAAF's long-term goal is to assist in creating the Regional Committee on Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains, which will help coordinate the work of the forensic data banks for missing migrants, oversee an ongoing and



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systematic forensic comparison of all cases across international borders, improve regional exchange-of-data, and disseminate forensic best practices.

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### **Migrants, Identification, Regional Collaboration**