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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Texas Wesleyan professor of biology researches world's oldest corncobs, thanks to NSF grant extension

FORT WORTH, April 11 – Dr. Bruce Benz, Texas Wesleyan associate professor of biology, has been privileged to study the most ancient specimens of maize agriculture in North and Central America through a collaborative agreement between Texas Wesleyan University and the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

Dr. Benz has performed biological research into the origins of Mesoamerican Agriculture for the past two years through a National Science Foundation grant and will continue his studies with a grant extension through 2003.

Dr. Benz said he hopes the research project, titled "The Origins of Mesoamerican Maize Agriculture: Climate and Intentionality," will explain whether human selection or climate changes was responsible for the increases in the production of grain during the last 5,000 years in Mesoamerica. Due to Wesleyan's collaboration with the INAH, Dr. Benz will have the opportunity to analyze a collection of corncobs – some more than 6,000 years old – found inside caves in the deserts of the Techuacan Valley of Southern Puebla, Mexico.

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Intense scientific study of the specimens will supply Dr. Benz with information unavailable to previous researchers who were limited by the technology of their day. Recent developments in molecular biology and geochemistry, including the ability to extract DNA, will answer the old questions such as the ancestral origin and rates of evolutionary change, as well as the exact age of the corn. The advent of technology will allow new questions to be posed, including how rapidly corn evolved during its 6,000-year existence.

For more information, contact Dr. Benz, Texas Wesleyan associate professor of biology, at 817-531-4863.

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