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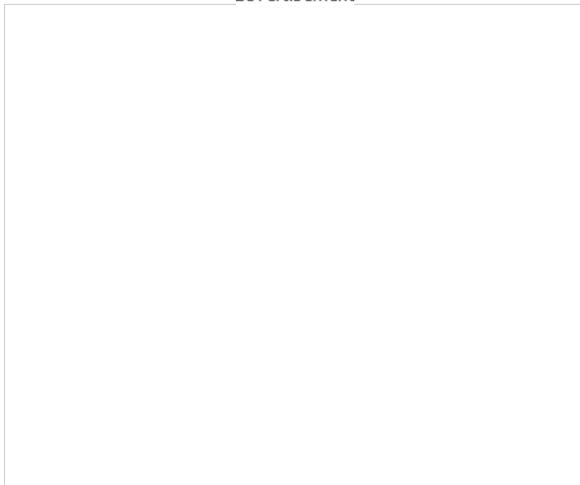
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Why our sight is coloured by emotion
By Roger Highfield Science Editor
(Filed: 14/02/2006)

Humans see in colour so that they can recognise the first flush of emotion in the faces of another, a study suggests.



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The traditional explanation of why humans, apes and monkeys see three colours, while other mammals manage with two, is that it helped our ancestors to find ripe fruits or edible leaves.

But a team from the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, in the latest issue of the journal *Biology Letters*, challenges this idea with evidence that colour vision is crucial for seeing changes in the skin of others - whether they are red with rage, flushed with embarrassment or white with fear.

As a corollary of this, humans have bare faces, not hairy ones, to help make their feelings plain. The survey of some 100 species of primates shows that colour vision tends to accompany having a hairless face.

The differences in the way that primates and other mammals see the world are due to colour sensors in the

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retina called cones.

Most other mammals possess only two types of cone, blue and green (blue and red in some species). But man and many other primates have "trichromatic" colour vision, based on three types of cone: blue, green and red.

The report suggests that changes in skin hue, which occur whether someone has black or white skin, can be detected by three cones.

If we are frightened, for example, and blood drains from our faces then the skin becomes more yellow. If we are embarrassed and flushed, when more blood is in the skin, then the hue is more green-blue.

"This connection between bare skin and colour vision may be important in understanding why humans are the 'naked ape'," the scientists report.

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