The Museum of Man gets jab in the gender

Scott LaFee Staff Writer

In a word, the Museum of Man has a problem.

It's the last word actually, the one that's supposed to suggest all of us, every man, woman and child. Some folks say the word doesn't cut it -- not by half.

"The message in 'Museum of Man' is that men are the first consideration. Men are primary. It makes women into second-class citizens," says Kris Anderson.

A post-graduate student at SDSU, Anderson and a friend complained to museum officials last October that the "man" in the anthropology museum's title was sexist.

"It's a legitimate issue," concedes museum director Douglas Sharon. "We've looked at changing it twice but both times the trustees thought it wasn't a big enough problem."

Nonetheless, the museum is reconsidering its name one more time. Sharon says the process began before Anderson and her friend, Michele Lyn, complained. "It's an issue that comes up every time the museum's charter is reviewed."

A committee of five men and one woman head the review.

"If you were going to name a museum, you'd want to consider the issue of sexism," says Mary Dawe, a lawyer and the committee's female member. "The name doesn't offend me."

It doesn't offend Mason Freeman, the committee's, uh, chairperson. He's been involved in all three reviews: in 1980, 1988 and now.

"It's a problem with the English language. There is no third-person singular word that corresponds to he and she," says Freeman, a retired admiral. And knowing that, Freeman thinks it's much ado about nothing.

"If you were to poll our membership, they would overwhelmingly say just stay where you are. It's a political issue with female groups who just don't like seeing a sexist word used. I don't disagree with them. It's just the way it is."

To which Anderson responds: "I thought we changed this thinking in the 1970s when it was proven how sexist language negatively affects people. The museum's name is a blatant anachronism."

Originally, the word man in Old English meant "humanity." According to Webster's Word Histories, there were other terms for a single man and woman: wer for a man, wif for a woman.

Over time, wer fell into disfavor. By 1000, man took on the double meaning of a single male and humanity. In 1841, the British Parliament adopted a resolution saying man meant mankind. The "Oxford English Dictionary" declared the term to be "the human creature regarded abstractly."

"It's a very old meaning that still has legitimacy today," said Orrin Seright, an SDSU professor of linguistics. "My feeling is that these objections to it come from a rather strident minority."

Perhaps, says Ernest Miranda, co-president of the San Diego chapter of the National Organization for Women, "but even if only a few people perceive the museum's title (to mean man the singular), it's a case of too many."

The problem in all this, says museum director Sharon, is that there don't seem to be any obviously suitable alternatives.

Anderson and Miranda have suggestions: the Museum of Human History, the Museum of Humanity, the Museum of Men and Women. A museum in Canada, they note, changed its name to the Museum of Civilization.

Freeman accepts the suggestions but wonders about donors who like the current name, about whether a name change would affect the museum's standing and image in the scientific community, about tradition.

On the other hand, Michele Lyn, who wrote the letter to the museum with Anderson, says the museum may be missing out. "They could have more benefactors if they were more inclusive. I know people who would give to the museum if the name was different."

Whatever happens, it's not likely to happen soon. There is no timetable for making a decision. Evidence suggests the museum will not act rashly.

Take its current name. For 75 years, it has been known as the Museum of Man. Technically, however, that wasn't its name. Until 1979, when museum officials finally changed state records, the place carried the bland, but non-sexist, moniker of Museum Association.

Caption: Michele Lyn, left, and Kris Anderson at the Museum of Man.