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Museums, Archeology, Repatriation and Colonialism



Aboriginal group ups ante on artefacts

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A Victorian Aboriginal group is offering to lend back seized etchings on loan from the British Museum, in a bold move aimed at breaking a stalemate over ownership of the artefacts.

The Dja Dja Wurrung tribe, who claim ownership of the 1850s bark etchings, will put their scheme forward at meeting with Museum Victoria.

Gary Murray, Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group secretary, described the move as a "creative strategy" aimed at moving the debate along.

His group is meeting with lawyers to get help drafting an exchange agreement that acknowledges Aboriginal ownership that can be put to museums including Museum Victoria and the British Museum.

The central Victorian group has already secured an emergency declaration order under federal legislation preventing the return of three bark etchings and a ceremonial emu figure to Britain.

The objects were loaned in March to Museum Victoria by the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens in London and were due to be returned this week. "We've got to be positive, we've got to be proactive and we've got to move that agreement out there for public scrutiny so everyone can see what we're trying to do here," Mr Murray said. "We're not trying to clear out collections overnight.

"We want an organised strategy that allows us to have a formal agreement of substance with any museum in the world, including our own, so that we can talk about ownership, talk about management, talk about short-term or long-term loans and talk about repatriation in a reasonable manner."

Mr Murray said the exchange agreement could also be used to resolve the status of hundreds of other Aboriginal artefacts at the British Museum that indigenous groups want repatriated.

The seizure has sent anxious ripples through the international museum community that other travelling exhibitions in Australia could be put at risk.

Museum Victoria has taken its own legal advice on the seizure and has warned that it must fulfil its obligations to the two British institutions.

But Mr Murray said overseas museums had nothing to fear because the exchange agreement could effectively add cultural value to overseas exhibits by including a statement and other information about the traditional owners.

"That's the beautiful thing about traditional owners, whether it's us or Inuits or Maori people.

"They (the museums) are not using it, they're not getting creative in their dealings with us.

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