

The Observer

Aborigines clash with scientists over bones

Vital evidence 'will be lost for ever' if ancestral remains are returned

Marsha Stewart.
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The Observer posted an article by Paul Harris on June 1, 2003, claiming that a furious row has broken out between British scientists and Australian Aboriginal rights activists over human remains being used as research specimens. The Aborigines want the remains returned to Australia, but scientists fear that some of their most valued research tools will be buried or burnt and lost to science forever. The row will come to a head this summer when the British Government is likely to ease the 'repatriation' of hundreds of samples from some of Britain's most respected museums and universities back to Australia.

Several of Britain's top scientists studying human evolution say the loss to their work will be incalculable. 'This would be very damaging. We would see whole areas closed off to research if we lost key specimens,' said Professor Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum.

The museum has some 20,000 human remains, ranging from whole bodies to teeth and hair samples. Half is British in origin but the rest comes from abroad, including many from Australia. British law protects the museum from having to return its specimens, but that is likely to change when a government panel returns a report on the issue in the next two months.

Aboriginal human rights activists say that using Aboriginal remains for study - no matter how old they are - is insulting. 'It is very offensive. We Aborigines were not put on this earth for British scientists to do research on,' said Rodney Dillon, a commissioner on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, which advises the Australian Government on Aboriginal affairs.

Stringer and other scientists say their collections should be seen as academic tools - like Egyptian mummies - and not as the ancestors of living people. They fear that, as in the case of the valuable 10,000-year-old Cohuna skull that was returned to Aboriginal control, the remains will be reburied and destroyed.

In North America hundreds of bones and skulls have been taken out of museums and universities and returned to the control of Native American tribes. Many have been destroyed in reburial ceremonies, removing them forever from scientific record and leaving only plastic replicas to be studied. They include many full skeletons, some of them of vital scientific importance, including that of 'Pelican Rapids Woman', destroyed by the Sioux in 1999, and 'Buhl Woman', destroyed by the Shoshone in 1991.

Scientists at the world famous Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies in Cambridge, which has a collection of 18,000 human remains share stringer's fears of similar losses in Britain. It is believed that several hundred of the specimens, nearly all from Australia, could become the subject of repatriation efforts if the law changes.

Scientists say it is vital to keep the bones for further study because new techniques of analysis are continually developing and new information can still be gleaned from old specimens, no matter how many times they have been studied. 'The problem with repatriation demands is that they are often unconditional. Once you let the specimens go back, you have no control of what happens to them,' said Dr Robert Foley, director of the Leverhulme.

Some Australian academics have dismissed the British complaints. They say that many of the bones in question were collected in the nineteenth century and are not ancient at all; they are of little scientific value, while clearly being ancestors of people currently living. 'I think the case for repatriation of these remains is very strong,' said Professor Paul Turnbull of the history department at James Cook University.

Turnbull said the opposition to repatriation was harming scientific research by convincing Aboriginal groups not to allow any access to fresh discoveries of ancient remains on their land. 'Opposition to repatriation has so distressed Aboriginal communities that they have refused to allow remains to be subjected to further examination,' he said.

Aboriginal activists say returning the remains is vital to restoring dignity to a people pushed to the edge of extinction and who continue to be marginalized in modern Australia. Dillon said he had recently witnessed the return and reburial of remains by the Ngarrindjeri Tribe from samples held by the Royal College of Surgeons, which voluntarily decided to send back some of its collection. 'They were just so pleased. The spirit of those people was not meant to end up in a cardboard box in some museum. It was meant to look out over the Earth.'

Marsha Stewart.

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