

The plan to bury Mungo Man and Mungo Lady pains some traditional owners – and the man who found them

Their discovery proved millennia of continuous Indigenous existence. Now time is running out for those who want to stop them being buried again



Mutthi Mutthi elder Mary Pappin says the Mungo Man and Mungo Lady should be kept in a place where they are safe and not 'buried so that they could never be seen again'.

by Paul Daley
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It might have seemed relatively uncomplicated half a century ago to take the ancient remains of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man from the dry bed of the Willandra Lakes in New South Wales.

Nobody stood in the way when scientists brought the bones to the Australian National University where research on them would reveal that modern Indigenous people had been continuously inhabiting this part of Australia for at least 42,000 years.

But laying them back to rest in the lake bed today – whether secretly in unmarked graves or with ceremony in a monumental keeping place – is proving far more vexing for the scientist who took them and, more importantly, for their living Aboriginal descendants.

The implications of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man – discovered in 1968 and 1974 respectively by geologist Jim Bowler – were profound.

The remains are at least 42,000 years old, and are the most significant human remains to be found outside of Africa.

Mungo Man and Mungo Lady were subject to elaborate funerary rites involving ochre and fire, indicating their cultural and spiritual sophistication.



Dr Jim Bowler, a geologist, came across human remains on the banks of Lake Mungo in south-western New South Wales in 1968.

They also hold unique value for their ongoing potential to shed light on human evolution, and Indigenous adaptation to climatic and geological change, as the Willandra Lakes had transformed from wetlands to what is likened in parts to an arid moonscape.

But for their descendants there are greater imperatives – their spirits will not rest until they are reinterred, one way or another, in country.

Soon, if the New South Wales government has its way, the Mungos and 106 other Indigenous people who've also been taken from the area will be reburied in 26 unmarked sites across the Willandra world heritage site. They will go back into the lake bed without public ceremony or any markers.

The plan for a simple reburial was accepted by the state government upon the November 2018 approval by a local Aboriginal advisory group comprising three people with acknowledged associations with the people of the region – the Mutthi

Mutthi, Ngiyampaa and Barkindji (the latter recognised as native title holders of 80% of the relevant area).

But there are suggestions the advisory group is splintering, has not consulted their broader communities and is defying the wishes of some dead elders that the remains be held in a special keeping or resting place. Some Indigenous stakeholders are divided over the nature of the keeping place, including whether it should have a monumental element.

Pain and anguish

Michael Young, a Barkindji man, was critical along with Bowler to the return of Mungo Man and the others from Canberra to the traditional owners of the Willandra Lakes Region in 2017. He says his relatives, living and dead, have long been in turmoil over the remains.



A repatriation ceremony was held outside the National Museum of Australia where the remains of Mungo Man and 104 ancient ancestors were given to the traditional owners of the Willandra Lakes region.

“There has always been so much pain and anguish associated with this. At the mention of Mungo Man and Lady ... the aunts would put their heads in their hands, shake their heads and weep,” he says.

He says there had been talks for decades about a keeping place, but that was now off the table and “they just want to rebury them”.

“And yet 80% of the land where they want to rebury is actually within the [Barkindji] native title determination area. And yet Barkindji community haven’t had any say,” Young says.

“We don’t want reburial. We don’t want the state-supported destruction of the ancestral remains.

“We want a subterranean vault for the remains so they are back on country and back in the earth – all of that could be implemented at minimal cost.”

Young says as existing building should be repurposed for the vault. A new building can’t be constructed on the world heritage site.

He says a keeping place should be run by and for Indigenous people and also be a place where Aboriginal archaeologists and other scientists would continue limited forms of research.

“But we don’t want large monuments. You can’t put monuments out there.

“The type of monuments some were talking about were ridiculous. It was very colonial ... just the idea of a monument goes against our culture.”

The concept of a subterranean keeping place and monument was first raised in the 1980s. An elaborate architectural design was even commissioned. But momentum waned amid lingering delays on repatriation and an ultimate unwillingness by the state government to fund the project.

Mungo Lady was returned in 1992 and has been safely kept in the Mungo National Park visitor centre. Mungo Man has been kept in the same place since returning in 2017.

Jewel in human story

NSW’s reburial plan came to light this month when the federal environment department called for the public to comment on it. That process was triggered because the burials are proposed in a world heritage area, the status coming in 1981 because of the global significance of Mungo Man and Lady.

Bowler, 91, says the remains of Mungo Man and Lady are a “jewel” in the global and Australian “human story of 40,000-plus years of continuous Indigenous civilisation” and that would “evaporate if we simply take them out and bury them”.

He says Willandra’s world heritage inscription was dependent on the global significance of the remains and that this status would be diminished by reburial.

The remains represent the existence and acknowledgement of “modern human consciousness in a landscape which remembers the Gondwana days of a million years ago”, the geologist says. And they should be “respectfully interred and acknowledged memorially”.



Mungo Man was taken on a repatriation journey from Canberra to the traditional owners of the Willandra Lakes Region in 2017.

“This is the site from which we can establish the long-awaited principle of making Australia proud, of giving us an iconic landscape where land and people come together to provide Australia with that wider concept of both nature and culture,” Bowler says.

Patsy Winch, chair of the Aboriginal advisory group, said recently that Bowler should “stop interfering, he’s had his time”.

“When Mungo Man was sitting on a shelf in Canberra, nobody worried about him then,” she told *The Australian*.

But Mutthi Mutthi man Jason Kelly, a member of the advisory group, supports Bowler’s position on preservation, a keeping place and memorial.

“I have gone through minutes of past meetings [of elders] ... and going back to the 1980s, again and again, the aunties were saying ‘keeping place – there will be a keeping place for them’,” says Kelly.

He says the three tribes on the advisory group have never been adequately resourced to consult with their own communities. “So we can’t be defined as a community-elected peak Aboriginal body.

“Yes, we are people from the three tribes but we have never been resourced to meet this criteria [to consult more widely]. There has been no consultation with traditional owner community members outside the AAG [Aboriginal advisory group].”



The Mungo National Park was once a lush lake and wetlands, and a gathering place for local Aboriginal people.

Mary Pappin, a Mutthi Mutthi elder, says the Mungos “can’t go back in the ground until after we get our keeping place”.

“The keeping place was the place that they should go – back in the ground, [but] behind the keeping place, in that landscape,” she says. “We didn’t want them locked away and buried so that they could never be seen again.”

She wants them in a place “where they could be safe and we could look after them”. “But we also knew we would need them [again] one day to explain to the rest of the world ... how long they had been there.”

It is unreasonable – and arguably a colonial legacy – for governments to expect that sometimes disparate Indigenous stakeholders might quickly speak with one voice on complex issues relating to the repatriation of ancestral remains. Tens of thousands of these remains were stolen from traditional burial sites from the early 18th century.

The acknowledged government starting point for return to country is that, wherever possible, Indigenous communities determine where possible what happens to the remains.

When multiple non-Indigenous governing structures – local councils, and state and federal governments, for example – and legal frameworks such as native title inevitably become part of the process, progress almost invariably becomes fraught and sometimes rancorous. Resolution takes time – sometimes many decades.



The NSW government's plan to rebury the Mungos in the earth has caused pain for some traditional owners.

But time is running out for those who want to stop reburial of the Mungo remains; the deadline for public comment has passed and a federal determination is expected in early August.

Bowler, who might not have foreseen all of this when he came across the bones protruding from the sands of the ancient lake all those years ago, concedes the fraught nature of what is happening.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey has, meanwhile, publicly supported Bowler.

“When we look at our history there are certain people, certain events, certain landscapes that give us a sense of wonder and a sense that we belong to this land. And whether it’s Henry Lawson’s short stories or Banjo Paterson’s poems or whether it’s the Heidelberg painters – there are certain events that make us feel we belong and Jim Bowler and Lake Mungo revolutionised our understanding of a vital part of ... the human history of our homeland.”

But Bowler does not sound optimistic.

“I think we are fighting an uphill battle,” he says. “Whatever the outcome, I’ll live with it. But I reiterate my conviction that the richness and global significance of this place will evaporate if we merely take the remains all out and bury them.”