

The return of the natives

Sydney

A DEMAND by an Australian aboriginal group that a collection of ice age human remains, 10,000 to 15,000 years old, should be handed over for reburial has sparked criticisms that the government of the state of Victoria is sanctioning the destruction of priceless relics. The dispute between scientists and members of the Echuca Aboriginal Cooperative, who claim descent from the Pleistocene inhabitants of the Kow Swamp area in northern Victoria, may yet erupt into a legal battle.

The Aboriginal community has told the Museum of Victoria, which holds the remains, that the collection of over 100 bodies must be returned to them according to the provisions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Heritage Protection Act of 1984, under which skeletal remains and sacred sites and artefacts receive federal protection (*Nature* 344, 697; 19 April 1990).

But according to John Mulvaney, secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the return of such old remains would be unprecedented. "There is no parallel in the world to destroy human remains over 10,000 years old. This is one of the best single examples from the Pleistocene age in existence and the Victorian government is allowing it to be destroyed", said Mulvaney.

Alan Thorne of the department of prehistory at the Australian National University, who excavated the remains between 1969 and 1972 and donated them to the Museum of Victoria in 1985, says that a decision to return the collection has been made by the Victorian Minister for the Arts, Andrew McCutcheon, who is responsible for the museum, the Victorian

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Brian Mier, and the Echuca Aboriginal Cooperative. "Nothing has been discussed", complained Thorne, who says that representatives of neither Australian archaeology nor the general aboriginal community have been consulted. "The Victorian government has received more than 200 letters from anthropologists and prehistory experts here and overseas protesting [at] the reburial", he said.

Victoria is divided into regions defined as belonging to aboriginal communities, which can ask for the return of remains taken from their region. But both Thorne and Mulvaney dispute the possibility of a connection between modern aboriginals and the prehistoric Kow Swamp people. "It is nonsense to think that the Echuca aboriginals are direct descendants of a group that lived there 10,000 years ago. These people moved around a lot", Mulvaney said.

Thorne claims that the Kow Swamp site is not part of the Echuca community area, and suggests that a legal challenge to the Victorian government may thus be made, preventing the collection from being handed over. A spokesperson at the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs agreed that Kow Swamp is "on the border of the Echuca area", and said government lawyers were looking into Thorne's claim.

As a compromise, Mulvaney and Thorne have suggested to the government that the collection be placed in the care of the Echuca aboriginal community to be stored, not buried, so that "white scientists would be denied access but Aboriginal prehistorians and anthropology students could have access to them at a later date".

Tania Ewing

RESEARCH PRIZES

Chain store fortune funds new award

Munich

A LITTLE-known foundation based in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland will next year offer a prize more lucrative than the Nobel Prize to a researcher in medicine or biology whose achievements "will contribute significantly to improvements in human health". The recipient will receive one million Swiss francs (\$738,000), more than the Nobel Prize's four million Swedish krona (\$688,000). The new award will be granted every second year beginning on 11 October 1991.

The Helmut Horten Foundation was created by the late Helmut Horten (1909-87), a German businessman who founded a successful department store chain in 1936. Despite a challenge from the West German tax authorities, Horten managed to deposit

most of his considerable fortune in Switzerland before he died, childless. The foundation currently has SFr 60 million at its disposal and will receive still more in the near future.

According to the foundation, the award winner must have made "seminal scientific contributions to the basic biomedical sciences, epidemiology, parasitology, or to disease eradication efforts". The winner will be selected by an international committee of experts.

The foundation asks researchers to nominate deserving candidates from anywhere in the world after contacting the Foundation at CH- 6995 Madonna del Piano, Switzerland. The deadline is 15 November 1990. Self-nominations will not be accepted.

Steven Dickman

East Germany says no

Munich

EAST Germany may be moving towards a tougher line on the release of even harmless genetically engineered bacteria into the environment, an East German company has discovered to its cost.

Although there are no clear regulations dealing with the release in question, and it had already been pronounced harmless by a local regulatory body, the national Genetics Commission has shut down enzyme production at the company until it conforms to stricter standards.

The 'release', which occurred at the biotechnology company PROWIKO of Schönebeck bei Magdeburg, was actually a continuous trickle of *Bacillus subtilis* bacteria, which were genetically engineered to produce large quantities of the enzyme alpha-amylase. The enzyme is used in food production. The same safety commission had declared the release safe every year since 1986 before deciding to shut it down in March 1990. In West Germany regulation is stricter, but even there the releases might well have been judged harmless.

Waste released from the plant carried the bacteria into the environment, says Kornelia Smalla, laboratory director at the local Magdeburg hygiene inspection office. But the bacteria died almost immediately and their recombinant genes did not persist, she says. Filtering out such bacteria is not required by the guidelines for "good industrial large-scale practice" issued by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), says Smalla.

An employee of the company, Michael Wölbing, said that stories of the releases had been distorted by both the local and the West German press, which printed "nonsense" about "beer that makes you sick". The company was mystified by the sudden order to close.

New safety demands have been made — such as the requirement to determine the entire sequence and gene products of the plasmid that carries the alpha-amylase gene — that Wölbing finds unnecessarily harsh. The company has stopped making its other products because of a lack of customers.

In contrast to the West, where environmental release has long been controversial, in East Germany there has never been much public concern, says Eva Reich, a physician and a prominent member of the opposition party New Forum in East Berlin. Even now, says Reich, genetic engineering is not yet an issue in most of East Germany. "People still believe in science here", she says.

Steven Dickman