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Aboriginal remains head for home

The origins of the small collection of bones that will soon travel from London's Natural History Museum (NHM) to Tasmania say much about why the journey has taken so long to come about — and is still so controversial. One skull comes from an unnamed Tasmanian aboriginal woman, shot by a white settler and later decapitated. The curatorial description for another set of remains notes coolly that: "There has been white settlement of Tasmania since 1802. The remnants of the blacks being removed from the island in 1831."

Just a dozen or so Tasmanian aboriginal women survived the brutal colonization by British settlers, and only a handful of museums retain specimens of the now dead race. For scientists, those remains are a crucial illustration on a page in human history. But for modern Australians descended from the aborigines, they are stolen property. On 17 November the NHM trustees announced that, in this case at least, indigenous claims trump scientific value.

The decision is a landmark in a process that has seen human remains repatriated to an increasing number of indigenous groups over the past 20 years. In the United States, a change in the law has allowed native Americans to request the return of cultural and biological artefacts since 1990. But the move by the NHM could mark a change in the process, as few remains have so far been repatriated to groups outside the country in which they are held. The museum has also unsettled scientists by assessing indigenous ownership using much looser criteria than other institutions have used.

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The NHM's decision is the first to be made since Britain passed legislation in 2004 that permits repatriation claims. Descendants of the aborigines, represented by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, submitted a case for the return of the remains of 17 Tasmanians to an independent panel of experts asked by the museum to weigh the ethical and scientific sides of the argument. The four-member panel recommended repatriation; the museum's trustees agreed and announced the move immediately.

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Tasmania was cut off from Australia some 12,000 years ago, giving its aborigines a unique culture.

The loss of the specimens is a blow to museum scientists. Rising sea levels cut Tasmania off from Australia some 12,000 years ago, isolating people there from the innovations, such as stone tools, that changed life on the rest of the continent. NHM researchers say that the Tasmanian remains are a crucial record of the region and a vital component in records of human variability. Very few Tasmanian remains exist in other museums, and those in Australia are often not accessible to scientists.

The NHM will retain the remains for three months to sample DNA and run computerized tomography scans. Storing such scans reduces the loss caused by the repatriation, but researchers point out that as the remains are likely to be cremated, experimental techniques that arise in the future cannot be applied. New analytical techniques were behind important results on Neanderthal DNA published just last week, they point out (see *Nature* **444,** 254; 2006). "Who knows what kind of questions we could ask," says Daniel Lieberman, an anthropologist at Harvard University.

Others worry that the NHM's decision puts at risk other foreign remains in its collection, which make up just under half of its 20,000 human specimens. The museum is already talking to the Australian government about the return of some 450 other aboriginal remains, and has also been approached by indigenous groups from New Zealand and the United States.

Museums in Europe and the United States typically require such groups to prove a strong connection to the community from which the bones were removed. Yet the Tasmanian claim is based on a relatively loose connection, as the small number of aboriginal ancestors became part of other communities. Such a claim would not satisfy US law, say experts familiar with the process. It also seems to contradict UK guidelines, which call for descendancy to be proved. "I find it bizarre," says one researcher familiar with the guidelines, who asked not to be named. "There is no evidence that [the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre] is the appropriate body" to receive these remains.

But Richard Lane, the NHM's director of science, says the museum made the decision after considering how the descendants of the Tasmanian aborigines view their link with the remains. He says that aboriginal groups place a great deal of importance on cultural links with their ancestors. Western thinking emphasizes genealogical descendancy above such links, but Lane says it would be unethical to place European views above those of the aborigines. He adds that the advisory panel's guidelines, drawn up after considering the national guidelines, reflect this approach. ■

Jim Giles

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