Repatriation at the National Museum of Natural History

Repatriation is the process through which museums and other institutions transfer possession and control of Native American human remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred objects to culturally affiliated groups. Repatriation has created a new meeting ground for museums and Native Americans; it has created new dialogues and collaborations with Native communities. The Repatriation Office at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) is responsible for carrying out the repatriation provisions of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Act. The office consults with federally recognized tribes to determine the cultural affiliation of human remains and cultural objects, and to facilitate their final disposition. In response to the NMAI Act, the National Museum of Natural History established the Repatriation Office in 1991. The office is located within the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History. The Repatriation Office staff follow the mandates of the NMAI Act to work with federally recognized tribes to determine the disposition of human remains and objects subject to the legislation. Consultation is a critical part of the repatriation process, and tribes are encouraged to consider making a visit to the NMNH to discuss repatriation matters. Visits to Washington can be funded through grants from the Smithsonian’s Repatriation Review Committee, which provides for transportation, lodging and meals.

The Native American Repatriation Review Committee
The NMAI Act required that the Smithsonian establish a special committee to monitor the repatriation process. The committee is required to ensure fair and objective consideration of all relevant evidence, and may, upon request of any affected party, review any findings of cultural affiliation, and facilitate the resolution of any dispute between tribes concerning the repatriation of human remains and objects. This external committee consists of seven members, two of whom are required by law to be traditional Native American religious leaders. Review Committee contact information and a list of the present and past members can be found here.

Laws
The National Museum of the American Indian Act, passed in 1989, requires the Smithsonian Institution to inventory, identify, and upon request, repatriate culturally affiliated human remains and funerary objects to federally recognized Native American tribes. Amendments to this act, passed in 1996, direct the Smithsonian to consider sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony for repatriation as well. The NMAI Act was the first federal law created to address repatriation. A similar law, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), passed in 1990, directs repatriation for all other U. S. institutions that receive federal funding. The Smithsonian Institution is specifically exempt from this law.

Collections
The archaeological and ethnological objects in the NMNH collections are searchable and some images of ethnology objects are available at our website. The online objects, archives, and library collections of NMNH and other Smithsonian museums can be searched at here.

Repatriation Office
NMNH MRC-138
10th and Constitution NW
P. O. Box 37012
Washington D. C. 20013-7012
(202) 633-0865
Click here for website

Photo by Cheri Botic, Repatriation Office

Photo by James Diloreto Smithsonian Institution Photo Services

Photo by Bill Billeck, Repatriation Office

The Repatriation Office at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) is responsible for carrying out the repatriation provisions of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Act. The office consults with federally recognized tribes to determine the cultural affiliation of human remains and cultural objects, and to facilitate their final disposition. In response to the NMAI Act, the National Museum of Natural History established the Repatriation Office in 1991. The office is located within the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History. The Repatriation Office staff follow the mandates of the NMAI Act to work with federally recognized tribes to determine the disposition of human remains and objects subject to the legislation. Consultation is a critical part of the repatriation process, and tribes are encouraged to consider making a visit to the NMNH to discuss repatriation matters. Visits to Washington can be funded through grants from the Smithsonian’s Repatriation Review Committee, which provides for transportation, lodging and meals.

Photo by Cheri Botic, Repatriation Office

Photo by Bill Billeck, Repatriation Office

The Repatriation Office at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) is responsible for carrying out the repatriation provisions of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Act. The office consults with federally recognized tribes to determine the cultural affiliation of human remains and cultural objects, and to facilitate their final disposition. In response to the NMAI Act, the National Museum of Natural History established the Repatriation Office in 1991. The office is located within the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History. The Repatriation Office staff follow the mandates of the NMAI Act to work with federally recognized tribes to determine the disposition of human remains and objects subject to the legislation. Consultation is a critical part of the repatriation process, and tribes are encouraged to consider making a visit to the NMNH to discuss repatriation matters. Visits to Washington can be funded through grants from the Smithsonian’s Repatriation Review Committee, which provides for transportation, lodging and meals.

Photo by Cheri Botic, Repatriation Office

Photo by Bill Billeck, Repatriation Office
Steps in the Repatriation Process

Repatriation Request
The process begins when a federally recognized tribe makes a written repatriation request to the Repatriation Office of the NMNH. Once a letter is received, the request is given to the appropriate staff member for evaluation and response. Repatriation claims are addressed in the order in which they are received.

Cultural Affiliation
The Repatriation Office staff researches the origins and cultural affiliation of the human remains and cultural items being requested for repatriation and produces a report on the case. The assessment considers any and all relevant information or evidence in assessing cultural affiliation. Kinds of evidence may include, but are not limited to biological, geographical, historical (both written and oral), genealogical, archeological, linguistic, folkloric, ethnological, and archival information, expert opinion, or any other relevant sources of information.

Repatriation Reports
Reports are reviewed by the office, the Department of Anthropology, the Native American Repatriation Review Committee, and the Director of the NMNH, with whom the ultimate responsibility for approval lies. The report is sent to the requesting group and to representatives of any additional culturally affiliated groups. Brief summaries of each report are on the Repatriation Office website.

The museum maintains its anthropological collections and exhibits in order to cultivate a better understanding of and respect for cultures throughout the world, including those indigenous to the United States. The repatriation process provides a unique opportunity for the museum to work with and learn from Native people and as a result, the knowledge associated with the collections is increased. Repatriation is also a process through which the museum and Native communities develop new relationships of benefit to both and new ways of working together to understand and appreciate human cultures.

T

he museum maintains its anthropological collections and exhibits in order to cultivate a better understanding of and respect for cultures throughout the world, including those indigenous to the United States. The repatriation process provides a unique opportunity for the museum to work with and learn from Native people and as a result, the knowledge associated with the collections is increased. Repatriation is also a process through which the museum and Native communities develop new relationships of benefit to both and new ways of working together to understand and appreciate human cultures.

Of the nearly 33,000 human remains in the collections, some 19,000 are believed to be Native American. As of 2015, approximately 6,000 have been found to be culturally affiliated and work continues to affiliate human remains in repatriation assessment reports. The North American collections consist of more than one million archaeological objects and 50,000 ethnology objects. Inventories of all archaeological objects and human remains by state were sent to federally recognized tribes in 1998 and summaries of all ethnology objects were sent in 1996.

Many of the remains and objects now held by the museum were collected as a part of archaeological excavations or anthropological expeditions. Remains and objects were also transferred to the Smithsonian from other institutions and museums, including the former U.S. Army Medical Museum. A small number of remains were collected by private individuals during the 19th century. Large numbers of ethnographic objects were acquired from Native people throughout the 19th and 20th centuries by private collectors and Smithsonian anthropologists.

Additional copies of the inventories and summaries may be requested by tribal officials.

Many of the remains and objects now held by the museum were collected as a part of archaeological excavations or anthropological expeditions. Remains and objects were also transferred to the Smithsonian from other institutions and museums, including the former U.S. Army Medical Museum. A small number of remains were collected by private individuals during the 19th century. Large numbers of ethnographic objects were acquired from Native people throughout the 19th and 20th centuries by private collectors and Smithsonian anthropologists.

Human Remains and Cultural Items Potentially Subject to Repatriation

Objects of Cultural Patrimony
These are objects that have ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group or culture itself, rather than property owned by an individual, and which, therefore, cannot be alienated, appropriated, or conveyed by any individual. Such objects must have been considered inalienable by the Native American group at the time it was separated from such group.

Sacred Objects
These are specific ceremonial objects that are needed by traditional Native American Indian leaders for the practice of traditional Native American religions by their present-day adherents.

Other Objects
It is the Smithsonian’s longstanding policy to repatriate, upon request, to the culturally affiliated Native American group, any materials acquired by or transferred to the NMNH illegally or under circumstances that render invalid the museum’s title to them.