

Bringing our people home: NAGPRA

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cover our people and property from those who want to own them..." said Suzan Shown Harjo of the Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee Tribes.

WHAT IS NAGPRA?

The belief that Indians were sub-human was essential to upholding the processes of stealing land, resources, dignity and life. It was necessary for the dominant society to believe that the people they were systematically destroying were animals, to be dealt with as was most convenient, lucrative and effective to their culture. Harjo continues, with discussion of the 1868 U.S. Army Surgeon General's directive to augment the collection of Indian crania. In an arrangement with the Smithsonian, the Army would receive osteological remains and the Smithsonian would be given burial and cultural items. Harjo notes advertisements for crania in old newspapers and other practices which led to the "decades long practice of decapitating Native people, weighing their brains and shipping them as freight to Washington, D.C. for more 'study.'"

For Native people such actions were and are unthinkable. To this day, Indian remains sit tumbled together and dusty in museum drawers or in private collections as novelties or precious scientific material. This is a testament to the continuing debt of disrespect and the crudity of ignorance.

The truth is, Indian people are neither a novelty, nor a scientific curiosity. Indians are people with civil rights that have long been violated.

NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, acknowledges Indians' rights to grave protection and the return of previously stolen Indian relics. The lines are still being drawn as to what exactly this legislation means. *Mending the Circle*, the Native American Repatriation Guide from which the above Harjo and Echo Hawk quotations were taken, gives an in-depth look at these issues.

The most current battle that came to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde arose from the cumbersome inventories of human remains and associated objects. These inventories are a tangle of incomplete information. For example, 80% of the human remains are not affiliated with a specific tribe. This means that whoever collected the bodies "forgot" to record where they came from.

The Grand Ronde, with the help of Ryan and Adrienne Heavyhead, (Blackfeet) national NAGPRA experts, have established a game plan. After having waded through the inventories, meeting with other tribes to identify primary areas of concern, creating a document of cultural information and objectives, the Grand Ronde Tribe has made its first requests for repatriation.

However, these steps are plagued at each foot fall by the congressional interpretation of NAGPRA. The discovery three years ago of the Kennewick Man has tested the original intent of the law. The Umatilla Tribe, in collaboration with the other Columbia River Tribes, fought to have the bones of the Kennewick Man

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~ Christine Contreras

reinterned without scientific testing. However, the federal district court ruled in favor of the scientists, on the 22nd of September.

CLOSER TO HOME

It is in the name of such atrocities to justice that the Grand Ronde Cultural Resource Protection staff were called to a private home in Salem where a grave robber's collection caught the attention of the authorities. The extensive collection, valued at \$50,000, included not only bead work, knife cases, feathers, religious and ceremonial objects, but assorted Indian remains. The man had the arrogance to place the bones of a foot in a moccasin, which sat on his coffee table. The skulls in his possession were most likely used as ashtrays. Unfortunately this sort of practice is not rare.

The reclaiming of these bones by Christine Contreras, Grand Ronde's Cultural Resources Site Monitor and tribal member, was a bittersweet victory for the Tribe.

Contreras says, "For me there's a lot of anxiety of being in the presence of human remains. I have this inner struggle that tells me it is not okay for them to be out on display. As a sovereign nation I think we should have access to our ancestors' remains both from museums and private collectors, to insure that they are not looked at like a trinket or a nickname, and that someone can't talk over them socially. I think we should get every bone, every bead, every piece of our heritage back from these people so we can take care of it as we see fit."

The human remains and associated burial objects (in Salem) were discovered because the grave robber was found dead in his house. Reportedly, he bled to death in his own home after being bitten by his pet parrot. While the unusual circumstances surrounding his death may cause others to pause, Native American people are not at all surprised. Grave robbers and profiteers need to be wary of the power of the dead.

Currently, remains from 180 tribal ancestors from the University of Oregon and the Smithsonian are being returned to the Tribe. As the remains arrive home, there is great responsibility bestowed upon the Tribe. The tribal NAGPRA committee was formed four months ago to deal with the issues of reinternment, and has accepted the gravity of the work.

Committee member Janell Haller says, "My belief is that everyone deserves respect. We were raised to know you don't eat in the cemetery or you get a crooked mouth. It's respect, respect of the cemetery, of where you walk, of where you come from."

Committee member Marce Norwest has been appointed to receive the

bones that arrive from the museum. Meanwhile, June Olson, Lindy Trolan, Lisa Watt and the Heavyheads have been in transit between different museums, researching other collections. The Heavyheads, renowned for their comprehensive data base and expert maneuvering through NAGPRA policies, have brought the Grand Ronde a great gift. However, the proposed NAGPRA amendment, if passed, may have a severe impact on their work.

PROPOSED CHANGES

Currently pending in the House of Representatives is a bill, which is backlash from the Kennewick Man case. The bill is "to amend the NAGPRA to provide for appropriate study and repatriation of remains for which a cultural affiliation is not readily ascertainable."

This means that those 80% of human remains which were not properly identified when they were stolen, will be free ground, once again, for the scientific community to play with.

As Bob McElderry, NAGPRA committee member, says, "It's an attempt by the government to renege on the original intent of the law. It doesn't matter what tribe those remains belong to, as much as it matters that someone says the right thing over them and lays them to rest."

Haller, shaking her head says, "it's just another form of a broken treaty."

Speaking of the proposed amendment, Contreras concurs, "I think it's crazy to think anyone can look at a group of bones and determine its their great, great grandfather or look at that moccasin and say it belonged to my family. How can we recognize these things that were stolen from us before we were born? I think that before people start digging up something and handling remains and the items they were buried with, they should consider how it would feel if this was their own grandparents or children. Would they want their family on display or used for scientific research? I don't blame the congress and the people now for things that happened in the past, but I will hold them accountable for the current practices which continue to disrespect our people."

Through the years of disease and forced acculturation, the years of termination, a great deal of the continuity to the past has been lost. However, enough roots have survived for the tree to flourish and rejuvenate.

From ethnographic texts and a handful of Elders who know the old ways, our generation still has access to enough information to know and understand the ways of our ancestors. As Louis LaChance has said, "Our ancestors laid it down for us.



The staff must determine if artifacts they inventory, such as these baskets, have sacred significance to the Grand Ronde people.

Photo by Lindy Trolan

We have only to pick it up; Sometimes the old knowledge seems hard to find, but it is there. We only need to look for it."

Over the years, the various tribes and bands now affiliated at Grand Ronde buried their people in a variety of ways. All these varied beliefs and customs are represented in the ancestry of Grand Ronde. One challenge of the NAGPRA committee and of the tribal community will be to meld traditions and honor the bones.

Margo Mercier, NAGPRA committee member, says, "Our goal is to reinter the remains in a good way, to build a memorial for those who came before us. We want to build a visual memorial of those who were unjustly incarcerated in museums, a memorial that says we belong to these people, they are our ancestors. The proposed NAGPRA amendment is another slap in the face. The injustice that has been done is horrific enough, but to point fingers and say you must prove affiliation is worse. Knowing these kind of grave robbers are in our community makes me sick to my stomach. Unless you are really well protected spiritually, it can really harm you to handle remains. When I had first started out on this committee four months ago, I had no idea what it all entailed. Each day I learn more and hurt more deeply for our ancestors. So, we work together to bring this all together in a good way. The needs of the living and the needs of the dead must be balanced together and it is really important to feed the spirit."

Despite continued opposition, Native America is reconnecting to its ancestors. Said Christine Contreras, "It is important for people to know there are still people out there who collect Native American relics. The Tribe needs to have some conversations about how they feel about these things that are property of our ancestors, so that we present ourselves as a tribe and relearn customs. I think people, even though we were stripped of our language and customs, still have a connection to tribal ancestors. I believe it is a link to a better way of treating your community and living your life."

— June Olson and Tracy Dugan contributed to this story.