

File no:

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Professor Norman Palmer
C/- Cultural Property Unit
Department for Culture Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
LONDON SW1Y 5DH



Dear Professor Palmer

SUBMISSION TO THE WORKING GROUP ON HUMAN REMAINS

The National Museum of Australia is committed to the repatriation of Indigenous human remains. To this end the NMA supports the efforts of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's 'Working Group on Human Remains' in addressing the issue of the treatment of Human remains in publicly funded United Kingdom museums and galleries.

The National Museum of Australia is actively involved in the repatriation of Indigenous human remains. The responsibilities, policies, strategies, experiences, and expertise of the NMA may be of interest to the working group, and the institutions with which it shall be working, in its consideration of the repatriation of human remains from Australia.

It is important to remember that repatriation can include not only the physical repatriation of remains but also the repatriation of authority over remains. In engaging with Indigenous communities and seeking their input, advice, and guidance into the management of Indigenous remains one act of repatriation has already occurred. For this reason the NMA encourages institutions within the United Kingdom to engage with Indigenous communities and their representatives in the spirit of reconciliation.

By far the greatest difficulty likely to face British Museums and public institutions holding Indigenous Australian Human remains is, having made the decision to repatriate remains, what to do next. The NMA is prepared to advise institutions as to suitable protocols and, where possible, refer them to appropriate Indigenous and Non-Indigenous contacts in Australia. Further, in accordance with its status as the prescribed authority under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage protection Act 1984*, the Museum is the designated keeping place for remains for which communities or custodians cannot immediately be identified. It is likely that a fair proportion of repatriated remains will eventually come under the care of the National Museum.

National Museum of Australia Repatriation Program

The NMA's has long had a commitment to repatriation of Indigenous human remains, with an enviable record of success. In furtherance of this commitment, the NMA has established a repatriation unit dedicated to the return of human remains and secret/ sacred objects to Australian Indigenous people. This unit is unique amongst Australian Museums. The operation and experiences of the staff in this unit may be of assistance to both the Working Group and to interested institutions. Please do not hesitate to contact Dr Michael Pickering, Repatriation Program Director, on phone: +61 2 6208 6243, fax: +61 2 6208 5241, or e-mail m.pickering@nma.gov.au

Supporting Documentation

I provide you with some documentation that may prove useful. This documentation addresses issues pertinent to the repatriation of Indigenous human remains within Australia.

Attachment 1. National Museum of Australia 'Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Human Remains'.

This document is under review with regard to issues of procedure. However, it clearly presents the philosophy of the National Museum of Australia in regard to the management and return of human remains in the care of the NMA.

Attachment 2. National Museum of Australia Repatriation Program: Repatriation of Human remains: Advice to applicants

This document is provided to potential applicants.

Attachment 3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 (Extract: Part A)

This is Federal legislation regarding Heritage Protection in Australia. The Act is currently under review. Of particular significance are Sections 20 and 21, which relate to the discovery and disposal of human remains. In accordance with Section 21(1) (c), the National Museum of Australia is currently the only 'Prescribed Authority' for the safekeeping of remains for which appropriate Indigenous custodians cannot be identified. In accordance with Section 21(1) (c), the NMA is currently contracted to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to provide services in identifying and returning remains to Australian Indigenous communities where possible.

Attachment 4. Previous Possessions, New Obligations.

This document was produced by Museums Australia (1993). It describes recommended policies and protocols for the management and repatriation of remains, and other items, by Australian Museums. It demonstrates a national commitment, by both institutions and individuals, to the management and or return of Indigenous cultural heritage, including human remains. The document has strongly influenced the policy and procedures of Australian Museums.

I hope that the information provided here proves to be of assistance in the Working Group's deliberations. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Dawn Casey
Director, National Museum of Australia