



Policy on Human Remains

This document sets out the Museum's present policy position on human remains—it is the basis for operational procedures and is a platform for future policy development. It complements the more general policies of the Natural History Museum in the publication *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*.

Principles and Scope

Scientific Research

The Natural History Museum is committed to the scientific study of humans as part of its mission to promote the discovery and understanding of the natural world. Such scientific research may include: studying human origins and evolution; identifying patterns of variation within and between human populations in time and by geographical area; determining the impacts of diet and disease on particular populations; and exploring the nature of human interaction with the environment at different times in our past.

The Collections

The Natural History Museum holds human remains in its collection as an essential reference resource, providing evidence for scientific study, and aims to maintain high collections management standards. The Museum is firmly convinced that there is continuing scientific value in this collection, and that it should continue to be the focus of active research. The scale of the collection of human remains in the Museum stands at almost 20,000 items (many of which are partial skeletons or individual bones). More than half of this number is from the British Isles, some dating back tens of thousands of years.

Access

The Natural History Museum is committed to the principle of access to its collections, science, intellectual and information resources. This applies to human remains in various ways: many visiting research scientists work directly on the collection; the wider scientific community benefits from specialist publications; and the public are given access through popular publications, considerable media coverage, and via the Internet. The Museum is exploring the provision of new forms of access to a greater diversity of people—a policy allowing access for non-scientists is set out below, and collections databases are helping to meet a range of new demands for information.

Collaboration and partnerships

The Natural History Museum advocates the need for international collaboration and partnership in furthering its objectives, on both a

practical and policy level. The Museum welcomes discussion and policy collaboration that can inform its strategic thinking—it has actively developed wide-ranging contacts on human remains policy and practice to explore the options available for current and future development.

Scope

For the purposes of this policy, the term “human remains” refers to items that are less than 10,000 years old.

Policy Objective 1 - To maintain a clear policy framework for Human Remains in the Museum

1. Trustees

The authority and responsibilities of the Trustees with respect to the collections and activities of the Museum are set out in section 2 of *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*.

2. Director and Director of Science

The Director and the Director of Science are responsible for development of the Museum's collections policy, including human remains, and for overseeing policy implementation.

3. Keepers

The Keepers are responsible for implementation of policy and for the development and implementation of procedures related to collections management.

Policy Objective 2 - To maintain high standards in collections management for human remains.

4. Formal Acquisition, Accession and Registration

In fulfilling its scientific role, The Natural History Museum may continue to acquire human remains and to add them formally to the collection. The Museum will add remains to the collection when it is satisfied that it can hold the remains in a lawful manner, when provenance can be clearly established, and when the remains are of scientific value to the Museum.

In general terms, the Museum's policy position is set out in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*:

"The Natural History Museum will not acquire, by whatever means, any object unless the Museum is satisfied it can obtain title to the object in question, and that it has not been acquired in, or exported from, its country of origin (or any intermediate country in which it may have been legally owned) in violation of that country's laws". (para. 5.3.4 *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*)

In making decisions to acquire human remains and add them to the collection, the Museum will make full consideration of all relevant issues.

5. Temporary Holdings

Some human remains may be held in the Museum on a temporary basis for the purposes of scientific research. Remains of this sort should have an established provenance, a clear potential value for scientific research, and a clear legal basis on which they are held.

6. Storage and Security

Human remains are held in the Museum in dedicated secure store areas. Access to these areas, to adjoining workrooms, and to the remains themselves is allowed only to authorised staff or to visitors with specific permission and under agreed supervisory arrangements.

7. Care and Conservation

Human remains are cared for and stored in conditions intended to preserve their physical integrity. Environmental conditions are monitored (including regular recording of temperature and humidity) and pest control is conducted.

Staff and visitors are required to follow departmental handling and good practice guidelines. The guidelines are made available to those using the collection for the first time and provided in written form. Those who do not follow the guidelines are likely to be refused further access.

8. Loans

The loan of human remains is covered by the Museum's general policies on loans, which are set out in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*, the relevant sections of which are as follows (numbering follows original):

5.9 Loans policy

5.9.1 Specimens from the collections of The Natural History Museum are available for loan for scientific study or public display, subject to certain conditions, under the terms of the British Museum Act 1963.

5.9.2 Loans of an unusual nature and any one loan comprising objects with a total value of more than £10,000 must be approved by the Board of Trustees.

(5.9.3 refers to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

5.9.4 The Museum reserves the right to refuse to make loans at its discretion, and further loans may not be made to individuals or institutions if loans are not returned at the agreed time or if conditions have not been strictly observed.

Loans for scientific study

5.9.5 Subject to considerations of safety of specimens, the Museum will send on loan for scientific study type specimens and other material which has been

the subject of publication. In addition, the Museum aims to make available other named and easily-accessible, part-sorted material for use in taxonomic studies. The collections benefit greatly from such activity. However, some limits on loans are inevitable because of the size of the demand. Other curatorial activities and the needs of the Museum's own research programmes must be balanced against requests from outside and the Museum reserves the right to refuse to lend material.

5.9.6 Certain international work practices and agreements make the loan conditions for some collections more stringent than above. For example, there is an international understanding that mammalian and bird type material is rarely sent out on loan but is available to visitors.

5.9.7 Loans are despatched only to destinations where appropriate secure transport and insurance arrangements are available.

5.9.8 Scientific loans are normally made to individuals working in recognised institutions and are the joint responsibility of the individual and the institution. Loans for students, artists, and some others will be made to their supervisor, who will be held responsible for the material. Loans will be made to private addresses only in exceptional circumstances.

5.9.9 No loans leave the Museum until an appropriate agreement has been signed by the borrowing institution and individual concerned.

5.9.10 The maximum initial loan period for primary type specimens (the specimens which act as the reference points for names of species, that is, holotypes, lectotypes, neotypes and syntypes) and for figured palaeontological material is 6 months. The maximum initial period for other loans is one year. Some may be extended, at appropriate intervals, to a maximum of five years upon application before the initial due date. Annual extensions beyond 5 years are subject to Keeper's approval. The total loan period shall not exceed 10 years unless at the end of that period the loan is inspected by an approved Museum employee at the borrower's expense.

Loans for public display

5.9.11 All proposals for the loan of specimens for public exhibition will be referred to the Director of Science. In the first instance, proposals should be addressed to the Keeper(s) of the department(s) concerned.

(5.9.12 Deals with conditions for loans for public exhibition - refer to the original for details).

9. Deaccessioning/disposal of registered objects

The Museum's policies on disposal are set out in detail in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998*. The British Museum Act 1963 and the Museums and Galleries Act 1992 provide the legal framework within which disposal may be considered. The British Museum Act 1963 states:

5. -(1) The Trustees of the British Museum may sell, exchange, give away or otherwise dispose of any object vested in them and comprised in their collections if -

(a) the object is a duplicate of another such object, or

(b) the object appears to the Trustees to have been made not earlier than the year 1850, and substantially consists of printed matter of which a copy made by photography or a process akin to photography is held by the Trustees, or

(c) in the opinion of the Trustees the object is unfit to be retained in the collections of the Museum and can be disposed of without detriment to the interests of students:

Provided that where an object has become vested in the Trustees by virtue of a gift of bequest the powers conferred by this subsection shall not be exercisable as respects that object in a manner inconsistent with any condition attached to the gift or bequest.

(2) The Trustees may destroy or otherwise dispose of any object vested in them and comprised in their collections if satisfied that it has become useless for the purposes of the Museum by reason of damage, physical deterioration, or infestation by destructive organisms.

The Museum's policy on disposal adds that "...Section 6 of the Museums and Galleries Act 1992 permits the Trustees to dispose of an object, by way of sale, gift or exchange, to the other national institutions listed in Schedule 5 to the Act.....However, there is a strong presumption against disposal of specimens, other than by transfer as gift or in exchange to another suitable institution (that is, not restricted to those listed in the 1992 Act), or by destructive investigation for research purposes." (*Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* para 5.4.1).

The Museum's policy continues "Any decision to dispose of registered objects will be taken only after due consideration. The Museum will assess all material considered for disposal in terms of its scientific, historical and cultural importance; the needs of both present and future users; and legal and ethical issues as they relate to that material." (*Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* para 5.4.4)

Policy Objective 3 - To maintain a high standard of documentation on human remains

10. Documentation

The Museum aims to meet the documentation standards referred to in section 5.7.1 of *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* "The Museum aims to meet the requirements of *SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard*subject to the limitations imposed by the size and use of the collections. The sheer number of specimens and volume of transactions in The Natural History Museum, coupled with the special needs of scientific research, demand a pragmatic, but carefully considered approach".

The Museum aims to improve the quality and scope of information on human remains and to this end has an ongoing programme of development of information and documentation, including electronic databases.

11. Archives

Information in the Museum's Archives is available for inspection by members of the public by arrangement with the Archivist (see contact information below).

12. Access to information

The Natural History Museum is committed to the principle of access to its information resources, and will respond positively to those requesting information on the human remains in the collection. The Museum will work with the enquirer to determine how their needs may be best satisfied, particularly where requests are general, or where a response may demand considerable resources. The Museum operates under UK Government guidance on access to information.

All requests for information on the collection must be made in the first instance to the Keeper of Palaeontology.

Policy Objective 4 - To enable research on human variation, human origins, bioarchaeology and related subjects

13. Access to human remains for research

Access to human remains in the Museum is provided for *bona fide* academic research workers.

The general terms of access for research are outlined in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* as follows (numbering follows the original):

- "5.8.2 Access to the research and reference collections is controlled by the Keepers and staff of each department. It is each Keeper's responsibility to set out regulations governing access. An appointment is usually necessary and initial contact should be made with the relevant Collections Manager.
- 5.8.3 Visitors who handle the collections must be properly trained in relevant aspects of their care.
- 5.8.4 Resource limitations, environmental or conservation requirements and security considerations will inevitably constrain access to the collections and the Museum reserves the right to refuse or terminate access at its discretion.
- 5.8.5 Where appropriate, visitors are requested to make provision, through their funding bodies, for Bench Fees or a Research Support Grant. A charge is mandatory if the collections are consulted for commercial purposes. Along with many other scientific institutions and universities the Museum now attempts to recover some of the substantial resource costs associated with provision of access to the collections."

Research work may be conducted only by *bona fide* academic researchers affiliated to universities, governments and associated institutions. A brief research proposal must be submitted in advance for consideration and approval by the Keeper of Palaeontology, making clear reference to all procedures and techniques to be used.

14. Use of the collection

Researchers are required to follow handling and good practice guidelines to which reference is made above (section 7).

15. Sampling, analysis and casting

Destructive and invasive sampling and analysis may be permitted for some research purposes but advance discussion and authorisation is required—detailed policies are set out in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* as follows (numbering follows the original):

5.5 Destructive and invasive sampling

- 5.5.1 Destructive or invasive sampling of specimens for research purposes generally involve irreversible changes (including, sometimes, complete destruction) to the objects involved. Decisions on such matters will be taken only after due consideration. The Museum will assess material potentially involved in such research in terms of its scientific, historical and cultural importance; the needs of both present and future users; and legal and ethical issues as they relate to that material.
- 5.5.2 Decisions on use of specimens for dissection or destructive or invasive sampling will be taken in accordance with procedures set out by the Keeper of each department. Decisions will generally involve at least one member of the curatorial staff independent of the relevant research. Investigations which result in the complete destruction of an object constitute a disposal and are thus governed by the provisions of section 5.4 above.
- 5.5.3 Proposals for research involving donation of whole or part specimens or for dissection or destructive or invasive sampling of specimens should be addressed to the appropriate Collections Manager. (The specific guidelines on the use of Museum specimens in DNA-based studies are additionally given in Appendix 8.)

Applicants should provide brief details of the proposed project, its justification, method, their competence and the institution where the work is to be done.

Proposals will be evaluated with regard to their scientific importance and technical feasibility. Further information or references might be requested. If the proposal is acceptable, the Collections Manager will decide, in consultation, which specimens, if any, may be used. The Museum reserves the right to refuse permission to allow invasive investigation of its specimens.

Invasive techniques must be agreed with the Collections Manager before the project proceeds. Museum staff can advise on suitable techniques. The Museum reserves the right to insist that the work is done within the Museum and/or by the Museum's own staff. Fees may be charged to enable the Museum provide the necessary resources and/or training.

The applicant agrees to:

- return to the Museum all remaining material including the original mount, dissected parts and any preparations,
- make permanent preparations of all remaining parts using materials and protocols specified by the Collections Manager,
- provide each permanent preparation with a direct copy of the specimen data including determination; in permanent ink on an archival quality label,
- fully cross-reference all preparations with the original specimen following the format specified by the Collections Manager,

- label prospective voucher specimens so that they may be recognised as such and linked with the published study they support,
- conform to normal loan regulations where material is to be removed from the Museum,
- identify specimens as far as possible before dissection or preparation,
- include details of vouchers, their nature and location, in published studies so that future workers can relocate them,
- acknowledge Museum staff and the use of the collection in publications involving the use of Museum specimens, and
- send to the Museum reprints of publications involving the use of Museum specimens."

For human remains, the specific procedures for securing authorisation may be determined by contacting the Keeper of Palaeontology in the first instance.

Casting and other potentially damaging procedures must be discussed in advance with staff from the Palaeontology Conservation Unit and are subject to the authorisation of the appropriate collections manager.

16. Data, information and publications resulting from research

The results of research by Museum staff and associates are generally published in the open literature—an annual list of publications is available with the Museum's Annual Report.

It is a condition for research access that research workers should make the Keeper of Palaeontology aware of databases, information outputs and publications that draw upon research on human remains in the Museum.

Policy Objective 5 - To give access to knowledge derived from the collection

17. Exhibitions

Human remains from the Museum's holdings may on occasion be placed on public display or loaned for display if there is clearly demonstrable benefit in terms of communicating the results of science or another aspect of culture, public understanding of science, or public understanding of the role of the museum.

Any proposal to exhibit remains will be subject to approval by the relevant Keeper, following consultation and consideration of social, scientific and related issues. Policy on loans for public exhibition is set out in section 8 above.

18. Images and film

Human remains may not be photographed or filmed without prior permission—policy is set out in *Curatorial Policies and Collections Management Procedures 1998* as follows:

"5.8.6 Specimens in the collections may not be photographed, imaged, reproduced or published in any format without prior permission being obtained from the relevant Collections Manager. It will normally be a

condition of granting such permission that copyright in any such images will be ceded to the Trustees of The Natural History Museum."

Photography or filming of human remains will only be permitted where there is a clearly demonstrable benefit in terms of scientific results, public understanding of science, or public understanding of the role of the Museum.

Policy Objective 6 - To be responsive to requests for dialogue on human remains.

19. Discussions on human remains

While there is continuing scientific value in a collection of human remains, and it should continue to be the focus of active research, the Museum also recognises that the discourse on human remains in museums is framed more widely.

The Museum agrees that there is a need to enter discussions and to work with recognised institutions and organisations in those countries where there is indigenous community demand for the return of human remains from collections, and demands for a role for indigenous peoples in determining the use of remains in museums.

Such collaboration aims to provide better information on the Museum's work, to learn from the experience of others in this context, and to try to develop mutually acceptable solutions in areas where there are conflicting views. The Museum has been active in discussions on human remains—for example, in contributing to the Museums and Galleries Commission *Guidelines for Good Practice on Restitution and Repatriation*.

There is particular interest in several countries in discussion on: return of remains to countries of origin; development of information resources (see above); systems of care for remains in the museum; and access for non-scientists to the remains. The Museum is also willing to discuss these and additional issues as they may be raised by others.

23. Return of human remains to countries of origin

The Museum has very limited power to return human remains to their countries of origin on a permanent basis, owing to the constraints on disposal of items from the collection. This is combined with a presumption against disposal that arises from the recognition of the scientific value of maintaining a collection of human remains as a resource for active research (see section 9 above).

24. Access for non-scientists to human remains

The Museum will consider requests for access to specific remains for non-scientists with established traditional links to the remains. Such access will only be granted after mutual agreement on the terms and nature of access requested. Requests for such access should be made in the first instance to the Keeper of Palaeontology.

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References

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