

**Submission to Working Group on Human Remains
Cultural Property Unit
Department for Culture, Media and Sport**

December 2001

To disregard the fact that human beings and their diversity form part of natural history would be untenable. However, the sensibilities of living Indigenous peoples must be recognised and considered in determining appropriate treatment of human remains in institutional collections. The current status of human remains as academic resources privileges scholarship over the cultural and spiritual concerns of potential Indigenous claimants. The oft-declared primacy of scholarship is often without foundation, when it is considered that many collections of human remains are often poorly provenanced or catalogued, and are not appropriately conserved (in direct contravention of the ethical principles laid down by the International Council of Museums). The reluctance of many institutions to adopt an open approach to their collections often has more to do with an acquisitive impulse, rather than any sense that the results of research flowing from human remains might benefit any members of society.

The United Nations' *International Decade of the World's Indigenous People* ends in 2004 - for the British Government to produce and deliver notable policy and recommendations for best practice on the subject of repatriation would represent a considerable commitment to the principles of the *Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, in particular, Article 13:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.”

The following approach is proposed:

- Openness in disclosing the nature and contents of institutional collections of human remains;
- Early attention to, and timely processing of repatriation requests, demonstrated by a willingness to engage in face-to-face dialogue rather than a 'correspondence-only' process;
- A clearly-defined, generic deaccessioning policy for all institutional collections of human remains;
- Improved communication links between institutional collections and the production of a consolidated database of human remains across the United Kingdom, which would serve to facilitate information-sharing, so ensuring that Indigenous claimants are able to trace human remains from disparate collections with greater ease;
- The formation of a curatorial/conservation 'watchdog' body to oversee the cataloguing and conservation of collections.

Jackie Tindill

(at the time of writing, PhD Candidate, University of Queensland, Australia)

E-mail: jtindill@hotmail.com