

AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM POLICY

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Title: Repatriation Policy for Australian Aboriginal Secret /Sacred and Aboriginal Ancestral Remains Collections

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Notes:

Australian Museums

Repatriation Policy for Australian Aboriginal Secret /Sacred and Aboriginal Ancestral Remains Collections

1. Purpose

This policy provides a framework and guidelines for the Australian Museum in areas of repatriation of Australian Aboriginal secret sacred objects and ancestral remains.

2. Background

The Australian Museum Trust adopted its policy of sympathetic consideration of repatriation requests nearly 40 years ago and has been implementing that policy since 1974. Initially the museums focus was on Australia and the Pacific region but over time repatriations have also occurred to Canada and India.

In each of these cases the cultural material and human remains were repatriated because of their cultural and spiritual significance to the traditional Indigenous owners. The museum has repatriated 80 objects and skeletal remains to non Australian Aboriginal communities over this period.

Due to the sensitive cultural and political nature of the Australian Aboriginal human remains and secret sacred collections, a more comprehensive policy outlining procedural issues is required.

3. Process

The policy and guidelines outlined below have been developed using protocols and policies from various sources including:

- NSW Government Aboriginal Affairs policy “Two Ways Together”
- The Cultural Ministers Councils program the “Return of Indigenous Cultural Property” (RICP)
- Policies from the National Museum and the Museum of Victoria
- The Museums Australia policy “Continuous Cultures, *Ongoing Responsibilities*”.

4. Policy Outline

Special policies and procedures are required for both the Australian Aboriginal secret/sacred collection as well as Aboriginal ancestral human remains, this is because of the sensitive ethical and legal issues surrounding both these collections.

The Australian Museum supports the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination in respect of cultural heritage matters and has over a number of years, curated the secret/sacred and ancestral remains collections in line with the wishes of the appropriate Aboriginal person or persons with proven rights of access/ownership.

The collections may have immense scientific value but the wishes of Aboriginal people take precedence. One consequence of this is that the secret/sacred and ancestral remains collections are closed to researchers until such a time that appropriate Aboriginal owner/managers desire otherwise. Furthermore, objects and remains will be stored, loaned or returned only according to the wishes of the appropriate Aboriginal person or persons from each community. In this sense, the policy is variable and flexible.

The Australian Museum fully endorses the repatriation of material of a secret or sacred nature and Aboriginal ancestral remains to either the community of origin, or to an appropriate person or persons in cases where traditional rights can be substantiated.

Before the secret/sacred objects or ancestral remains can be physically repatriated a number of conditions and procedural issues will be met by both the Museum and the community or people requesting the return of material. These are outlined below.

5. Guidelines for Storage and Repatriation

1. All secret/sacred material and ancestral remains will be stored in a manner that will not cause offence to Aboriginal people. The collections are housed within specified areas separated from the rest of the Museum's anthropological, archaeological, biological and geological collections.
2. Access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret sacred items and associated information must be as determined by the appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Therefore access to some items must be restricted in accordance with tradition.
3. The Museum will store objects that are identified as secret sacred by either relevant community members or researchers and in addition material identified to be of a private nature (that is, it is not secret or sacred nor of a general open nature) such as carved trees, in a suitable manner reflecting traditional cultural objectives. In particular, the items are stored so that inappropriate people cannot handle or see them.
4. The process of identifying secret/sacred material within the broader collection involves extensive consultation with appropriate Aboriginal people and researchers.
5. The Australian Museum will strive to provide relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with information in an accessible form, about the cultural objects and other materials from their communities that are in the collections.
6. Upon receipt of a written request for repatriation of both material of a secret and sacred nature and ancestral remains, the Australian Museum will commence procedures to validate the request and confirm community support for return of the material. This involves extensive community consultation to determine the rightful custodians according to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custom. This process of consultation will vary from community to community due to differing circumstances.

7. All requests for the return and or reburial of Aboriginal ancestral human remains must be in writing, to the Australian Museum, outlining the place of reburial as well as the community support for the requested repatriation of the remains.
8. Remains will only be returned for reburial to appropriate Aboriginal people, community organizations or groups.
9. Once the museum has undertaken a thorough investigation of the request for repatriation of either secret sacred material or ancestral remains, a recommendation will be made to the Museum Trust.
10. If the Trust approves the repatriation of either secret sacred material or ancestral remains the Australian Museum will undertake the repatriation as quickly as possible.
11. All requests for the Museum to act as an intermediary or as a custodian should be in writing and should describe the material as well as outline the person or persons who are requesting the action, what community support there is and what action the Museum is requested to undertake.

References

Museums Australia policy Continuous cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities

http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/dbdoc/ccor_final_feb_05.pdf

The Return of Indigenous Cultural Property (RICP), Cultural Minister's Council

http://www.dcita.gov.au/arts_culture/funding_programs_and_support/return_of_indigenous_cultural_property_program

NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs Two Ways Together policy.

<http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au/data/files/FinalPOLICY.pdf>