

Repatriating tribal remains to California



At the University of Birmingham Medical School we hold a collection of human skulls and bone fragments from many places around the world. The records relating to how the collection was formed are no longer available, so little is known about the items. A small number of museums and medical schools have repatriated remains around the world, but often the process has been fraught with controversy. Our collection is not on display, and is not used for teaching or research.

There are a variety of opinions about repatriation. Museums are often keen to keep collections intact to allow education and further research to take place. This informs our understanding of how early cultures developed and functioned. From a native perspective, it is vital to have ancestral remains repatriated to allow the ancestors to rest in peace and the tribe to flourish again. Knowing that ancestors are kept as museum items is deeply traumatic and demonstrates the ultimate disrespect. Believing that repatriation was the only ethical response to our discovery, a decision was made to attempt repatriation of any of the remains which had good provenance. The first part of the collection to be repatriated is the Californian collection, which comprises 7 complete skulls and 4 bone fragments. Each item has a label attached stating that was found from a grave in the San Luis Obispo area of California. [Dr June Jones \(/staff/profiles/haps/PrimaryCareClinicalSciences/jones-june.aspx\)](/staff/profiles/haps/PrimaryCareClinicalSciences/jones-june.aspx) was asked to contact tribes in that area to investigate whether there was any interest in repatriation. The Salinan tribe responded enthusiastically, as San Luis Obispo is in their tribal area. Under the direction of the Dean, June began the repatriation process, which took several months of negotiation with US Embassy in London and US Customs Officials. Here is her diary.

Week in California WITH DR JUNE JONES



is the culmination of many months of collaborative effort between myself and tribal elder, John Burch. The San Luis Obispo area is home to the Tribe of Salinan Native Americans, and has been their ancestral land since prehistoric times. I know that when I arrive in Los Angeles I will be met by a very excited Tribal Elder. The first task is to get the box containing the skulls into my car- no mean feat considering the box is large and my car is not. Having accomplished that with the help of a colleague, I set off for the journey of a life-time.

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along the conveyor belt, right next to my suitcase. I then begin the process of clearing the box through US Customs. I have been in discussions for several months with the US Embassy in London and their specialist Customs team in Atlanta Georgia, so I have all the required paperwork and contact details at the ready, in case of any problems. Not for the first time on this journey, I am greeted with the opening question 'what's in the box, lady?' I produce all the paperwork and tell my story. Again, I am met with nothing but interest and a genuine desire to help the process go as smoothly as possible. The Customs Official jokes that his family will never believe what he has dealt with today. We both laugh about the shock the staff x-raying the box in airport security must have had!



Tuesday 8 May

Sealing the box, I feel a mixture of anxiety, relief and a huge sense of responsibility for what is about to happen. I am travelling down to London Heathrow to begin the journey of taking 7 skulls and 4 bone fragments back to their place of origin- the San Luis Obispo area of Central California. We found the human remains, fully labelled with their place of excavation, in our Medical School anatomy collection just over 14 months ago. This repatriation

Wednesday 9 May

Arriving at London Heathrow, my first task is to check the box in as part of my luggage. The process goes smoother than I had thought. United Airlines staff are really helpful once they know what is in the box! They surround the outside of the box with 'fragile' stickers and take me round to the area for large items, reassuring me that there would be no problems getting the box onto the flight. Arriving at Los Angeles, I am so relieved to see the box come

As I come through into the arrivals lounge, John and Chris are here to meet me. Our shared relief is palpable. They had driven 3 hours down from the San Luis Obispo area to meet me. We stop for long hugs and photographs then begin our journey north along the Coastal Highway, taking in some of the most beautiful scenery California has to offer. Our first stop is at the Sheriff's office, to meet the County Coroner who will take possession of the skulls until the reburial. First, they have to be inspected by expert archaeologists to confirm that the remains are Native American. Apparently confirmation is gained by examining the molar teeth, which are 'shovel' shaped from years of grit in the diet. The experts are ready to begin the process of identification when we arrived. Each skull is carefully examined and confirmed as Native American, so reburial arrangements can proceed. We leave the skulls with the coroner and travel 30 minutes to John's home, where I am staying. We talk late into the night about our work so far and our hopes for the reburial. There are already some legal issues that the tribe will have to overcome to be allowed to proceed with reburial quickly. If a tribe is Federally recognised, the process is fairly straight forward, but the Salinan tribe are awaiting Federal recognition, so the situation is complex. We go to bed wondering what the next few days would bring.

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Thursday 10 May



Rather than wait by the phone for news of the reburial process, John decides to take me on a tour of important Salinan sites. He is the Spiritual Elder of the Salinan tribe, so he knows the land in a special way. We travel to Mission San Antonio, where Salinan Indians were

rounded up and converted to

Catholic Christianity. There is a plaque here recording the first marriage to be conducted at the Mission in 1773, between John's many times removed grandparents. We then travel to 'the Indians', an area of sacred rock formations in the San Lucia Memorial park, and then to the Ventana Wilderness Trail. Being in these sacred landscapes with John is so special. Tourists would be impressed by the awesome splendour of the mountains, but John explains their sacred nature first hand, which brings a unique perspective to such a memorable day. Unfortunately we can't stay as long as we wanted (which would have been about 3 months!) because we have an appointment at Mission San Miguel with the local news channel, who are covering the story on their 10pm news that evening. The Mission contains a Chapel with original wall frescos painted by the Salinan Indians in the 1770s. The contrast between the sacred sites we had visited in the morning and the Chapel we are now sitting in couldn't have been starker.

We are interviewed by KCOY TV (<http://www.kcoy.com/story/18306360/native-american-remains-returned-to-the-central-coast>),

who are really interested in the story. It becomes apparent that although around 700 Salinan Indians still live in the San Luis Obispo area, little is known about them outside of their own community. There is also great interest in a UK University making the initial contact to begin and pay for repatriation. US repatriation efforts are usually initiated by Native American groups under Federal Law, which requires US Museums and Universities to return Native objects and remains. The process is often long, costly to the tribe and contentious, so our story had several unique features.



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Friday 11 May

The phone rings early this morning and we receive the best news of all- the Native American Heritage Commission have given permission for the reburial to take place today! We travel quickly to receive the remains from the Sheriff and Coroner, in front of TV cameras. It is a very moving and symbolic moment to see the Elders formally receive their ancestors for reburial from the Sheriff. We then travel to the site of reburial, which is kept secret to avoid

people coming to the grave site to dig up the ancestors again- yes, that actually still happens today! There are about 25 people present, mainly tribal members and people who support the tribe. The Sheriff and Coroner have come too, which is a very meaningful gesture away from the cameras. There are no photographs or recordings allowed of the reburial, and everyone is respectful of this. Tribal songs of welcome are sung to the ancestors, and their remains are laid to rest in a communal grave, side by side for the first time in over 100 years. It is a very emotional ceremony, with lots of tears shed and mixed emotions. The overwhelming theme I hear throughout the day, from State Officials and Tribal members, is how grateful everyone is to the University of Birmingham for repatriating the ancestors. There is regret over what happened during excavation and shipping the remains abroad, but that is completely overshadowed by the joy of homecoming. As one Tribal leader said to us as we gathered around the grave 'tonight our ancestors will sit around the fire together in their own land for the first time in many years'.

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Saturday 12 May

Today John takes me to another sacred site, Morro Rock on Morro bay. The rock is protected now as there are breeding pairs of peregrine falcons nesting on top of it, so no one is allowed to climb it. There are exceptions, however. At the winter and summer solstice John is allowed to take a few tribal members to the top to perform ancient tribal rituals. The rock is on the Pacific Ocean, so we have a great view of it whilst paddling.



After lunch we travel to the annual tribal BBQ. I am so privileged that my visit coincides with this annual event, where I get to meet around 150 tribal members. Listening to their tribal legends and stories I get a sense of a people still very much in touch with their cultural heritage, despite having completely assimilated into the American way of life. Older members reflect back on their lives, and the lives of their grandparents, discussing how much and how little has changed for them. The BBQ is truly the best I have ever had. BBQ'd oysters, local beef and chicken, lots of salads and dressings, and amazing cakes.



We spend our last evening together sitting round the fire at home, reflecting on the visit and the work yet to be done to bring ancestors and their tribal items back from many locations across America and Europe. The work ahead will be very hard, financially, practically and emotionally, but the tribe is prepared to go through it all in order to respect their ancestors. Having experienced the cooperation of our University, they only hope others will be equally receptive to their need for repatriation.

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Sunday 13 May

I leave today for London Heathrow. I am sad to be leaving these wonderful people, but I know that I will return again. We have forged strong bonds in our joint desire to honour the ancestors, and we are grateful to the Dean of Medicine, Professor Paul Stewart, for making all this possible.