



Australian Government
Department of Communications and the Arts



Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
Repatriation

Indigenous Repatriation—International Questions and Answers

Why were ancestors removed from Australia?

For more than 150 years, Australian Indigenous ancestral remains were removed and sent to museums, universities and private collections both in Australia and overseas. They were collected by medical officers, anatomists, ethnologists, anthropologists and pastoralists. At the time of collection, ancestral remains from many Indigenous cultures around the world were highly sought after for 'scientific' research and the value it was believed they added to collections.

Who is involved in the repatriation?

International repatriation is a collaborative process to return Australian Indigenous ancestral remains to their communities of origin. The Department of Communications and the Arts (the Department) works with Australian Indigenous communities; international collecting institutions and private holders; other Australian Government departments, including overseas embassy staff; foreign governments; state and territory governments; and Australian and international experts.

How long does it take to complete an international repatriation?

Negotiations are complex and depend on the nature of each case. The timing is subject to a number of factors including consultation with Australian Indigenous communities, agreement from the institutions for the unconditional return of the ancestors and other international governance and legislative processes.

How many ancestors have been returned from overseas?

The Australian Government has supported the repatriation of Australian Indigenous ancestral remains from overseas for over 30 years. More than 1500 ancestors have been returned to Australia from collecting institutions and private holders in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Austria, Ireland and Canada.

What happens to the ancestors when they return to Australia?

If the community of origin is known, they will decide how their ancestors are laid to rest. If provenance to a state or region is known, the ancestral remains may be returned to the appropriate state museum for temporary care, where further research will be undertaken to identify the community of origin. In cases where the state, region or community is unknown, the ancestral remains are cared for in a specialised repository in Canberra until further provenance research can be completed.

How many Australian Indigenous ancestral remains are still held in other countries?

The total number of Australian Indigenous ancestral remains held overseas is unknown. It is understood many overseas institutions hold ancestral remains, including some located in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Poland, Austria and the United States of America. The Australian Government has established relationships with these countries and is developing relationships with other countries to progress the repatriation of Australian Indigenous ancestral remains. Currently, the Department is progressing negotiations with over 35 institutions across 10 countries to facilitate the return of ancestral remains.



Find out more

To find out more please call 1800 006 992
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More information is available at arts.gov.au/repatriation