



Frequently asked questions: International repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestors

The repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains (ancestors) from overseas is a priority for First Nations people. The Australian Government maintains its ongoing commitment to seeking the repatriation of all ancestors held overseas so they can be returned home.

Why were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestors removed from Australia?

For more than 200 years, ancestors 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 and then sold, traded or gifted to collecting institutions or held privately. At the time of collection, ancestors from many First Nations cultures around the world were highly sought after for 'scientific' research and were frequently displayed and treated as objects.

Who is involved in the repatriation?

It has long been recognised that repatriation requires a collaborative approach to support the best outcomes for First Nations people. Consistent with the Australian Government Policy on Indigenous Repatriation, First Nations people are central to the

repatriation process. The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (the department) works closely with First Nations people and advocates for repatriation of ancestors overseas. This involves working directly with overseas collecting institutions and private holders, foreign governments and peak bodies and consulting with Australian and international researchers.

How long does it take to complete an international repatriation?

Negotiations for the return of ancestors are often sensitive and complex and each case is unique. The timing is subject to a number of factors including consultation with First Nations people, agreement from the collecting institutions for the voluntary and unconditional return of the ancestors and other international governance and legislative processes. Some negotiations may take place over many years, while others may occur quickly.

How many ancestors have been returned from overseas?

The Australian Government has supported the repatriation of ancestors from overseas for over 30 years. To date, more than 1650 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 Traditional Custodians are known, they will decide how their ancestors are cared for and until final resting. These arrangements may take some time. Often the return from overseas is the first part of the long journey home. If provenance to a state or region is known, the ancestors may be returned to the appropriate state museum for temporary care, to be closer to home until further provenance research can be completed. In cases where the state, region or community is unknown, the ancestors are cared for in a specialised repository in Canberra until further provenance research can be completed.

How many ancestors are still held in other countries?

The total number of ancestors held overseas is unknown. It is understood many overseas institutions and private holders are caring for ancestors, including those 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 discussions and support the repatriation of ancestors. Currently, the department has identified approximately 100 collecting institutions and private holders from over 20 countries as potentially holding ancestors.

Further information

To find out more about the repatriation of ancestors from overseas please call 1800 006 992, email repatriation@arts.gov.au or visit www.arts.gov.au/repatriation