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Indian Remains to be Returned to Sacred Burial Grounds

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Indian remains to be returned to sacred burial grounds

From The Associated Press

MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK — The skeletons of 450 Anasazi Indians, more than 2,000 bone fragments and a vast array of sacred burial goods will be reburied this year.

It will mark the end of five years of negotiations between Mesa Verde National Park, where some of the skeletons had been publicly displayed as late as 1990, and descendants of the Anasazi.

"It's the right thing to do," said Charles Peterson, chief ranger at Mesa Verde. "The remains should be buried with the same reverence and the same ceremonial honor others would receive."

The Mesa Verde burial is part of the 1990 Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act, which requires publicly funded facilities throughout the United States to return between 600,000 and 2 million human remains.

The exact site and date for the reburial in Colorado hasn't been set.

Archaeologists, building crews and looters at Mesa Verde had dug up the graves over the years, interrupting the long journey to the afterlife for the souls of the Anasazi Indians buried in centuries-old graves.

The controversial practice of digging up the graves has become a human rights issue, said Walter Echo-Hawk of the Boulder-based Native American Rights Fund.

Universities and museums across the country called the pillaging of burial sites research and said the displays were educational.

Echo-Hawk and Indian tribes call it grave robbing and labeled the public displays barbaric.

"It's about time that we and our ancestors are treated as people rather than data or some kind of research material to add to someone's academic advancement," said Clay Hamilton of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office in Arizona.

The Hopi and Pueblans are the living descendants of the Anasazi.

No bones from early explorers or settlers were displayed at Mesa Verde, the Indians said.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., has the largest number of items to be reburied, with more than 19,000 skeletons, skulls and other human remains.

Some museums outside Colorado have refused to comply with the fed-

eral act, claiming an irreplaceable loss of scientific material or disputing the Indian claims.

Others, including the Anasazi Cultural Heritage Center in Cortez, have started to return several hundred skeletons and single bones.

Director LouAnn

Jacobson said more has been gained than lost.

"It's forced us to do what we should have been doing all along, which is to talk to Native Americans about their past and their perspective," said Jacobson.

The Denver Art Museum, the Colorado Historical Museum and

the Denver Natural History Museum as well as state university collections have inventoried their Indian material and worked with culturally related tribes to return the remains.

At Mesa Verde, the five years of negotiations shifted thinking about the museum's outlook on human remains.

"Most of these remains have been out of the ground for 40 or 50 years. There was ample opportunity for study, and it wasn't done," said Linda Towle, chief of research at Mesa Verde.

"These individuals were taken from their place of rest and their descendants feel that shouldn't have been done," she said. "We have lots of other material to work from."

Since the human remains and burial goods have been removed from the museum, Peter Pino feels pride when walking through the displays of ancient southwest Indian life.

Pino represented Zia Pueblo in talks with Mesa Verde.

"We always felt that removing the burial materials showed a lot of disrespect," he said. "They removed the bodies and the burial good because they made money."

Now, he can look at the items, like the tools, and see how the Anasazi were able to use them, he said.

"It amazes me to see how smart they were."

The Ute Mountain Utes, located next to Mesa Verde, attended the talks, but didn't participate.

Terry Knight, a tribal representative, said he thinks the process should take a long time.

"The museums shouldn't be giving these things back to just anyone," Knight said. "I'm glad there's a lot of red tape."

'They removed the bodies and the burial good because they made money.'

Peter Pino
