

# john hawks weblog

paleoanthropology, genetics, and evolution

Wednesday March 18 2009 7<sup>01</sup> pm

## University of California administration rejects science, accepts tribal creationism

Rex Dalton reports in *Nature* on [a strange story of repatriation](http://www.nature.com/news/2009/090318/full/458265a.html)

(<http://www.nature.com/news/2009/090318/full/458265a.html>) from the University of California, San Diego. It looks like Kennewick 2.0, except this time it's the University administration that has created the problem:

Officials at the University of California are moving to give two of the oldest-known skeletons in North America to a local Native American tribe, against the recommendation of university scientists who say the bones should be retained for study.

Dalton's article points out that the remains are more than 10,000 years old, and therefore cannot be associated with any recent or extant tribe. Under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), recent remains with cultural affiliations to extant tribes must be returned upon request, but such ancient remains should not be. That was precisely the issue in the Kennewick case.

Dalton had [reported on this case](http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/4551156a) (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/4551156a>) in October, at which time the local decision-making process had led to a rejection of the request for repatriation. But that decision was threatened by action from above -- the system president Yudof and UCSD chancellor Fox. From that October article:

Currently, decisions about cultural affiliation are made by a panel of scientists — typically including a Native American — at each campus. Campus actions are then reviewed by a nine-person University of

California panel, which includes two Native Americans, before a final decision is reached. But in September, the office of Mark Yudof, the president of the University of California, initiated discussions about possibly eliminating the system-wide committee.

I haven't yet found another news story reporting on the events. Instead, I found a number of stories about [this other piece of Kumeyaay news \(http://www.sdsuniverse.info/sdsuniverse/news.aspx?s=70885\)](http://www.sdsuniverse.info/sdsuniverse/news.aspx?s=70885):

The on campus sports and entertainment venue at San Diego State University will be renamed Viejas Arena, under a new agreement between the university and the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians, the two announced today.

The naming rights agreement will officially go into effect July 1, 2009 and will pay SDSU approximately \$6 million over 10 years.

SDSU is not a UC campus. So if you're mystified about why the UC system president and UCSD chancellor would be so solicitous about the reburial of two 10,000-year-old skeletons, wonder no further.

Dalton's current article brings us up to speed on the reburial request:

[L]ast month, University of California president Mark Yudof and UCSD chancellor Marye Anne Fox began seeking a rare federal approval to give the skeletons to the local Kumeyaay tribe, which has asked for them. And some anthropologists say the decision is based on politics, not science.

"This is scandalous," says Robert Bettinger, an anthropologist at the University of California, Davis, who is on the panel that oversees how archaeological remains are handled at all ten University of California campuses. The panel was not consulted on this transfer proposal.

So let me get this straight. The University of California has an expert panel to consult on matters of exactly this kind, matters in which University facilities and collections may intersect with federal agencies or laws regarding archaeological remains. The reason for these experts being that federal laws are complicated, and their application depends on the age and provenience of artifacts, things that only experts tend to know.

And the president and chancellor just decided, "What the heck? Who needs experts? Time to rebury these bones!" And besides that, "Maybe this panel of experts isn't such a good idea. They are getting in the way too much. Let's dump the whole idea of experts!" And maybe, "I wonder which stadiums *we* could rename?"

It is worse than scandalous. It's a recognition by the chancellor of UCSD and the president of

the University of California that creationism is true. These creationist beliefs are dressed up as multiculturalism, but they are creationist nonetheless.

Because if they accepted evolution, they would recognize the transitions among historic and prehistoric cultures in California and the immigration and emigration of peoples during the last 10,000 years. Across that distant time span, no cultural affiliation is plausible, and genetic relationships are necessarily diffuse --- the individuals represented by these remains might have no living descendants, or descendants living throughout North and South America. A direct and unique lineal connection between these ancient people and the living people in the same area is creationism, not science. Because if you're a creationist, you can feel free to reject the radiocarbon dates, the cultural affiliation, and all other scientific evidence.

Of course, the president and chancellor in this case aren't really Native American creationists. They're something worse: unprincipled quislings intent on selling out science for a quick buck.

Friend of the blog Margaret Schoeninger gets her digs in:

"This goes against the policies of President Barack Obama for science-based decisions, not belief-based ones," says anthropologist Margaret Schoeninger, who chairs the UCSD committee that reviews such specimens.

It's a good line. But sadly I think the idea that the Obama administration is going to be better in this regard than the Clinton administration (which took Kennewick) is a forlorn hope. Consider [this October Washington Post story on Obama's fundraising: \(http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/21/AR2008102102996\\_pf.html\)](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/21/AR2008102102996_pf.html)

From the start, Obama's campaign has designed a fundraising effort that tries to maximize contributions from both small and large donors. That effort expanded in late summer, when Obama prepared to accept his party's nomination and the DNC set up separate committees that would enable top donors to give as much as \$65,500 to support his bid.

The best-known of those committees, the Obama Victory Fund, has catered to party regulars who attended one of dozens of gala events around the country, including VIP gatherings for those able to donate \$28,500. The Committee for Change has quietly accepted millions more, in checks ranging from \$5,000 to \$66,900, from celebrities, corporate titans, Native American tribes and several of Obama's most ardent bundlers.

They include entertainment mogul David Geffen, Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos, actress Annette Bening, **the California-based Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation** and members of Chicago's Crown family.

The single largest corporate contributor to Obama's campaign? The University of California. Somehow I don't think the president and chancellor are going to have much trouble with their request at the Interior Department.

If the scientists aren't ready for Kennewick II, these bones will almost certainly be reburied.