

Scientists in bone battle

Native Americans lay claim to 10,000-year-old skeletons.

Rex Dalton

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.

Under federal law, bones are returned to a tribe that can prove 'cultural affiliation' through artefacts or other analyses. At nearly 10,000 years old, the skeletons in question — unearthed in 1976 at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) — are so ancient that they are not culturally linked to any tribe (see [*Nature* 455, 1156–1157; 2008](#)).

But last 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.

"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. The final decision is likely to be made by Obama appointee Ken Salazar, secretary of the Department of the Interior.

Officials at the Department of the Interior say the request will be considered by the committee that reviews the return of remains and artefacts when it meets in Seattle, Washington, on 23–24 May.

Fox declined an interview, but said in a statement that

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the transfer "seems an appropriate balance between the interests of science and [those] of the Native American community".

This week, Schoeninger is petitioning the research committee of the UCSD faculty senate to try to prevent the transfer. But Kumeyaay spokesman Steve Banegas says the tribe impatiently awaits the chance to bury the bones. "This is long overdue," he says.



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As one who is part Cherokee, and yes the Cherokee is one tribe that allows one to claim to be a person #6740 of fractional heritage, this is science and those laying claim to it for sentimental, heritage or for whatever inadequate reasons might wish to consider the greater implications here. often archaeological finds are turned into gross debates as too often witnessed in the Middle East. To claim cultural affiliation is ridiculous. It would seem the Native Amerians in question should desire to learn more about their ancestry via scientific discovery rather than verbal myths. But to expect anymore out of them than we can expect from the superstitious majority of peoples on Earth is unfair.

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Posted by: **David Deal** | 2009-03-19 01:15:56 AM

Liberal thinking may be the death of science yet. It may seem paradoxical but the more liberal and #6753 politically correct a scientist is- the more religion [or emotion] trumps science in decisions.

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Posted by: **A J Mims** | 2009-03-19 07:23:55 PM

I think, why don't invite to investigate the native scientists in team with the University?. Win-Win. We #6782 need learn and understand of the traditions but we need learn to share the science to others points of view.

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Posted by: **Alonso Verdugo** | 2009-03-24 10:29:22 AM

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