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Study of Ancient American Skeletons Shows Their Importance

It isn't often that anthropologists get a direct look at the remains of some of the earliest people to arrive in the Americas. Researchers have discovered only a handful of Paleoindian skeletons older than 8000 years. Now that University of California (UC) officials have recently urged federal officials to give two of the oldest known skeletons in America to the Kumeyaay nation for reburial, anthropologists at several UC campuses are protesting vehemently, calling the action "scandalous" in blogs and interviews.

In a talk Saturday at the annual meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA) in Chicago, Illinois, UC San Diego (UCSD) anthropologist Margaret Schoeninger will demonstrate the two skeletons' importance to science: Her lab analyzed stable isotopes from samples of the remains of a man and a woman, which indicated that these ancient Americans ate a diet of marine mammals and offshore fish. That coastal adaptation contrasts with the desert origins of the Kumeyaay and counters the old view that the earliest inhabitants of North America were big-game hunters, says Schoeninger. At almost 10,000 years old, the skeletons—excavated in 1976 from the property of the former chancellor's house at UCSD—are too old to have any cultural or biological affinity with the Kumeyaay or any living Native Americans, says Schoeninger, who is co-director of a UCSD working group that advised the university to keep the skeletons. She also says that emerging methods to study ancient DNA could be applied to the skeletons, which are good candidates for this technology, and could help reveal which populations in Asia were the ancestors of the first Americans. Even though the skeletons have been under study since their discovery, researchers are developing new methods that could be used to gain even more insight into these people's lives and ancestry.

Also this week, Schoeninger met with AAPA's executive committee, which will send a letter to the U.S. Department of the Interior and the administrators of the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, saying that the specimens are too important to science to rebury. "Their continued study is critical for understanding the original peopling of the New World," says Schoeninger. "Unlike most skeletons of such antiquity, these are remarkably well-preserved." They are both better preserved and older than the well-known skeleton of Kennewick Man,

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which was the subject of several lawsuits after Native Americans claimed the skeleton when it washed ashore on the bank of the Columbia River in Oregon.

Schoeninger has also sought the support of the UCSD Academic Senate, which plans to discuss the issue at one of its forthcoming meetings. Members of the scientific working group want the Academic Senate to consider whether governance procedures were violated when UC President Mark Yudof and UCSD Chancellor Marye Anne Fox ignored the scientific group's recommendations and failed to inform it that they were seeking to return the remains to the Kumeyaay nation. For a flavor of just how concerned anthropologists are about the repatriation, see the [evolution blog](#) by paleoanthropologist John Hawks.

—Ann Gibbons

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