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- LETTERS

## Unexamined Bodies of Evidence

In his News & Analysis story “Do island sites suggest a coastal route to the Americas?” (4 March, p. [1122](#)), M. Balter discusses the implications of evidence that more than 10,000 years ago, people used marine resources and specialized technology on California's Channel Islands. He mentions that some archaeologists, citing Spanish ethnohistorical observations, argue against interpreting the evidence as support for a coastal route from Alaska, suggesting instead that mainlanders used the islands seasonally. Later in the story, Daniel Sandweiss notes the need for DNA studies and states, “we need to find where the bodies are.”

Two such bodies, a rare double burial, were recovered during archaeological excavations at the University of California, San Diego, chancellor's residence in 1976 ([1](#)). Radiocarbon dating carried out in 1977 gave dates of 8730 to 9350 years before present, slightly younger than the material found at the Channel Island sites, but still very old by North American osteological standards and similar to the age of the skeleton found in Kennewick in 1996 (8340 to 9200 years before present). Stable carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses made almost 30 years ago on bone collagen extracted from the skeletons indicates year-round, not seasonal, dependence on marine mammals and subsistence on high-trophic-level fish, possibly indicative of early open-ocean fishing ([2](#)). Low levels of aspartic acid racemization in the bones suggest that it might be possible to retrieve endogenous DNA ([3](#)). With state-of-the-art ancient DNA (aDNA) extraction, amplification, and sequencing methods ([3](#), [4](#)), there is a strong possibility that aDNA sequences will be obtained for these skeletal remains. Such information could be used to assess their genetic affiliation, if any, with modern American Indian groups.

Unfortunately, the University of California administration has failed to honor research requests for the study of these unique skeletons. Instead, the University of California favors the ideology [see also ([5](#))] of a local American Indian group over the legitimacy of science. In contrast, the 2004 Kennewick case verdict stated that there was insufficient evidence to establish that the skeleton was Native American or related to any living American Indian group ([6](#)). The potential loss of the La Jolla skeletons would have a profoundly negative impact on our knowledge of the peopling of the Americas and the antiquity of coastal adaptations ([7](#), [8](#)).



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California's Channel Islands

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Michael Balter

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