

Field Museum returns Maori skulls

Chicago follows European trend

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The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago returned the remains of 14 Maoris to New Zealand last month, concluding years of negotiations with Te Papa Tongarewa, the national museum in Wellington. Though other remains from the Bishop Museum in Honolulu have been given back to New Zealand, the Field is the first museum from the mainland United States to repatriate Maori material.

The handing over ceremony took place on 10 September at the national meeting ground at Te Papa Tongarewa where the remains will be placed into a repository until the tribal identities of the individuals can be established. Maori remains are not displayed in New Zealand.

John Terrell, the Field Museum's curator of Pacific Anthropology, said the repatriated remains include parts of 13 skulls purchased in the 1890s from a New York scientific supply company. He does not know how the firm obtained them or the identities of the individuals. The Field has also returned the preserved tattooed head of a tribal chief acquired in 1958 from a British collector who sold the museum more than 6,000 pieces from the Pacific Islands.

Arapata Hakiwai, director of Maori Culture at Te Papa, says approximately 150 foreign museums and medical colleges hold Maori remains, and since 2003 a government-mandated five-person team at the national museum has sought their repatriation. A request for restitution was first lodged with the

Field in July 2005, although informal discussions about the head go back to the mid-1980s. Hundreds of remains have been recovered from museums in Europe, Asia, and Australia, generally after a request from Te Papa. Mr Hakiwai says an emerging trend, especially in the UK, is for institutions to initiate discussions, citing the recent return of remains from the Marischal College Museum in Aberdeen, Scotland.

In April, a New Zealand delegation visited the Field museum to mark the 125th anniversary of a Maori meeting house that has been a key piece in the collection since it was acquired in 1905. The Field has an extensive Pacific Islands collection, assembled mainly in the first decades of the 20th century, but according to both Mr Hakiwai and Dr Terrell there are no pending repatriation requests for Maori material.

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