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## **Seminole's' Long Fight for Return of Stolen Ancestors Yields Results**

**BIG CYPRESS SEMINOLE RESERVATION, FLA.** (Oct. 26, 2020) – After years of advocacy for change, the Seminole Tribe of Florida Repatriation Committee has received a revised repatriation policy from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. The revised policy includes provisions to repatriate human remains and funerary objects back to affiliated tribes that have been previously identified as “culturally unidentifiable” by the NMNH.

The revised policy is an important step in the repatriation process of human remains and funerary objects obtained by the NMNH through various donations and acquisitions over the course of many decades during the 1900s. Included are the remains of approximately 1,496 Seminole ancestors exhumed from dozens of burial sites across the State of Florida. An additional tens of thousands of archaeological artifacts such as potsherds, arrowheads, delicately carved bone tools, and wooden effigies may now also be classified as funerary objects and subject to repatriation.

“The NMNH holds vast collections of human remains that have been refused repatriation for nearly 30 years,” said Domonique deBeaubien, Collections Manager and Chair of the Repatriation Committee. “Until now, there has been no legal mechanism to return those ancestors to their homelands. That transition can now begin.”

The new policy language is a long-awaited change and will provide an unprecedented opportunity to repatriate thousands of additional ancestors and sacred funerary objects to tribes across the United States.

“The eventual enactment of this policy is a historic victory for indigenous rights and an encouraging sign that the NMNH recognizes the importance of returning ancestors to finally rest,” said Paul Backhouse, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

“We look forward to working with Native communities on requests for culturally unaffiliated remains and associated funerary objects,” wrote Bill Billeck, NMNH Repatriation Office Program Manager, in a message that accompanied the revised policy.

The Repatriation Committee of the Seminole Tribe of Florida led the charge in urging the NMNH to revise their repatriation policy. In 2018, the Tribe’s Historic Preservation Office passed its first formal resolution through the United South and Eastern Tribes (USET) and a second

resolution in 2019 with the National Congress of the American Indian (NCAI). Both resolutions encouraged NMNH to adopt a repatriation policy that gave equal weight to tribal knowledge and oral histories and create a process that would allow all ancestors to be repatriated.

“While this victory is celebrated, there is still much work left to do,” said Tina Osceola, member of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Associate Justice for the Tribal Court, and member of the Repatriation Committee. “The revised policy has been a long time coming and generations overdue. As our Tribe continues to seek the return of our stolen ancestors, we will continue to work on behalf of Indian Country to pass better laws that can help to return more ancestors, funerary, and sacred objects. I hope that the nation and world will shift their beliefs that our culture and people are only valuable when owned, displayed or studied.”

For more information about repatriation, visit [www.stofthpo.com](http://www.stofthpo.com) or follow #NoMoreStolenAncestors on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for updates.

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