

Angilluki – RETURN THEM



Across the United States, thousands of organizations hold the remains of Native American people. American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian ancestors are stored in coroners' offices, held as laboratory specimens, displayed by historical societies, and kept in museums. By some estimates, there are over 100,000 Native American ancestors in institutions around the country. Why?

A wave of collecting Native American remains followed the settlement of Native lands in the 19th century. Westerners believed that Native cultures were disappearing and sought to document Indigenous people and their traditions before they disappeared. During this era, ancestral remains were taken from graves without consent or regard for Native burial practices and beliefs. The remains were often displayed as curios or used in research. Many ended up in museum collections. This treatment of ancestral remains is very painful for tribal communities who wish to care for their dead in culturally appropriate ways.

Ancestral Alutiiq/Sugpiaq remains have been held by at least 20 institutions across the United States. For example, in the 1930s, anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička dug into ancient Alutiiq village sites around Kodiak and collected ancestral remains to study the origins of Alaska Native people. He took the bones of more than 1,000 Alutiiq ancestors to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In 1991, the Native Village of Larsen Bay secured the return of these ancestors in one of the country's first repatriations. Their efforts contributed to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), federal legislation that affirms the right of Native people to care for their dead. The law requires all organizations that receive federal funding to identify the Native American remains in their care, disclose this information to related tribes, and assist tribes in claiming their ancestors. Since 1991, the Kodiak Alutiiq community has repatriated the remains of 1,240 individuals. Hundreds more await return.



The Old Harbor community reburies ancestral remains beside Three Saints Bay, 2019.

To support the repatriation process, Kodiak's 10 federally recognized tribes formed the Kodiak Alutiiq Sugpiaq Repatriation Commission (KASRC) in 2007. The commission sets island-wide procedures for repatriation and establishes priorities for repatriation projects in partnership with the Alutiiq Museum.

Today, the Alutiiq Ancestors Memorial, a public park in Kodiak, provides a quiet space to learn about repatriation. Visitors of all heritages are encouraged to consider the importance of ancestors to their own families and history.

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Grave Injustice, 2002, by Kathleen S. Fine-Dare. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.