

Bark etchings fight

By Peter Fray
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Moves by a Victorian Aboriginal group to prevent the return of precious bark etchings to two prominent British institutions have endangered the whole system of international museum loans, the institutions have warned.

The Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group has secured an emergency declaration under Australian heritage protection laws to stop the etchings being returned to the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Surrey from Museum Victoria, where they have been on loan since March.

The Dja Dja Wurrung claim the artefacts, made in the Wimmera 150 years ago, are Aboriginal treasures and should be kept in Australia in defiance of a loan agreement with the British institutions.

The etchings feature hunting scenes and images of kangaroos and have been part of the museum's *Etched on Bark* exhibition.

The British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens have warned that the emergency declaration "puts at risk the very legal framework" that allows exhibitions in Australia to draw on loans from British, American and European institutions.

The stand-off comes at a sensitive time in relations between Aboriginal groups and British museums as the Blair Government considers a far-reaching report on the repatriation of Aboriginal remains.

British institutions are split on the issue, with some, such as the Natural History Museum, which holds the biggest black bone collection, opposed to the moves and others far more sympathetic.

The Dja Dja Wurrung's action risks alienating previous supporters of repatriations.

The precise legal basis of the bid to keep the works in Australia was unclear last night.

Museum Victoria chairman Harold Mitchell said he believed traditional owners were entitled to seek an emergency protection declaration from the state Aboriginal Affairs Minister, which could then be ratified by a court.

Mr Mitchell said the museum had been in contact with the relevant UK authorities. "They're very understanding of our situation and we're continuing negotiations," he said.

Gary Murray, secretary to the Dja Dja Wurrung, told *The Times* newspaper in London: "They (the artefacts) belong to Australia... if we had your crown jewels, you'd be knocking our doors down."

Mr Murray called on Prime Minister John Howard to ask the British Government to return the barks and the hundreds of Aboriginal remains held by the Natural History Museum.

- with AFP, Chris Evans