

Aboriginal remains will be returned

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Major Sumner holds remains returned in 2003. Photo: Reuters

Aboriginal body parts that scientists and explorers took to Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries can be returned to Australia, after the enactment of a new British law.

The British Museum and the Natural History Museum are among nine institutions that now plan to return human remains to indigenous communities around the world.

The Culture Minister, David Lammy, said the British Government had changed the law in "response to the claims of indigenous peoples, particularly in Australia, for the return of ancestral remains".

The newly enacted section of the Human Tissue Act allows museums to return remains that "are reasonably believed to be under 1000 years in age".

A spokeswoman for the British Museum said the museum had pushed for the legal change and was absolutely committed to returning human remains, provided that Aboriginal communities could prove a link to the items.

Aborigines have appealed to the British and Australian governments for more than 20 years to help them bring home their ancestors' remains, which range from locks of hair to entire skeletons. Indigenous groups in North America and New Zealand have made similar appeals.

Aboriginal groups believe that more than 8000 sets of remains - most taken as curios and scientific specimens - are still in museums and institutions abroad.

In a global trend towards repatriation, Sweden and the United States have already returned Aboriginal remains.

Manchester Museum returned four Aboriginal skulls in 2003, while the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter announced last year it would return four remains, including a male and a female skull coming from an Aboriginal burial ground 480 kilometres below the junction of the Darling and Murray rivers.

It is believed most British museum curators favour the return of remains, but the British and Natural History museums and other large national institutions were created by acts of Parliament that require legislation to dispose of items in their collections.

Moves to change the law gained force in July 2000 when the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a joint declaration urging the repatriation of human remains to Aborigines where appropriate.

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