

Led by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, a resolution has been passed concerning repatriation policies at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

The resolution was passed by the United South and Eastern Tribes Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF) board of directors at its annual meeting in October at the Seneca Nation of New York.

The resolution calls for the Smithsonian to revise its repatriation policy to include “provisions for the repatriation of culturally unidentifiable human remains.” It seeks other adaptations regarding human remains, as well as a revision of its dispute resolution process to “work with Tribal Nations more respectfully and engage in meaningful consultation to resolve the disposition of Tribal ancestors.”

“The resolution was brought forward and led by the Seminole Tribe of Florida,” Sisy Garcia, policy analyst for USET SPF said.

Garcia said her office worked on the resolution with Anne Mullins, assistant director of the Seminole Tribe of Florida’s Tribal Historic Preservation Office. Mullins has collaborated with THPO collections manager Domonique deBeaubien on the issue as well.

“We’ve been working on and off with the Smithsonian for a number of years on repatriation,” Mullins told The Seminole Tribune. “They don’t have a policy [on culturally unidentifiable human remains], no procedures in place. The resolution pushes them to adopt their policy - every other federally funded museum has this policy,” she said.

The Smithsonian has thousands of Native American remains it won’t repatriate - more than 1,400 from the state of Florida, of which there are certain to be Seminole ancestors, Mullins said.

“We at least want to be part of the discussion; know the history; how they’re connected; and have [remains] potentially repatriated,” she said.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 is the federal repatriation law that all federally funded institutions or federal lands must follow, excluding the Smithsonian Institutions.

The National Museum of the American Indian has its own repatriation policy that was updated in 2014 to include guidance on remains that are culturally unidentifiable. But the Smithsonian policy specifically excludes culturally unidentifiable remains.

“The museum received the USET resolution [in early November] and I expect to have a meeting in the next few weeks with department staff to discuss a response to USET,” Bill Billeck told The Seminole Tribune.

Billeck is the program manager in the repatriation office of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Requests for further comment from Billeck from The Seminole Tribune have not been returned.

deBeaubien said there are several scholarly articles written on the importance of repatriating culturally unidentifiable Native American remains.

“Museums across the country now view this as ethically vital to the health of their institutions,” said deBeaubien, who herself has written about repatriation under NAGPRA.

“Tribes across the country consider the return of their ancestors and sacred objects of the utmost

importance, and we hope the resolution passed through USET will help encourage that process," she said.

"We're not sure how [the Smithsonian] is going to react," added Mullins. "We're not sure why they haven't been more open to this process."

USET SPF is an intertribal organization comprised of 27 federally recognized Tribal Nations. The Seminole Tribe of Florida is one of the founders of the group.

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