

Australian Tribes Seek Return of Native Artefacts

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Historic Aboriginal artefacts loaned by two world-famous British institutions are now in storage in Australia after a bid by a native tribe to keep them.

The Dja Dja Wurrung people have embarked on a legal battle to ensure some of the earliest surviving bark etchings made by their ancestors are not returned to the British Museum or Kew Gardens.

They accuse the organisations of colonial attitudes, and say the pieces are part of their cultural heritage and should stay where they came from.

The works two bark etchings from the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, and a ceremonial emu figure from the British Museum were loaned to the Museum Victoria for its 150th anniversary exhibition, Etched On Bark 1854.

The pieces are now being held in secure storage in Melbourne while the wrangle is sorted out.

Gary Murray, secretary of the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group, said the artefacts had been insured for about £900,000 just under two million Australian dollars but dollars dont interest us. Our value is in our spiritual, emotional value.

It physically connects us " it could have been my great-grandfather who did the work.

We have a personal interest as well as an emotional and cultural one and we are concerned that the British havent seemed to have changed their attitude in 200 years since they colonised us.

We will explore all legal avenues. We are going to write to Her Majesty the Queen and the Prime Minister and even the Pope to make sure this debate is dragged out and there is proper dealing.

Emergency declarations which last for 30 days were made on behalf of the Dja Dja Wurrung in June and subsequently renewed, and they now hope the state governor will make a permanent order.

Mr Murray said the lack of direct negotiation by the British institutions with them

showed disrespect, and added: We dont have the Crown Jewels, but by Christ if we did all hell would break loose. There would be a warship stationed off the port of Melbourne.

They came and murdered us and dispossessed us. This is their English inheritance coming back to haunt them.

We are in for the long haul. If the world wants to see them they should come here where they came from.

The Museum Victoria says it believes it is the first time such a bid has been launched.

Chief executive officer Patrick Greene said the emergency declarations came really out of the blue because the legislation was aimed at protecting archaeological sites from development

He added: We have two parts to our priority. First of all, we have a contractual arrangement with the British Museum and the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew and we will stand by that and we will do everything to make sure that we do comply with that and return the items.

The second priority is to ensure that our relations with the aboriginal community which are very good and which have been built up over many years also remain good, so therefore that requires a lot of discussion and that is taking place.

In a joint statement, the British Museum and Royal Botanic Gardens said they were committed to exercising stewardship of the collections for the benefit of a worldwide public and for future generations.

It added: The emergency declaration puts at risk the very legal framework that allows such exhibitions to take place drawing on loans from Europe and America.

It is in the interests of everyone that objects of cultural and artistic significance such as these continue to be able to move around the world and be seen by many different publics.