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Mission aims to place ancestral remains at rest

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David Thompson can tell some horror stories, such as the remains of an Aboriginal baby, looted from a burial site in Queensland, which were passed around a bar as a curiosity and then thrown on to a rubbish dump.

Mr Thompson, an elder of the Bidjara people, is currently on a mission to restore human remains, many scattered in collections around the world, to their correct resting places.

'I didn't realise I would be doing this. The spirits of our ancestors called me to it - and I've only just begun,' he said.

He and other representatives of communities around the nation are getting some earthly help through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and from institutions such as the National Museum of Australia. Locating the remains, and then identifying their origin, is a major work of detection.

Michael Westaway, an archaeologist and physical anthropologist, runs the museum's repatriation program.

He said there had been a breakthrough with the promise to amend British legislation that would make it easier for institutions there to return their often vast collections of remains to Australia.

'The public collections are going to be much easier; private material is another matter,' he said.

'Last year, ATSIC got word that a highly decorated cranium was being auctioned in Brussels. A Department of Foreign Affairs representative confronted the owner and said it should be returned to Australia and he was more or less laughed at.

'One of the problems is that some Queensland bundle burials are highly decorated and very beautiful, and people regard them as works of art rather than funeral items. They can fetch up to \$20,000 on the black market.'

A further problem is what to do with the remains when they are returned.

Mr Westaway said the museum was happy to act as a half-way house, storing them when they arrived back in Australia until there was an agreement on which part of the country should be their final resting place.

Mr Thompson said the material had often been looted from open Aboriginal burial grounds and he was reluctant to put them at risk again.

'At this stage we are looking at a Keeping Place where we can hold ceremonies which will ensure the spirits are finally at rest,' he said.

The market for Aboriginal remains was insatiable through most of the 19th century.

Mr Westaway said that, in the earliest years, skulls were needed by the practitioners of the pseudo-science of phrenology, who attempted to work out mental powers by the bumps and indentations in the head.

'Later on, as Darwinian theories took hold, people were trying to understand the processes of evolution, and most major museums were eager to get collections of indigenous people from across the world.'

The practice was rapidly dying out by the 1930s, although Mr Thompson said a looted burial ground at Blacks' Palace, about 200km south-east of Longreach, was intact at least until that time.

He is taking back a skull, part of a collection from Edinburgh, Scotland, which has been identified as coming from his area. Partly fossilised, it could be thousands of years old, but that matters little. It is returning to its country and when the ceremonies are over, one more spirit will be at rest.