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## Aboriginal burial sites disturbed on a regular basis

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TONY EASTLEY: While great care was taken with today's repatriation of veterans' remains, we're not so careful with others.

Around the south-west of New South Wales, the disturbance of Aboriginal burial sites occurs with alarming regularity, according to one archaeologist who's spent decades studying the region.

The local inspector of police says it can happen up to several times a month.

Tim Lamacraft has the story.

TIM LAMACRAFT: When human remains were discovered in a load of sand dumped at a construction site near Mildura recently, the local police were naturally called in.

STUART GORDON: New South Wales Police were advised by Mildura detectives that human remains had been located, that was at a construction which was taking place at Red Cliffs in Victoria.

TIM LAMACRAFT: That's inspector Stuart Gordon, of the Dareton Police in New South Wales.

STUART GORDON: We made inquiries with an archaeological expert from the Office of Environment and Heritage. He ultimately attended Kelso Station and located a further human tooth, and he was able to determine from his expertise that the bones were ancient.

TIM LAMACRAFT: It seems to be a readily agreed upon fact that Aboriginal burial sites in the region are regularly disturbed.

STUART GORDON: Bones are discovered quite regularly in this area, in fact Lake Victoria, not too far from us, is regarded as possibly the largest Aboriginal burial ground in Australia and estimates range anywhere between 6-10,000 people are estimated to have been buried there over thousands of years.

TIM LAMACRAFT: The latest discovery is now in the hands of the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage.

It issued a statement saying the mine, which is still operating, is assisting with investigations to ascertain how and where the burial was exposed.

It also issued a reminder to extractive industries, saying they have an obligation to exercise due diligence in their assessment of the potential to disturb Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly in sand deposit landforms.

Dr Colin Pardoe is an archaeologist who's studied the region for decades and is well aware of what lies beneath the ground and in the sand hills.

He was also unsurprised to learn of the latest discovery.

COLIN PARDOE: Here we go again. A common enough occurrence when sand hills are dug into. Okay, I'm not biased, but it is one of the most important areas in Australia from an archaeological perspective. Certainly in terms of the number and density of people throughout the continent, this is one of the three core areas.

TIM LAMACRAFT: Graham Clarke is a Barkindji man, a direct descendant of the Aboriginal people who've continuously occupied the area for tens of thousands of years.

GRAHAM CLARKE: We know for a fact that right throughout these areas here of the junction of Australia's two longest rivers, the Darling and the Murray and all the way up to Lake Victoria, Lake Mungo, and also trekking north on the Darling river, there's burials all around these areas.

There's a lot of cover-ups, a lot of people would not report it or anything like that because they think that there's gonna be terrible consequences.

TIM LAMACRAFT: He says his people aren't seeking retribution for the disturbance of their ancestors, but respect.

GRAHAM CLARKE: When they come across burials out here that are unknown, which are coming out that are thousands of years old and that, we don't know that they're there you know, a lot of them are appearing from weathering.

So what it needs to come back to is respect for that, exactly like we all respect the cemetery, so they should all respect those bones and we have a system where we all work together to protect that.

TIM LAMACRAFT: Mr Clarke says a key reason why protection of the region is failing is because there are multiple government bodies and appointed representatives who all have some sort of responsibility in the management of cultural heritage.

GRAHAM CLARKE: Who's jurisdiction is it actually under? It seems that everybody wants to control everything, but nobody wants to take a responsibility for anything. That's the biggest problem.

Why does all these issues have to go round and round, we need to eliminate the whole lot. Because don't forget, who's paying for all this? The taxpayer is the one who's being duped here.

If somebody come in and started digging up a cemetery and all that, and bones, you'd have the whole community down there jumping on your back, you know and abusing you.

Then you'd be fined, you know, then you'd probably end up in jail for desecrating a site.

TIM LAMACRAFT: The Office of Environment and Heritage says it's currently consulting with the Aboriginal community, including Native Title Holders, to make a repatriation plan for the remains.

TONY EASTLEY: Tim Lamacraft reporting.