

PRESS RELEASE  
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## SB Museum of Natural History Returns Chumash Remains and Objects

*SBMNH and the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians collaborated on exchange under  
Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)*

**SANTA BARBARA, CA**—Following six months of collaboration with representatives of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History curatorial staff returned thousands of items, including human remains and associated funerary objects, to the Santa Ynez Band in April 2022.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is a federal law that provides a process for federal agencies and museums to repatriate or transfer from their collections certain Native American cultural items including human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, to lineal descendants, and to Indian tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations.

After receiving the NAGPRA claim in October 2021, Museum curatorial staff inventoried and packed all of the requested materials in an appropriate manner given the cultural sensitivities associated with these human remains and items found with them in grave sites.

The oldest remains to be repatriated were from the Arlington Springs Man, which consist of three human bones discovered on Santa Rosa Island by Museum archaeologist Phil Orr in 1959. While excavating nearby, Orr discovered the bones, which due to erosion, were visible in a stream bank. These remains have been radiocarbon dated to 13,000 years old making them the oldest human remains yet found in North America.

Kenneth Kahn, Tribal Chairman for the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians shared, “These items have come home to our tribe, and it allows us to do the important work of repatriation and reburial. We continue to have a close working relationship with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History and consider it to be a collaborative partner in the community.”

“The Museum has been honored to care for this important cultural heritage for many years and now finds it deeply satisfying that we can transfer custody back to the Chumash community,” added Museum President and CEO Luke J. Swetland.

While NAGPRA facilitates repatriation for federally recognized tribes like the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, other Chumash bands are recognized under the broader state law, CAL-



NAGPRA. SBMNH looks forward to working with California native communities to ensure that human remains and associated items are appropriately restored to their rightful ancestors.

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## Backgrounder

### *Why does SBMNH have human remains and associated funerary objects in its collections?*

In 1922, Museum director Ralph Hoffman hired David Banks Rogers to establish a department of anthropology. Rogers and his successor Phil Orr conducted extensive research on the Channel Islands and the Santa Barbara coast documenting the sites of Chumash villages and burial sites. Items were excavated, precisely documented, and brought to the Museum for further study. However, the Museum's practice of excavation without Chumash monitoring came to an end in the 1970s when heightened cultural sensitivities began to call this kind of activity into question.

### *How does SBMNH collaborate with Chumash bands in the Santa Barbara region?*

In 1989, the Museum established a California Indian Advisory Council comprising members of local Chumash bands. The council advises the Museum on all aspects of its work, e.g., collecting, research, exhibition, and education related to Chumash life and culture.

No scientific analysis is conducted without the express permission of the Chumash band with whom the ancestral remains or artifacts are associated.

Over the past 40 years, Museum Curator of Anthropology John Johnson, Ph.D. has conducted significant research based on the Museum's collections. He worked with other academic researchers to facilitate appropriate access and study of the Museum's collections consistent with the best practices for this kind of study established by professional entities such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the Society for American Archaeology.

A significant part of Dr. Johnson's work has involved engaging with numerous Chumash individuals to study their cultural heritage as a way to enlarge their understanding of themselves and their community.

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## About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

*Powered by Science. Inspired by Nature.* Founded in 1916, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History inspires a thirst for discovery and a passion for the natural world. The Museum seeks to connect people to nature for the betterment of both, and prides itself on being *naturally different*. For more information, visit [sbnature.org](http://sbnature.org).