



HeritageBC



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# Setting the Bar

A GUIDE TO ACHIEVE NEW STANDARDS FOR RECONCILIATION WITHIN THE HERITAGE SECTOR

**7 Possession, Interpretation, Repatriation and Cultural Care**

# 7

## Possession, Interpretation, Repatriation and Cultural Care

**ACTION:** Recognizing a responsibility to the cultures that are represented in collections, heritage organizations will reflect on and resolve issues of possession, interpretation and repatriation with a commitment to reconcile.

In 2019, the First Peoples' Cultural Council issued a policy paper with the goal "to address the immediate need to revitalize, manage, and protect Indigenous cultural heritage (ICH) in meaningful and substantive ways." The need for such a document rises from the recognition that "while many people acknowledge and

celebrate Canada's rich and diverse cultural heritage, this diversity, as it relates to Indigenous Peoples, is under threat."

This document, "Recognizing and Including Indigenous Cultural Heritage in B.C.", therefore sets out a goal to end the threat to cultural heritage – a goal that should be equally shared by all participants in the heritage sector.

Issues of possession, interpretation and repatriation are among the threats that are particular to organizations with collections. The "Indigenous Repatriation Handbook", prepared by the Royal BC Museum and the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay, provides an excellent historical context and notes that "there have been significant changes [for the better] over the years." Yet, the handbook still needed to be written as "there is a long way to go in working with museums to Indigenize their institutions", and "there are still tremendous challenges in building more respectful and balanced relationships."

While it is not within Heritage BC's mandate to establish policy for collections-based organizations, it is well within its scope to strongly encourage everyone in BC's heritage sector to seriously consider the advice and direction found in "Recognizing and Including Indigenous Cultural Heritage in B.C.", and other essential documents, such as the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (UNDRIP, 2007), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action.

Focussing on possession, interpretation and repatriation, this Heritage and Reconciliation action is rooted in the belief that "all cultural groups in Canada, including Indigenous Peoples, have a right to identify their cultural heritage, interpret its meaning and determine its disposition." (source)

The rights of possession, the approaches to interpretation, and the complexities of repatriation are significant and cannot be properly tackled here. Nevertheless, the issues are far too important not to address with guidance and a call to action.

This starts with a commitment:

Heritage organizations have a responsibility to the cultures that are represented by artefacts, and Indigenous and cultural representatives have a role in determining issues that relate to possession and interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

It is the responsibility of each organization to reflect on and reconcile issues of possession, interpretation and care. The following is offered as guidance:

- Seek out of the advice and resources of the BC Museums Association and other similar organizations; BCMA's The BCMA's "[Naknakim Declaration](#)" will be relevant.
- Seek out the advice and resources of the Royal BC Museum; consult the "Indigenous Repatriation Handbook" ([link](#)) (note: this handbook is written to support Indigenous communities in the repatriation process);
- Seek out advice from the First Peoples' Cultural Council and cultural organizations in your area; contact lists of Indigenous Band Council and staff can also be found on CivicInfo BC;
- Understand the policies found in the First Peoples' Cultural Council's paper, "Recognizing and Including Indigenous Cultural Heritage in B.C." ([here](#));
- Understand the intent and direction of the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (UNDRIP, [here](#));
- Investigate and understand the origin and history of cultural artefacts in your collection;
- Consider the context, research and interpretations of artefacts; consider who did and did not participate in the interpretations;
- Consult community organizations and leaders who have cultural connections to the artefacts;
- Ensure all records, archives, artefacts are fully accessible;
- Learn from colleagues who have put into place memorandums of understanding with Indigenous organizations (The Nanaimo Museum and Exploration Place are two examples); Put into place similar agreements of understanding and responsibility;
- Enter into collaborations that are mutually beneficial to all partners;
- Seek opportunities to have members of culturally diverse groups assist your organization in its care and documentation of collections.

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<sup>1</sup> "Possession" and "interpretation" are to be interpreted broadly. Possession refers to issues such as the conditions under which the artefact was originally acquired and subsequently retained. Interpretation refers to issues such as the context and conditions in which artefacts are displayed and stored and the research and commentary that accompanies the artefacts. For more information, please refer to "Naknakim Declaration and Simkin, Naknakim" in Roundup, issue 266. [link](#)

- Indigenous community members are also part of their local communities and share an interest in and are part of broader narratives. What was it like for them to work at a local mine? What were their roles in the local forest industry? What was the role of non-white labourers in the local industry or what was the relationship between this industry and indigenous communities?
- Consider your obligation to care for things in a culturally appropriate way. For example, how do you handle and interact with sacred and spiritual items?
- Don't be afraid to reach out to Indigenous communities about repatriation for fear of items being removed from your collection.

Organizational preparedness for reconciliation also includes the adaptation of collection policies and collection management procedures to include measures for the culturally appropriate acceptance, documentation, conservation and storage of artifacts and archival material. This work will address not only established collections, but also future donations and collection decisions.

This Heritage and Reconciliation action is one of reflection and intent, and a commitment to reconcile. It takes courage to ask the difficult questions and hard work to find the answers. However, the rewards will be significant for your organization and your community, and the entire heritage sector will be strengthened as we collectively and appropriately acknowledge and celebrate our rich and diverse cultural heritage.

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