Tribes Celebrate Mesa Verde Repatriation

*Mesa Verde, Colorado* – On Sunday, a coalition of tribes including the Hopi Tribe, the Pueblo of Acoma, the Pueblo of Zia, and the Pueblo of Zuni repatriated and reinterred ancestors and associated funerary items at Mesa Verde National Park. The National Museum of Finland repatriated the human remains of 20 ancestors pursuant to a joint-agreement with the four sovereign tribes who claim cultural affiliation to the Mesa Verde area. The United States Department of State and the United States Embassy in Finland assisted the four tribes in transporting the ancestors and funerary items from Helsinki, Finland to Mesa Verde, Colorado.

In 1891, scholar Gustaf Nordenskiöld took these ancestors and their funerary items from the Mesa Verde area to northern Europe. Nordenskiöld then sold the collection to a Finnish doctor who later bequeathed the collection to the state of Finland following his death, and the collection was ultimately placed in the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki.

The history of this incident played an important role in swaying public perception about the importance of protecting cultural heritage resources that ultimately led to the 1906 Antiquities Act and the establishment of Mesa Verde National Park, as Nordenskiöld, who was of Finnish and Swedish descent, also took hundreds of dwelling site finds from the Mesa Verde region. Nordenskiöld was initially arrested for attempting to export these remains and artifacts out of the country, but was later released and the collection shipped to Stockholm, Sweden as no U.S. laws at the time prohibited such action.

Following contacts with the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office in 2016, the National Museum of Finland conducted a re-inventory of the collection, containing altogether 614 items, with efforts to identify the ancestral remains and funerary items in the collection. This inventory, completed in March of 2018, determined that the collection contained remains of 20 individuals and 28 funerary items.
In July of that same year, the U.S. Department of State sponsored an International Visitors Leadership Program to build relationships between Native American tribes and European Museums. As part of this program Heli Lahdentausta, Curator of the National Museum of Finland, met with representatives from the Hopi Tribe and visited other cultural institutions in New Mexico. Following this visit, the Republic of Finland notified the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki that it would consider an official request for repatriation of human remains and funerary items.

Thereafter, in 2018, at the annual meeting of the Mesa Verde Native American Tribal Consultation Committee, the committee determined by consensus that the Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni tribes take the lead in the effort to see the ancestors returned home. The U.S. request was made in fall 2018, followed by the unanimous passage of a resolution by the Hopi Tribal Council in July 2019 in support of the repatriation efforts. The All Pueblo Council of Governors, representing the 19 Pueblos in New Mexico and 1 in Texas, also passed a resolution in July of 2019 supporting the repatriation and the efforts of the four repatriating tribes.

On October 2, 2019, during a meeting between United States President Donald Trump and President Sauli Niinistö of Finland, it was announced that Finland had agreed to return the ancestors and their funerary items. Finally, on August 28, 2020, the National Museum of Finland and the four tribes entered into an agreement for the repatriation of the 20 ancestors and the 28 funerary items.

On Saturday, September 12, 2020, representatives from the Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni tribes received the ancestors in Durango, Colorado, after having been transported there with the assistance of the U.S. Department of State. The following morning, after nearly 129 years abroad, the ancestors were finally reinterred to their home in Mesa Verde National Park.

The Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni tribes share ancestral ties to the original Ancestral Pueblo inhabitants of the Mesa Verde region and continue to express their gratitude to the Republic of Finland, the National Museum of Finland, the United States, the U.S. Department of State, other tribes and partners for their assistance in this important endeavor to right a historic wrong.

Tribal leaders of each of the four repatriating tribes stated:

"The Hopi People are thankful to everyone involved in ensuring our ancestors were returned to their rightful home, and are afforded the respect all human people deserve – being allowed to rest in peace." Said Hopi Vice Chairman Clark W. Tenakhongva. "The act of returning home has special significance in Hopi culture, for the return of our family both past and present is something to be celebrated. It is my hope that this event will serve as an example for other institutions in the world to follow, in how to build genuine cross-cultural understandings between people. Kwakwhá."

"The Pueblo of Acoma is grateful for the return of ancestors to their place of rest, the sacred homeland of Mesa Verde. For decades, the repatriating tribes have worked to return ancestors, associated funerary materials, and items of cultural patrimony excavated from various locations within Mesa Verde. Many of these collections remain in museums awaiting review and discussion between culturally affiliated tribes and museums either through the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) process or other methods where private institutions or foreign entities are concerned. This engagement, which evolved between the Finnish government, the National Museum of Finland, the four repatriating tribes, and United States officials, ensured a safe
and culturally-appropriate process for the return of ancestors and funerary items. It is our hope that comparable institutions throughout the world who have similar collections, will become motivated to engage in this level of nation-to-nation collaboration that results in repatriation and long-term partnerships, fostering dialogue and joint strategies for access to collections, stewardship, and programming.” Governor Brian D. Vallo – Pueblo of Acoma

“Our hearts are happy that our ancestors have made their journey home and are at rest where they belong. We are thankful to the Finnish government and the National Museum of Finland and are pleased to have forged this new relationship. The Pueblo looks forward to continue to work with the National Museum of Finland to repatriate all items of cultural value and historical importance to their rightful owners.” Governor Fredrick Medina – Pueblo of Zia

“The Pueblo of Zuni joins the Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Acoma, and Pueblo of Zia, in expressing our heartfelt appreciation to the leaders of Finland in the return of our ancestors to Mesa Verde. As their descendants, the A:shiwi continue to practice the shared Puebloan values and ways of life to this day. Even as modern-day boundaries and jurisdictions disrupt our dedication, through our age-old prayers, we have realized this event. In doing so, we honor their vision and intent to share resources, blood, and resiliency. Elahkwa.” Governor Val R. Panteah, Sr. – Pueblo of Zuni

###

**Contacts:**

- **The Hopi Tribe:**
  Hopi Office of the Vice-Chairman
  P.O. Box 123
  Kykotsmovi, AZ 86039
  (928) 734-3113
  E: CITenakhongva@hopi.nsn.us

- **Pueblo of Acoma:**
  Office of the Governor
  P.O. Box 309
  Acoma, NM 87934
  (505) 552-6604
  E: Governor@poamail.org

- **Pueblo of Zia:**
  Ken Lucero, Tribal Administrator
  135 Capitol Square Dr.
  Zia Pueblo, NM 87053
  (505) 220-4704
  E: Ken.Lucero@ZiaPueblo.org

- **Pueblo of Zuni:**
  Lt. Governor Carleton Bowekaty
  P.O. Box 339
  Zuni, NM 87327
  (505) 782-7000
  E: Carleton.Bowekaty@ashiwi.org