

We must learn to respect the past

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About 150 years ago, before Canada was born, a young member of the Valley's First Nations community died. The child's body was placed in a cedar burial box in keeping with tradition, and the community mourned.

Sometime between then and now, the burial box and the child's body found their way into a display at a Ladysmith museum and were viewed, along with portions of an adult's skeleton, by visitors and locals.

This week, the Chemainus First Nation recovered the remains and plans to rebury them in a permanent resting place.

It's a positive resolution, but it points to a persistent blind spot when it comes to First Nations history. Whether it is a developer knowingly disturbing a burial site or one of the museums around the globe that refuse to return First Nations artifacts and remains, non-First Nations have trouble seeing aboriginal artifacts for what they are - human remains.

Relationships between Natives and non-Natives are not going to improve until we remove that blind spot.

According to a member of the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, the problem arises from "the idea that First Nation human remains are considered just artifacts - as objects, someone's property that can be owned ... to begin to respect First Nations culture, we need to make people understand them in human terms - that their skulls and bones aren't artifacts, but real peoples' family members. That this burial box is not some kind of art object, it's a coffin, and from a First Nations' cultural view, such things are not meant for the living world."
