

## **Museum display of aboriginal bones riles Chemainus band**

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Word that the remains of a First Nations female have been part of an exhibit at a Ladysmith museum has upset members of the Chemainus First Nation, who have asked the bones be given back for reburial.

The Black Nugget Museum on Gatacre Street has displayed the mummified remains of a small adult or child for more than two decades. The display didn't raise any eyebrows until late July, when an anonymous phone call to the Chemainus band office brought the issue to light.

"That's how we found out about it," said Eric McLay, a researcher with the Hul'qumi'num treaty group.

The band asked McLay to check it out. He found the museum had the bones and burial box on display for 26 years.

The container is "a very small, cedar, hand-carved burial box with no nails, so it's certainly 1850s or earlier," said McLay.

Inside, was "a mummified individual, with skin. It's a relatively intact individual."

It's unclear if the person was a child or adult, he said.

Calls made to the Black Nugget Museum got no response Thursday.

The Chemainus band members were "quite upset" to learn that aboriginal remains were on public display, said band administrator Stephen Olson.

"It's in poor taste and rather macabre. There are strong cultural reasons why people who have been interred need to stay interred."

The remains and burial box were taken to the Royal B.C. Museum on Thursday for examination by experts. The museum owner has agreed to give the remains back to the First Nations.

"We'll try to find out its cultural affiliation --what group it's from," said McLay.

The bones will be returned to their area of origin for reburial.

However, the burial box is now the focus of dispute because the museum owner wants to keep it and the First Nations believe it's as important as the remains and should be returned.

"What we'd like to do, if he does have an attachment to the box itself, is present him a newly carved box and contribute something to the museum itself," McLay said.

Aboriginal bones are in the hands of many private collectors, he said. The idea of remains being "collectable" is offensive to the First Nations.

"It's the idea that these are just curiosities, rather than looking at them in a human manner. They are someone's family member, a deceased human being, rather than objects that should be on display."

Having a museum openly display aboriginal remains is unusual, he said.

"The museum community are quite sensitive to this [issue] these days, and they work quite closely in partnership with First Nations to not only interpret but exhibit their culture."

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