Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Last year, President Trump and President Niinistö of Finland finalized an agreement to return American Indian ancestral remains and funerary objects taken over a century ago from what is now Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. Today, U.S. Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt, Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Tara *Katuk* Sweeney and other officials joined President Trump in the Oval Office to recognize the cultural and ancestral importance of these items being returned safely to the Mesa Verde region.

"The leadership of President Trump and President Niinistö of Finland resulted in the return of these important objects to their rightful place in Indian Country, **said Secretary Bernhardt**. "They are to be commended for their solemn efforts."

"Repatriating ancestral remains to the Tribes that are culturally connected to the Mesa Verde region underscores the importance of continued protection of the heritage and traditions of our Indian nations," **said Assistant Secretary Sweeney**. "While this is a solemn occasion, I express my humble gratitude to President Trump and President Niinistö for leading a team of dedicated individuals working alongside Tribal governments to achieve this successful conclusion."

In 1891, Swedish research Gustaf Nordenskiold conducted excavations in what is now Mesa Verde National Park, removing a large collection of American Indian ancestral remains, funerary items and other cultural items. Mesa Verde is a complex of stone dwellings hand-built into cliffs, and was home to Ancestral Pueblo people for more than 700 years, from 600 to 1300 C.E. The excavated items became part of the ethnographic collection of the National Museum of Finland.

Since 2016, the U.S. government, led by the U.S. Department of State, with support from Mesa Verde National Park and others at the Department of the Interior, has supported the associated Tribes in their request to repatriate certain items from the Nordenskiold collection identified as ancestral remains, and cultural items such as funerary objects as defined under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Under NAGPRA, Federal law requires that U.S. museums and Federal agencies transfer human remains and funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to lineal descendants, Indian Tribes or Native Hawaiian organizations that have requested them. NAGPRA's requirements position the United States as a global leader in honoring indigenous peoples' rights for repatriation of cultural heritage and ancestral remains under U.S. law.

Although NAGPRA does not apply internationally, the U.S. refers to the national policy established by NAGPRA in its support for Tribal requests for repatriation from foreign countries. This is one of several international repatriations from foreign museums that Interior has supported in recent years in response to Tribes' requests for assistance. Interior coordinates with the Departments of State, Justice and Homeland Security to support Tribes seeking repatriation of cultural items held abroad in museums or private collections or sold at foreign auctions. Interior also maintains an informal internal working group, co-led by the Office of International Affairs and the Office of the Assistant Secretary – Indian

Affairs, to coordinate these efforts.

More information on NAGPRA's domestic application and Interior's role on international repatriations are online.

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