Determination by Interior Secretary follows two years of scientific examination

Media Contact: Stephanie Hanna 202/501-4633 | Office of the Secretary
For Immediate Release: September 25, 2000
Print PDF

The Department of the Interior provided its determination to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that the bones of the 9,000 year-old human skeletal remains known as Kennewick Man be given to the five Indian tribes that have collectively claimed him as their ancient ancestor. The decision was announced in a letter from Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera and represents the culmination of a thorough process of scientific examinations and investigations. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers currently is responsible for the skeletal remains, which are now located at the Burke Museum of Natural and Cultural History in Seattle. Under an agreement with the Corps, the Interior Department agreed to determine the proper disposition of the remains under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA).

"This is a unique case on so many levels," Babbitt said. "The bones are of great antiquity and were found in the shallows of the Columbia River without an archaeological context. The Department completed a careful, detailed series of scientific investigations involving world-class experts to learn as much as possible. All that information is now available to anyone, and is posted on the Internet. After evaluating this complex situation, I believe that it is reasonable to determine that the Kennewick Man remains should be transferred to the Tribes that have jointly claimed him -Tribes that have inhabited, hunted and fished this area around the confluence of the Columbia and the Snake Rivers for millennia."

Secretary Babbitt based his determination on two grounds. First, he concluded that the remains were culturally affiliated with the five Tribes making a joint claim. " Although ambiguities in the data made this a close call, I was persuaded by the geographic data and oral histories of the five tribes that collectively assert they are the descendants of people who have been in the region of the Upper Columbia Plateau for a very long time," Babbitt explained.

Second, Secretary Babbitt concluded that the land adjacent to the river shallows where the more than 380 pieces of bone were found scattered had been determined by the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) to be the aboriginal land of a number of the five tribes that are currently claiming the skeletal remains. The land is currently federal land managed by county government as Columbia Park in Kennewick, Washington.

University of California at Davis and the University of Michigan. None of the laboratories was able to extract DNA for analysis due to the antiquity and mineralization of the more than 9,000 year-old bone. "Clearly, when dealing with human remains of this antiquity, concrete evidence is often scanty , and the analysis of the data can yield ambiguous, inconclusive or even contradictory results," Babbitt said "We worked hard to gather and analyze all information and evidence that might possibly be relevant and these investigations and documentation were essential to my determination.. If the remains had been 3,000 years old, there would be little debate over whether Kennewick Man was the ancestor of the

Upper Plateau Tribes. The line back to 9,000 years, with relatively little evidence in between, made the cultural affiliation determination difficult."

The Secretary's determination would preclude further study of the remains by the public. His letter and other accompanying documents, scientific expert reports, and radiocarbon and DNA analysis reports are available on the Department of the Interior's web site, with a web link off the Interior home page or at htm://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/kennewick/
