

Respect Indigenous ancestors: Scholars urge community engagement before research

26 April 2018



Anthropology professor Ripan Malhi works with Indigenous communities, scientists and scholars to analyze their DNA and that of their ancestors. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A new article in the journal *Science* provides guidance for those intending to study ancient human remains in the Americas. The paper, written by Indigenous scholars and scientists and those who collaborate with Indigenous communities on studies of ancient DNA, offers a clear directive to others contemplating such research: First, do no harm.

Scientists studying ancestral remains have similar obligations to those that bind researchers working with living human subjects, the authors wrote. The descendants or people affiliated with those who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago deserve to be consulted before their ancestors are disturbed. Even in cases where the remains were collected long ago and moved far from their original burial place, and even when the surviving lineages are in doubt, scientists ought to consult Indigenous groups living on the land or claiming

ancestral ties to the region where the ancestors were found, the authors said.

"Right now, there are inconsistent or no regulations for working with ancient ancestors," said University of Illinois anthropology professor Ripan Malhi, a co-author of the report. "And there are no requirements for working with descendant or affiliated communities, even though new scientific findings relating to their ancestors can have serious implications for them."

Malhi partners with Indigenous communities to study ancient DNA from individuals found on lands their descendants still live on. Malhi, along with Indigenous scientists, scholars and other scientists who work with Native American and First Nations communities, worked to create the Summer internship for Indigenous Peoples in Genomics, which trains Indigenous scientists in genomics techniques and explores ethical concerns.

Not consulting Indigenous communities before analyzing ancient DNA potentially harms those groups, said Alyssa Bader, a co-author and graduate student at the University of Illinois.

"Genetic analyses can reveal information not just about the ancestors, but also their descendants. If genetic variants associated with specific diseases are identified in ancestors, for example, this can influence how we think about disease susceptibility in the descendant community - and that community could be stigmatized," she said.

New findings also may interfere with ongoing treaty negotiations, she said.

"For Indigenous communities involved in negotiating land claims or repatriation, new genetic findings could either bolster or complicate those

claims," she said.

Studying ancient DNA without consulting descendant communities is also a missed opportunity, said Concordia University professor Jessica Bardill, the lead author of the article.

"The engagements we highlight show that collaboration with communities not only strengthens the analysis but also can allow for better questions to be asked in the research, informed by community narratives about the ancestors, their lands and their relationships," she said.

For these and other ethical and practical reasons, Malhi said, it's in a scientist's interest to identify and locate potentially affected groups, consult with them about the research and invite them to join the effort, thereby improving the scientist's understanding of the context in which the ancient peoples lived. It also allows Indigenous communities to guide the science and ask research questions that are of interest to them.

"Engaging communities at the outset is critical for understanding their concerns or questions about research involving ancient relatives. Without feedback from the community, scientific interpretations remain one-sided and inherently biased," said Nanibaa' Garrison, a bioethics professor at Seattle Children's Research Institute and the University of Washington School of Medicine, and a co-author of the article.

More information: J. Bardill at Concordia University in Montreal, QC, Canada et al., "Advancing the ethics of paleogenomics," *Science* (2018). [science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi ... 1126/science.aag1131](https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aag1131)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

APA citation: Respect Indigenous ancestors: Scholars urge community engagement before research (2018, April 26) retrieved 25 September 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-respect-indigenous-ancestors-scholars-urge.html>

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