



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

May 5, 2022

The SAA board adopted a new “Statement Concerning the Treatment of Human Remains” in the spring of 2020. On December 9, 2021, several SAA board members and committee chairs took part in a listening session with members of the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO) to discuss the new statement on the treatment of human remains and other topics. NATHPO members asked if there could be an apology and acknowledgment of harm from the SAA. The SAA board agreed that such a statement is an important first step toward reconciling relationships between non-Native archaeologists and tribes. In that spirit, we developed a formal statement acknowledging harm, which has been submitted to NATHPO:

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) acknowledges that Indigenous, descendant, and marginalized communities have been harmed by some archaeologists. For this, we profoundly apologize and strive to continue efforts to be inclusive and respectful.

Archaeologists must acknowledge that our work can violate communities in ways we may not fully understand. Harms may be inadvertent, may occur in alignment with practices of the time, or may have been chosen as the best outcome by all parties using their best judgment at the time but nonetheless have caused harm. Recognizing this reality, the SAA will work to encourage expansion and promotion of inclusive and respectful archaeology in order to advance the discipline and to create a more culturally informed and responsive archaeology.

The SAA acknowledges that as we heal relationships and increase representation and equity, this statement is a critical first step. Our second step is to endorse and strategically plan for a membership society that both creates and reflects a respectful and inclusive archaeological practice. As we move forward to this goal, the SAA encourages all archaeologists to likewise acknowledge past harm and trauma, reflect on their own practices and worldview, and strive for a better and more equitable future.

The acknowledgment of harms raises up the importance of cooperative and collaborative archaeology that continues to celebrate the humanistic and scientific process of exploring varied perspectives and ideas to reach the most well-informed understandings of the past.

How was this statement developed?

SAA leaders asked the Committees on Native American Relations and Repatriation to draft an “Acknowledgment of Harms.” In April 2021, they delivered a draft statement. The board then engaged in a careful process of discussion, writing, and rewriting; circulated a draft statement; and invited SAA members to comment on it. During the 30-day comment period, which concluded in September 2021, the board received 173 responses. Comments included a full range of perspectives, from full acceptance to total rejection. After reviewing all feedback from membership and seeking additional input from several committees, including the Committee on Ethics and the Past Presidents Advisory Group, a board subcommittee worked on a shorter, more concise version. We heard a range of views from our members and recognize that this statement will not fully satisfy everyone. The

board felt that authoring a statement that can be wholeheartedly accepted by a broader number of members would better serve our goals. This statement is intended to be an important beginning of a conversation, rather than being divisive or alienating.

The SAA Board of Directors endorsed the above statement at its meeting in March 2022. We agreed to submit the letter first to NATHPO and then to the membership. We wrote to NATHPO on April 21, 2022, and now are writing members.

The board also agreed that the Society should promote a greater understanding of the kinds of harms that archaeological practice can cause. There remains much for us to discuss and share about the interplay of scientific endeavor and its potential to impact humanity. We encourage everyone to engage in these discussions to represent a fuller explanation of the range of views on this topic and to advance the discipline. We also need to address the complicated challenges of addressing harms of archaeological practice internationally.

We look forward to continued discussion about this subject.