



POLICY BRIEF 2024

Coming Home

Wenonah North Peigan

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəjəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaʔ* (Tseil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

And Also Too

COVER ILLUSTRATION

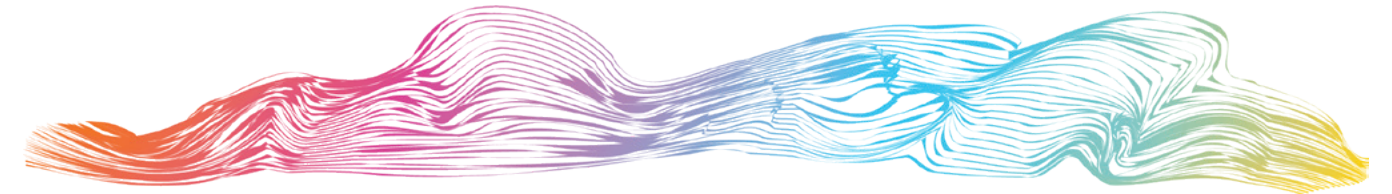
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HEADSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *hə́nq'ə́min* 'ə́m̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the *Halkomelem*-speaking Tseil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

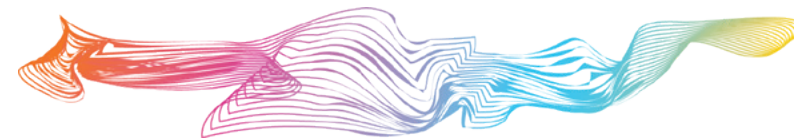
1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Wenonah North Peigan



Wenonah North Peigan is Blackfoot and a proud member of the Piikani Nation, Treaty 7, and Anishinaabe from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory. Her traditional Blackfoot name is Siikiaayoaki, meaning Black Bear Woman. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of British Columbia (UBC), with a focus on Indigenous political and social traditions, and her studies explored ways for Indigenous peoples to rebuild their political and legal systems. Growing up in a traditional Blackfoot household, Wenonah is a dedicated advocate for advancing positive outcomes for First Nations, with a particular focus on women and youth. She currently serves as a Policy Analyst with the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, having joined the organization through the Indigenous Youth Internship Program, a collaboration between the BC Provincial Government and the First Nations Leadership Council. Raised on her Blackfoot territory in what is now Southern Alberta, Wenonah enjoys traditional beading, spending time outdoors, watching films, and thrift shopping in her spare time.



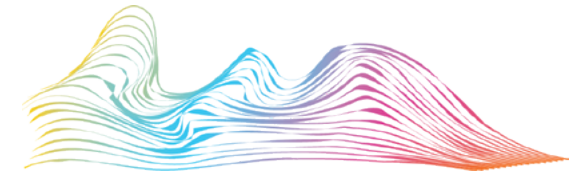
Executive Summary

Repatriation of First Nations Human Remains (Ancestors) and their Belongings, which were, and continue to be stolen, damaged, and/or sold without First Nations' consent, remains a pressing issue.

This injustice continues to be perpetuated through auctions, estate sales, and private collections both locally and globally, leading to the ongoing exploitation of our communities. This policy ask aims to address this historical and ongoing injustice by highlighting best practices for communities and all levels of government to undertake. It emphasizes the need for repatriation policies grounded in a First Nations' perspective, and aligned with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The recommendations presented in this policy ask call on all levels of government to fulfill their legal obligation by developing and implementing legislation that is both guided by and aligned with UNDRIP. Further, these legislative measures should not only support the repatriation of Ancestors and their belongings, but also empower First Nations to take a leading role in the process. This approach will foster a more transformative and impactful repatriation process, promoting genuine self-determination and the restoration of cultural integrity by allowing First Nations to exercise their heritage stewardship fully.

The work presented henceforth is grounded in a First Nations context, reflecting a Blackfoot and Anishinaabe understanding of the world and the land now known as "Canada."



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Background

In the wake of the discovery of 215 Ancestors on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School on Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc in 2021, many institutions have hastily begun to release their own guidelines and standards for repatriation.

However, these efforts often lack accountability due to the absence of comprehensive policies and legislation that establish clear standards.

The lasting impact of colonialism has resulted in the sale, theft, and destruction of First Nations' Ancestors and their cultural belongings—both tangible and intangible—through government policies and legislation. Many existing repatriation policies, which are grounded in a Western framework, unfairly place the burden on Nations to demonstrate the significance of our Ancestors to museums and other institutions. Consequently, it is crucial that the return of Ancestors and their cultural belongings be determined by First Nations and our governance structures.

First Nations have an inherent right to practice, revive, and reclaim their cultural items and traditions—both tangible and intangible—as a fundamental part of their self-determination and self-governance. This right is supported by Articles 11, 12, 28(1), and 32(3) of UNDRIP and Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. Both

Canada and the Province of BC have enacted legislation to implement UNDRIP, which reinforces this right.

In line with this legislation, both BC and Canada have subsequently developed strategic Action Plans with specific Action Items to advance Repatriation to further these objectives.

Specifically, BC enacted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, 2022 (Action 4.33), while Canada introduced the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, 2023. (Action 98). These legislative measures underscore that both BC and Canada have not only a moral obligation, but also a legal obligation to co-develop and implement transformative repatriation policies.

As of 2024, repatriation work is managed by British Columbia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport and, at the federal level, by Canadian Heritage.



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Proposal

Drawing on academic research, government reports, and a deep understanding rooted in my lived experience as a Blackfoot and Anishinaabe person, the following recommendations are essential and non-negotiable for shaping effective repatriation policies. These recommendations align with the spirit and intent of UNDRIP and are designed to uphold self-determination while ensuring that repatriation efforts are meaningful and transformative.

1 First Nations Involvement at All Stages.

First Nations must be actively involved at every stage of co-developing repatriation policies. It is essential that First Nations are not merely consulted for feedback on pre-existing plans but are given a leading role in shaping the standards and frameworks for repatriation. This includes ensuring that all community members, including Elders and youth, are engaged in the process. Elders provide invaluable traditional knowledge and wisdom, while youth offer fresh perspectives and ensure the continuity of cultural practices. A comprehensive approach to repatriation must reflect the collective input and leadership of the entire community, thereby setting a standard that respects and embodies the principles of self-determination and cultural integrity.

2 Increase Government Funding to Support First Nations' Capacity.

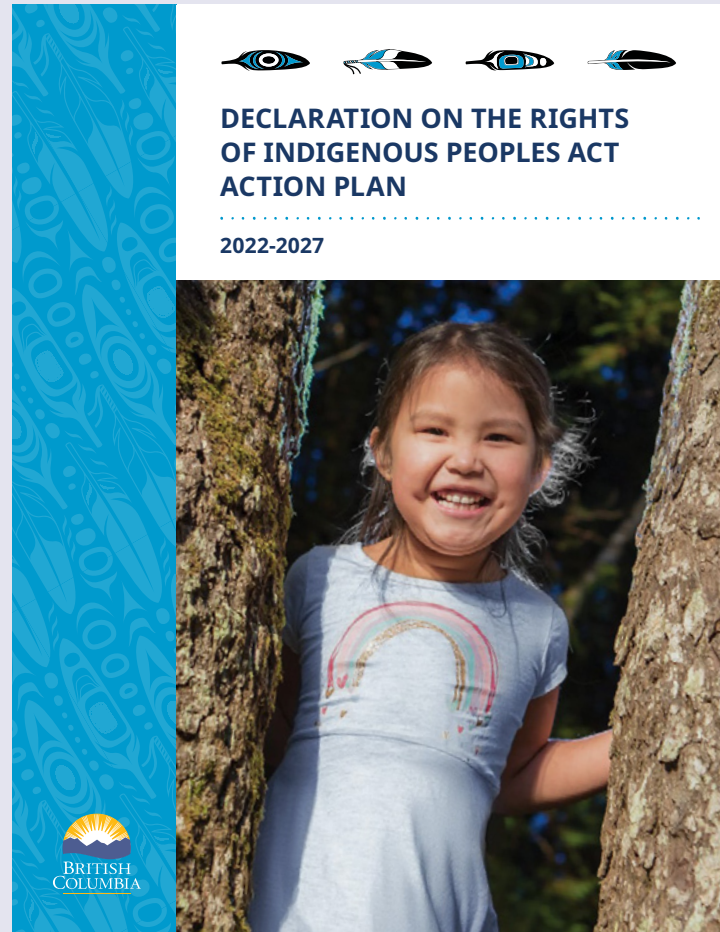
Both the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport and, at the federal level, by Canadian Heritage, through their items assigned in their respective Action Plans, need to allocate funding not only to facilitate First Nations' engagement in repatriation processes, but also to support comprehensive education and training programs for community members. This funding should be used to build and enhance Nation-based capacity by investing in the development of skills, knowledge, and resources within the community. By fostering such capacity-building measures, governments will ensure that First Nations are well-equipped to manage and oversee repatriation projects effectively and sustainably.

Communities will also need capital funding to establish appropriate facilities, referred to as repositories, for the storage and preservation of Ancestors and their belongings. It is crucial to acknowledge that each Nation may have its own specific policies for management and ceremonial processes for the return of Ancestors. This diversity of approaches must be affirmed, upheld, and supported through funding to ensure that each Nation's unique practices and requirements are honored in the process.

3 Enhance Coordinated Government Approaches.

Developing and implementing repatriation policies for First Nations requires a coordinated government approach to address the unique needs, histories, and cultural considerations of First Nations. This includes not just collaboration across all levels of government to ensure consistency, but also a strategic whole-of-government approach across Ministries. Such coordination also facilitates meaningful engagement, supports successful reintegration, and enables swift responses to urgent repatriation needs, ultimately honoring First Nations' human and legal rights.

For example, the Province of BC has established the Declaration Act Secretariat to ensure provincial legislation that is consistent and reflects the spirit of UNDRIP. Mechanisms such as the Declaration Act Secretariat are useful to ensure accountability and transparency, providing a structured approach to integrating First Nations' interest and rights into provincial governance, and facilitating meaningful engagement with Nations.



Cover of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan, British Columbia.



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4 Implementing Funding Requirements for Museums and Institutions.

The Federal Government, which provides funding to public museums and institutions, including universities, should establish mandatory criteria for repatriation efforts aligned with UNDRIP as a condition for receiving financial support.

In addition to compliance with UNDRIP, funding requirements could include: Forming partnerships with local Nations, supporting a specified number of First Nations-led projects annually, repatriating a designated number of items each year, and establishing First Nations-led training programs in curation, collections management, or archival work to build community capacity. These requirements will ensure that institutions contribute effectively to repatriation and capacity-building efforts.

5 Shifting the Language in Policy and Legislation.

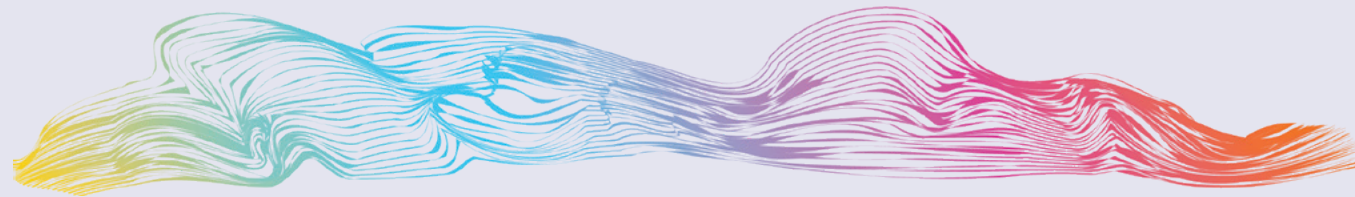
To ensure that repatriation policies and legislation fully respect and reflect the perspectives of First Nations, it is essential to both, shift the language used and broaden the definitions/ understandings of commonly used terms such as heritage, property, and artifacts beyond traditional Western frameworks. This language shift and expansion of definitions should encompass:

- Recognition that “heritage” is not only physical objects but also intangible cultural practices, oral traditions, and Ancestral knowledge that are integral to the identity and continuity of First Nations communities. This includes sacred sites, ceremonial practices, and spiritual teachings that hold significance beyond material value.
- Acknowledgement that, for many First Nations, the concept of *property* differs from Western notions of ownership. This perspective acknowledges that belongings could be held in trust for the community and are interconnected with broader practices and responsibilities, rather than being subject to individual ownership.
- Celebration of contemporary cultural expressions and creations that embody the living traditions and ongoing practices of First Nations.

6 Increased Public Education.

Public awareness, education, and campaigns on repatriation are crucial as they educate the broader public about the importance and urgency of repatriation to foster informed support, promote accountability among institutions, and encourage respectful behaviour toward First Nations, Ancestors and their belongings. An informed public can drive policy change by generating demand and interest for more meaningful and impactful repatriation practices, ultimately empowering First Nations communities and contributing to broader efforts of reconciliation and First Nation self-determination.

Conclusion



The repatriation of our Ancestors and their belongings is not merely a matter of returning physical items but is deeply tied to the restoration of identity, dignity, and self-determination for First Nations communities. The recommendations provided reflect an understanding that each Nation's unique history and practices must be honored and supported. The policy must be adaptable, recognizing the diversity and specific needs of individual communities, while upholding a universal standard of justice and empowerment. With the support of all levels of government and the broader community, we can ensure that the process of repatriation is not just a formality but a profound restoration of rights and respect for First Nations peoples.

Central to this work is the sacred act of bringing our Ancestors home. Their return represents more than the restitution of belongings; it is a symbolic and tangible act of healing. This process honors the legacy of those who

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came before us and reinforces our collective responsibility to uphold their dignity. As we advance this crucial work, we do so with the enduring hope that our Ancestors will once again find their place within their rightful lands, allowing us to celebrate and preserve our identity and history for future generations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This policy ask has been informed by the individuals and organizations already dedicated to advancing the repatriation of our Ancestors and their belongings. Your tireless efforts, innovative approaches, and unwavering commitment are crucial in shaping a transformative and just repatriation framework.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my family—Dad, Mom, Nicole, and Caleb—as well as

my friends, peers, and community members who have provided invaluable support throughout this journey. It truly takes a village and without you all, none of this would be possible.

I dedicate this project to the Ancestors who have returned and those still on their journey home. We do this work for you and for our future that has yet to unfold.

To my big sister, Jasmine, who taught me compassion, kimmapiiyipitssini. Your eagerness to learn, to understand, and to offer help in any way you could has been a guiding light in my work. I carry you with me every day and remain committed to honoring your legacy through this work by striving to embody your kindness and resilience in all that I do.



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Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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