

From Stealing to Healing:

Repatriation and B.C. First Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction + Context

The report, *From Stealing to Healing: Repatriation and B.C. First Nations* was developed by K'yuu Enterprise Corporation with support from the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC). It provides a comprehensive review of the current state and future needs of repatriation led by B.C. First Nations (BCFNs), highlights the challenges to this work, and proposes actions to support successful repatriation outcomes for BCFNs and wider publics. A companion report, the *Repatriation Cost Analysis (RCA)*, presents a framework and model to document and understand the comprehensive costs of repatriation.

The legacy of genocide and colonization that continues to deeply impact BCFNs communities includes the often-forcible removal of thousands of Ancestors and Belongings from their ancestral territories.¹ Despite growing support for repatriation across B.C., Canada and internationally, many of the stolen BCFN Ancestors and Belongings are still housed in global colonial institutions, and the process of returning them to their home communities remains unstructured, arduous, prolonged and costly.

This report draws on engagements with BCFNs and colonial institutions, and groundbreaking original research to highlight the urgent need for substantial long-term funding to support repatriation, particularly for communities facing geographical and economic isolation. It emphasizes the importance of strategic planning, capacity building, infrastructure, legal/policy frameworks and financial support, while showing how these investments also contribute to the social, cultural, spiritual, physical and economic health and wellbeing of BCFNs and society at large.



Cedar bark and wool textiles from various BCFNs held at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. (Photo credit: Nika Collison, 2019, courtesy of the Haida Gwaii Museum)

¹ The term repatriation is used throughout *From Stealing to Healing*, unless *rematriation* is used by the community referred to. Rematriation describes and honours the return of Ancestors and Belongings with an ancestral connection to matrilineal societies.

Part 1: From Stealing to Healing: Truth-telling + Repatriation



A Brief History of Repatriation in B.C.

The majority of BCFN Ancestors and Belongings held in colonial institutions were acquired during a dark time in Canada's history. The land known today as British Columbia was home to Indigenous Peoples for millennia before European settlers first began arriving to trade with coastal communities in the mid-1700s. Intensification of trade in the 19th century spurred European efforts to consolidate power and exert control over Indigenous economies, land, resources and socio-political structures. This period was also characterized by widespread theft and unscrupulous acquisition of BCFN Ancestors and Belongings by colonial institutions and private collectors who took advantage of the diminished political agency and social organization of BCFNs weakened by disease, displacement and colonial laws.

Following the lifting of the Potlatch Ban in 1951, BCFNs actively sought ways to protect and recover their Ancestors and Belongings. Communities made progress through a variety of methods, including community organizing, lobbying, forming relationships with colonial museum workers, and building their own cultural institutions. Early accomplishments, such as the opening of the 'Ksan Historical Village (1970), the Haida Gwaii Museum (1976), two Kwakwaka'wakw cultural centres (1979, 1980), and B.C.'s first modern treaty with the Nisga'a Nation (1998), paved the way for Canada's first repatriation-focused conference, hosted by the Haida Repatriation Committee in 2004.

While BCFNs were forging a path of self-determination, national and international institutions also began processes to align their policies and practices to support BCFNs' repatriation efforts. Laws like Canada's *Cultural Properties Export and Import Act* (1977), supports repatriation and Indigenous ownership of cultural property. Publications such as the 2015 Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC): Calls to Action and the 2016 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) articulate the moral imperative for Indigenous self-determination, including the right to own and control their own cultural heritage.

These initiatives and others progressed the case for repatriation in B.C., and in 2016, the provincial government announced \$2 million in funding for the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) to support repatriation. From 2017-2020, the RBCM's newly formed Indigenous Collections and Repatriation (ICAR) department established an Indigenous Advisory and Advocacy Committee, updated the RBCM's Collections Policy, inventoried and organized BCFN holdings, hosted an international repatriation symposium, administered Canada's first repatriation grants, and published the *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook* (2019). ICAR's initiatives accelerated public and institutional awareness of and support for repatriation across the country.

The last five years have seen further progress, including B.C. adopting the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA) (2019) and publishing the DRIPA Action Plan (2022-2027). Following work to locate Little Ancestors in Tk'emlúps in 2021, other Indigenous Nations across Canada initiated the use of ground penetrating radar at former residential school sites. The B.C. government initiated a multi-year revision of the *Heritage Conservation Act* (HCA), and two B.C. Museums Association (BCMA) Indigenous Advisors joined the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) to lobby for a national repatriation framework and legislation (2023). New reports including the CMA's *Moved to Action: Activating UNDRIP in Canadian Museums* (2022), Canadian Heritage's *Renewal of the Canadian Museum Policy: What We Heard* (2023), and FPCC and the BCMA's co-authored *New National Museum Policy Position Paper* (2024) called on the federal government for further action.

Locating BCFN Ancestors and Belongings: What Is Known

Growing support for repatriation has strengthened efforts to locate BCFNs' Ancestors and Belongings held in colonial institutions. After decades of work relegated to individual, internal and siloed efforts, the Government of Canada's Survey of Heritage Institutions (2019) reported for the first time on the number of Ancestors and Belongings held in Canadian non-profit heritage institutions. Table 1 shows data from the 1,817 institutions that participated.

Institutions housing Ancestors	Ancestors held in Canada	Ancestors held in B.C.	Ancestors held in Ontario	Ancestors held elsewhere in Canada
1.3%	2,500	1,176	1,129	195
Institutions housing Belongings	Belongings held in Canada	Belongings held in B.C.	Belongings held in Ontario	Belongings held in Manitoba and Quebec
26%	6.7 million	310,000	2.1 million	4 million

Building on this data, K'yuu conducted broad research on BCFN Ancestors and Belongings held in 229 global institutions. This research found that more than 2,500 BCFN Ancestors and almost 100,000 BCFN Belongings are held within those institutions. While Table 2 provides a high-level overview of these preliminary findings, there are over 200 institutions still to contribute data. Data presented here may also be incomplete due to limited response rates, lack of online inventories, restrictive access policies and incomplete collection records.

Location	Institutions housing or potentially housing BCFNs Ancestors & Belongings	Institutions housing BCFNs Ancestors & Belongings	Number of BCFNs Ancestors held	Number of BCFNs Belongings held	Institutions reporting no BCFNs Ancestors and/or Belongings**	Institutions that could not provide collection data***	Institutions that have closed, transferred or sold collections
Canada	53	45	885	53,950	6	8	2
USA	126	113	1,586	29,654	8	4	3
Overseas	76	71	52	7,581	4	1	1
Total	255	229	2,523	91,185	18	13	6

*These are minimum numbers with research current as of October 2023.

**One museum in B.C. and one museum in the U.K. reported that they have repatriated all BCFNs collections.

***The main reasons provided were low capacity or policy.

Research also revealed that despite many colonial heritage institutions' efforts to take good care of BCFN Ancestors and Belongings, in some institutions, the quality of care for these holdings is alarming, often due to aging facilities, poor record-keeping and lack of education and funding. At the same time, almost 10% of these facilities in B.C. are approaching the end of their service life. In this environment, with Belongings actively transferring back to BCFNs and others continuing to be cared for in institutions, there is a clear need for repatriation funding to include post-repatriation care that supports both infrastructure development and stewardship in BCFN communities and in colonial institutions.

Part 2 : Repatriation Costs + Funding Needs



The Current State of Repatriation

To understand the current state of BCFN repatriation initiatives, timelines and costs, K'yuu administered a B.C. State of Repatriation survey. Fifteen BCFNs and eight colonial institutions active in repatriation work participated in the survey, answering questions about current and future repatriation activities, costs, funding sources, and challenges they face. Survey results show that, across the board, BCFNs and colonial institutions are engaging in a wide variety of repatriation activities, and that success in repatriation requires capacity development, time, infrastructure, funding, community support and more. Over half of BCFN respondents indicated their community is planning for repatriation activities well into the future (10 years and beyond). Detailed survey results can be found in the full report.

Phases of Work

Each repatriation is different, with costs and timelines dependent on the unique circumstances and characteristics of BCFNs, the Ancestors(s) and Belonging(s) being repatriated, and the respective holding institutions. While repatriation work does not begin or end with a single project, the wide diversity of activities that take place throughout multi-year repatriation process generally fall into four distinct phases. Each phase of repatriation work outlined below incurs ongoing costs including fundraising, capacity-building, research, community engagement, addressing racism, wages and honoraria, ceremonial and protocol gifts and more.



Figure 1

Repatriation Costs and A Demonstrated Need for Funding

“Returning remains to their communities can create financial demands on some of the most impoverished communities in our country. Some may think, what do they need all that money for? I would suggest you recall or imagine arranging a funeral for one of your loved ones. Everything adds up: the cost of the undertaker, the casket, the flowers, the lunch or tea afterward, the newspaper obituary. In our communities, the wrappers, the diggers, the singers, the cooks, the meals, the blankets. Funerals cost money. Repatriation and reburials of human remains are funerals in every sense.”

- Diane Hinkley, Indigenous Perspectives on Repatriation Symposium, 2017

Results from the B.C. State of Repatriation survey confirmed what is already widely acknowledged within the field: repatriation activities are costly for both BCFNs and colonial institutions. Despite heavy reliance on volunteer labour and community fundraising, 60% of BCFNs surveyed have already spent over \$1 million on repatriation work to date.

Since the Canadian government has yet to commit to dedicated repatriation legislation, policy and funding, many BCFNs are reliant on grants and other mechanisms to support their repatriation work. These efforts come with their own challenges. When applying for grant programs that are not dedicated to repatriation, BCFNs are forced to focus on strict funding criteria and narrow timelines rather than their specific repatriation needs. From time to time, holding institutions provide support for repatriation activities, but this support does not reflect the true scope and costs of repatriation, and can be influenced by colonial laws and other conditions, which can infringe on self-determination.

B.C. State of Repatriation Survey: Types of funding accessed by BCFNs and colonial institutions for repatriation work

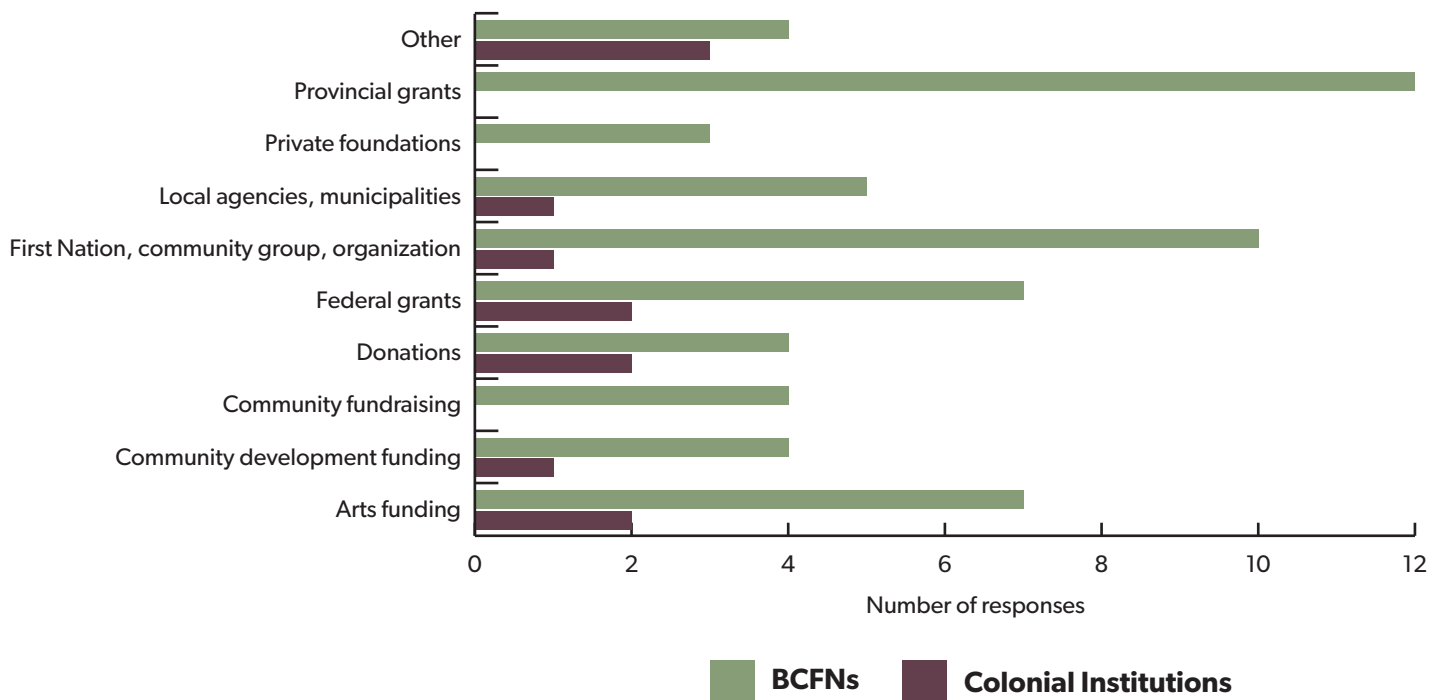


Figure 2

In recent years, modern treaty negotiations and tripartite reconciliation efforts with provincial and federal governments have created opportunities for legally binding repatriation support. At the time of publication, approximately 37 BCFNs are actively engaged in or have concluded treaty negotiations, some of which include pledged provincial or federal support for the return of Belongings from global institutions. In addition, the B.C. Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada are both obligated and committed to supporting repatriation and reconciliation with BCFNs.

Dedicated repatriation funding finally became available in Canada in 2016, when the Province of B.C. announced one-time funding to support BCFNs’ repatriation initiatives through grants which were administered by the RBCM in 2018. Since then, two more one-time repatriation grant programs were administered by the BCMA in 2020 and by FPCC in 2023, resulting in 60 grants awarded and nearly \$1.8 million distributed. Table 3 shows the breakdown of the applications received, funding requested and grants awarded.

Table 3: B.C. Repatriation Grant Summary (2018-2023)

Grant agency	Number of applications received	Funding requested	Number of grants awarded	Total funding granted
RBCM	25	\$720,000	21	\$586,160
BCMA	37	\$1,086,858	23	\$454,000
FPCC	16	\$725,000	16	\$725,000
TOTAL	78	\$2,531,858	60	\$1,765,160

Funding requests to the three repatriation grant programs totaled over \$2.5 million, highlighting the B.C. State of Repatriation survey findings that the cost of repatriation is significantly higher than the funds available to support this work. Despite the many creative ways BCFNs secure funding, 80% of survey participants reported that funding they have been able to access has not fully covered the costs of their repatriation work.

Notably, 100% of BCFN respondents accessed cultural knowledge, expertise and guidance without funding for it. This type of in-kind community contribution to repatriation work is rarely tracked and therefore hard to quantify, but if western professionals were paid for the same work, it would add up to millions of dollars.

There is an urgent need for sustaining, sufficient funding to support repatriation. 100% of BCFN and 50% of colonial institutions surveyed indicated they would be interested in applying for repatriation grants in the next three years. This speaks to the importance of multi-year dedicated repatriation funding for the work to continue sustainably. Figure 3 shows BCFNs’ and colonial institutions’ survey responses about how much money they anticipate spending on repatriation activities over the next decade.



Tse’k’wa. Image by Julie Elizabeth Photography.

B.C. State of Repatriation Survey: What are your future repatriation funding needs in the next 3–5 years and 5–10 years?

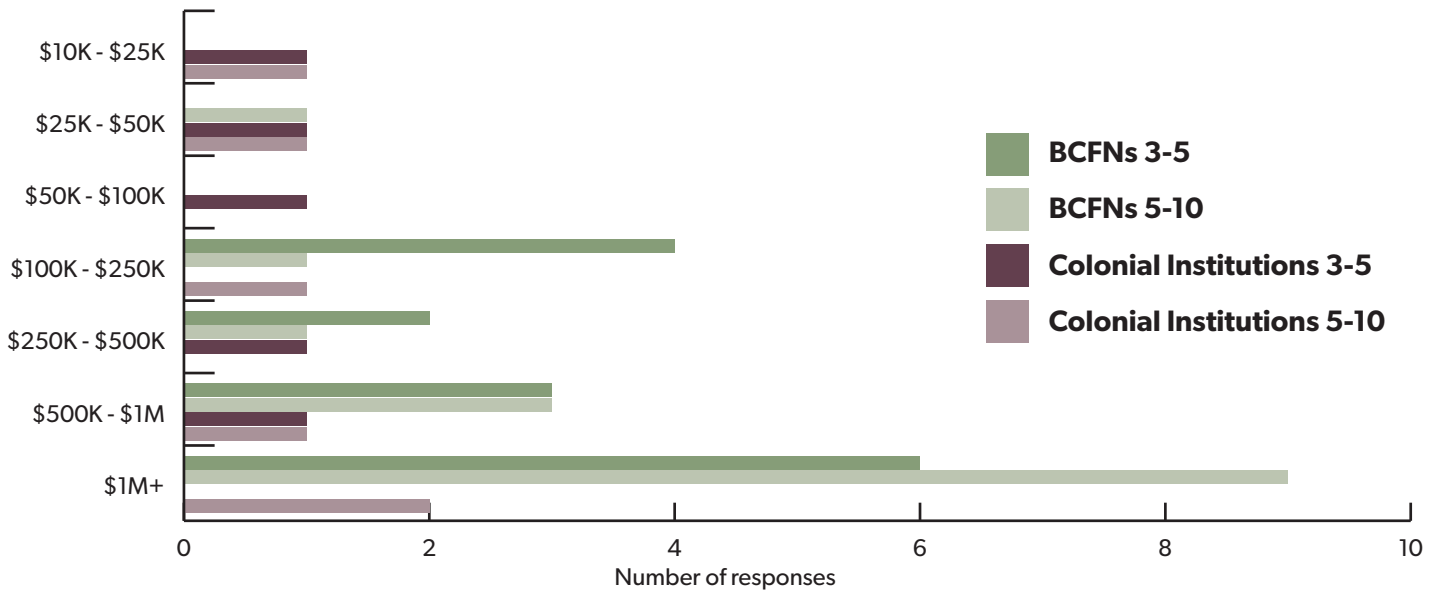


Figure 3

Tla-o-quiht community members with their Repatriated Belongings. (Photo courtesy of Melody Charlie)



Part 3: Repatriation Costs Are Contributions



Repatriation is a moral and ethical imperative that should be understood not only as a cost, but also as an economic and social driver. Repatriation contributions can include, but are not limited to the following:

- ▶ Health and healing for both BCFNs and greater B.C. and Canada by restoring self-determination and facilitating truth-telling that leads to healthy, respectful ways to co-exist.
- ▶ Shifting the paradigm to unlearn entrenched narratives, re-evaluate historical perspectives, foster equitable knowledge exchange and cultivate empathy, friendship and anti-racism.
- ▶ Job creation through the development of a skilled workforce in repatriation and post-repatriation stewardship. Repatriation work supports careers such as engineering, construction, arts administration, IT and more.
- ▶ Community development through BCFN community-led programs and services in language, arts and cultural revitalization, including building relationships with colonial institutions and other BCFNs.
- ▶ BCFN arts and culture market growth through strengthening opportunities for revitalization of language, arts and cultural practices. It contributes to public interest and increased recognition of BCFN artists and other creatives.
- ▶ Cultural and heritage tourism is supported by attracting visitors and other opportunities that contribute to local economies.
- ▶ Freeing up colonial institutions' resources and spaces, allowing institutions to focus their efforts on work that supports a wider range of programs, including collaborative work with BCFNs.
- ▶ Increased museum and exhibition activity through opportunities to collaborate on programs, publications, and events that bring increased foot traffic and revenue to both colonial institutions and BCFNs museums and cultural centres.
- ▶ International collaboration and trade through fostering international partnerships, exchanges and cultural diplomacy based on relationships built during the repatriation process.
- ▶ Positive reputation and branding through continued efforts in reconciliation, which can increase public goodwill, impact potential investment and attract supporters.

Part 4: BCFN Repatriation Case Studies

The K'yuu team collaborated with BCFN repatriation experts and museum staff to develop 16 unique case studies that highlight the intricacies and costs associated with repatriation work. BCFNs repatriation initiatives are just as diverse as their budgets and visions, and each case study offers different learnings and takeaways. Explore the full report to read about BCFNs' experiences that show the reality of repatriation timelines (Kwakwaka'wakw, Haida), the importance of self-determination (Stó:lō, Haíłzaqv), the value of protective laws and treaties (WSÁNEĆ, Nisga'a), the need for sustained funding (Ucluelet, Gitxaala), and more. Read all the case studies here: fpcc.ca/resources/stealing-to-healing/.

Part 5: Findings

Research and analysis informing this report reveals a rapidly changing repatriation landscape in B.C. Spanning centuries, from the removal of BCFN Ancestors and Belongings from communities and territories to more recent BCFN-led repatriation initiatives, colonial institutions and governments have finally begun to recognize their ethical and legal responsibilities to support repatriation. While new legislation such as DRIPA formalizes government support for truth-telling, repatriation and respectful co-existence with BCFNs, its implementation remains in its infancy.

Research carried out for the *From Stealing to Healing: Repatriation and B.C. First Nations* report reveals how much more work there is to do to locate, fund and properly care for repatriated Ancestors and Belongings. Since repatriation costs are also contributions to safe, healthy and prosperous communities for all, it is in the best interest of all Canadians to support this work.

7 Key Milestones

The seven key milestones described below offer actions and outcomes necessary to supporting BCFNs repatriation:

1. B.C. and Canada formally and publicly acknowledge that the vast majority of BCFN Ancestors and Belongings held in colonial institutions were removed from BCFN territory by theft and duress, and that BCFNs are the rightful stewards of these Ancestors and Belongings.
2. B.C. and Canada commit to substantial intergenerational funding and support BCFN repatriation locally, nationally and internationally.
3. B.C. and Canada support the development of a BCFN-led, centralized organizing body and program focused on critical initiatives that will facilitate the work of repatriation.
4. B.C. and Canada support the development of a BCFN-led strategy, along with policies and laws that protect BCFN Ancestors and Belongings still in territory, and facilitate BCFN repatriation locally, nationally and internationally.
5. Canada and B.C. recognize that BCFN repatriation extends beyond Ancestors and Belongings held in colonial heritage institutions.
6. B.C. and Canada acknowledge that “Land Back” is an essential act of reparation and restitution and is required for successful repatriation.
7. Creation of a repatriation accreditation program for colonial institutions.



Conclusion

The ongoing repatriation work led by BCFNs is a testament to their resilience and dedication to their cultural, spiritual, physical and economic well-being. In recent years, growing recognition of Canada's legacy of colonization has sparked a movement towards reconciliation, with repatriation emerging as a crucial step. This report demonstrates the urgent need for sufficient, sustainable long-term funding and strategic support for repatriation. It also reveals the imperative for colonial governments, institutions and society to recognize and support BCFN-led repatriation to ensure communities have the freedom and authority to make decisions about their cultural heritage. The 16 case studies presented in the report showcase the repatriation stories of BCFNs and institutions, and make the case for repatriation investments as not merely costs, but also larger contributions to the economic and social wellbeing of BCFNs and all British Columbians and Canadians.

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