**Desecration of Graves Sanctioned by Wisconsin Assembly Bill**

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The Ho-Chunk Nation has been in a legal tussle with a Dane County mining company that wants to destroy a state-protected burial mound in one of its limestone quarries to get the aggregate underneath. The five-year-old conflict turned red-hot on December 29, 2015 when Republicans sent [Assembly Bill 620](http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2015/related/proposals/ab620) to the Wisconsin State legislature’s Committee on Environment and Forestry.

“The legislation opens the door to widespread destruction and desecration of mound and burial sites throughout the entire state, specifically by imposing the requirement that conclusive proof of burials must be provided in order to have a site catalogued and protected. The limitations of existing technology would necessitate the use of digging and excavation to provide this proof, which would ultimately be the actual physical disturbance of the site and in the case of mounds, irreversible damage and destruction,” Henning Garvin, District 2 Representative for the Ho-Chunk Nation, told ICTMN.

The Ho-Chunk consider themselves keepers of these sacred sites in Wisconsin and direct descendants of the “Mound Builders.” They built major ceremonial centers incorporating mound complexes and settlements between 2,200 and 1,600 years ago throughout the Midwest, according to the [Newberry Library](http://publications.newberry.org/indiansofthemidwest/people-places-time/eras/moundbuilders/) in Chicago. Two of the best-known sites are the Ohio Earthworks and Cahokia in St. Louis. [Other complexes](http://www.greatdreams.com/mounds.htm) extended as far north as Canada and as far south as Seminole territory in Florida. Effigy (cultural representations) and geometric (conical, linear) burial mounds are prominent in these complexes.

“Such burials remind us of Westminster Abbey in London in which the burials of people of historical importance memorialize the history and achievements of England,” says the [Newberry Library website](http://publications.newberry.org/indiansofthemidwest/people-places-time/eras/moundbuilders/).

Burial mounds are called “barrows” in England, “cairns” in Scotland and “tumuli” elsewhere in Europe. The mound of Emperor Shihuangdi in China is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Japanese royalty and prominent aristocrats were buried in mounds. Although debate as to whether or not Mound Builders were distinct from the Adena and Hopewell cultures prevails among Western academics, the high stature of [burial mounds](http://www.britannica.com/topic/burial-mound) is not debated.

Garvin says the sites are of world-class heritage quality, on par with the ruins of Rome and Greece. The single bird effigy site at the Wingra Stone limestone quarry is the last of seven contained in the Ward Mound Group and is of particular significance to the Ho-Chunk Nation.

“We don’t need to be studied to be able to know there are remains,” said Ho-Chunk District 1 Representative David Greendeer in an interview with [WORT-FM](http://www.wortfm.org/save-the-mounds/) in Madison on December 31. “Many of these mounds predate Christ. They are older than the Egyptian pyramids.”

Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska Vice Chairman Alan Kelley agreed with Greendeer, stating the Ioway were a branch of the Ho-Chunk and still share the history of the sites. In addition, for his tribe, effigy mounds were sites for treaty signings. The Iowa Tribe has recently witnessed one of the worst cases of mismanagement in National Park Service history where 78 Effigy Mounds National Monument construction projects were approved and built from 1999 to 2010. The projects were in violation of federal laws and damaged the mounds, according to the [*Des Moines Register*](http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/life/2015/08/03/national-park-service-buries-report-effigy-mounds-scandal/31073151/).

The National Park Service’s internal investigation of the matter entitled “[Serious Mismanagement Report](http://www.peer.org/assets/docs/nps/8_3_15_Effigy_Mounds_Serious_Mismanagement_Report.pdf)” stated, “It is clear that while the cultural resources program was being dismantled due to a professed lack of funding, the maintenance program was rapidly growing, acquiring approximately 60 percent of EFMO’s [Effigy Mounds National Monument] base funding increases.”

Besides describing incredible corruption, the report also describes how federal officials allowed destruction of the Iowa mounds by creating the same type of loophole that the Wisconsin Republican proposed changes in burial site protection law would create.

Under the National Historic Preservation Act any federal undertaking on a designated or eligible historic property is subject to a Section 106 Compliance Review, which assesses, and then avoids, mitigates or minimizes adverse effects in consultation with all concerned parties, including state and tribal historic preservation officers. Optimally, an “undertaking” is considered on a case-by-case basis.

In the case of the Effigy Monument National Park investigation, the report describes management self-proclaiming Section 106 and other regulation compliance exemptions based on previous “disturbances” in the park by farming or infrastructure construction. Officials claimed that disturbances negated the need for consultation on the sites. Similarly, the Wisconsin law as proposed would allow disturbance of burial mounds to prove the existence of human remains, and that type of disturbance could eliminate the mound from completely protected status if mitigation or minimization were deemed appropriate based on the degree of disturbance.

Add to this the scandal of former Effigy Mounds National Park superintendent Thomas Munson’s removal of human remains over a period of 22 years, and it is clear that improvement of cultural preservation laws and oversight, not eradication of laws, is what is needed. Mistakes are very costly considering that Wisconsin has already lost 80 percent of its burial mounds to urban development, according to the [website Recollection Wisconsin](http://recollectionwisconsin.org/), a statewide collaboration of cultural institutions.

“This isn’t a new issue for us,” Greendeer told bill co-author Sen. Chris Kapenga (R-Delafield) at a recent town hall meeting. “Every place that we walk within the State of Wisconsin, every building that’s been built, every metro city, is over our people. This is no different… This is a holy site.”

[*http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2016/01/06/desecration-graves-sanctioned-wisconsin-assembly-bill-162970*](http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2016/01/06/desecration-graves-sanctioned-wisconsin-assembly-bill-162970)