

Apology by the Royal Society of Tasmania to the Aboriginal People of Tasmania

Today the Royal Society of Tasmania apologises unreservedly to the Aboriginal people of lutruwita (Tasmania).

This apology is long overdue.

The Royal Society of Tasmania recognises that it has been responsible for negative impacts on Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the past, and that these impacts contribute to the disadvantage, injustice and intergenerational trauma suffered today.

The Council of the Royal Society of Tasmania, on behalf of its membership, offers this sincere and formal apology to the Aboriginal people of lutruwita (Tasmania).

We acknowledge that:

The Society acted to exhume and to purchase the ancestral remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal people for scientific study. In some cases these remains were sent to collecting institutions outside of Tasmania.

Exhumation and mistreatment of ancestral remains occurred with a lack of regard for their deep cultural and spiritual significance. In at least one case, exhumation was against the expressed wish of the individual concerned.

These remains were held by the Society in the Royal Society Museum without care or respect, and without discussion or permission from Aboriginal community members.

For this, we are sorry.

Research and interpretation of Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture, language and cultural knowledge were undertaken without consultation or due respect.

For this, we are sorry.

While sometimes advocating for the recognition of the importance of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, the Society at times failed to challenge prevailing attitudes that denied recognition and respect for Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Past practices of collection, description and representation of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their material culture by the Society contributed to beliefs that continue to be misleading and destructive.

For this, we are sorry.

The Society failed to respond to a past request to support a proposal for a treaty with Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Actions of some members of the Society, who were also leaders in the Tasmanian community, legitimised and facilitated the mistreatment of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their material culture.

Some members of the Society actively opposed requests for the return of ancestral remains to Aboriginal people.

For all this, we are sorry. We are unreservedly sorry.

Now we look to the future.

The Royal Society of Tasmania understands that this apology must influence all aspects of its undertakings in seeking the advancement of knowledge.

We intend to work co-operatively and respectfully with Tasmanian Aboriginal people on meaningful and lasting initiatives.

We will work to respect the values and perspectives of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and understand and acknowledge protocols and processes determined by Aboriginal people.

We will seek a truthful and full account of the actions of the Society and its members that fully recognises impacts on Aboriginal people for which we take responsibility.

We will promote ethical research-related scholarly activities in consultation with, and of benefit to Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

We will support Tasmanian Aboriginal people in seeking the repatriation of their ancestral remains and material culture.

Finally, we hope that the delivery of this apology today will mark the beginning of a new era, and a relationship that recognises the histories, cultures, knowledge and aspirations of Tasmanian Aboriginal people as fundamental to the future of Tasmanian society.

Resolution of the Council of the Royal Society of Tasmania
22 September 2020



Mary Koolhof, President
15 February 2021

