

Statement in support to the proposed bilateral agreement between the United States of America and Chile for the protection of Chilean archaeological and ethnographic materials.

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The Chilean cultural patrimony is threatened by illegal activities that include looting, redistribution, and commercialization of archaeological and ethnological materials obtained from archaeological sites and from museum collections. Studies conducted by scholars and government officials in Chile indicate that, despite the efforts conducted at a national level, this problem is far from being resolved. International commercialization of selected items is one major motivation for illegal activities aiming at gathering selected pieces that have a market value outside the country. Individuals from the United States, as well as from other countries, have been known to engage in the chain leading to the commercialization of archaeological and ethnological materials from Chile. Signing a bilateral agreement between the governments of United States and Chile will be instrumental for the protection of heritage, such as this type of items, protected under the UNESCO Convention of 1970.

Chile has taken measures to protect its cultural patrimony. All cultural heritage including archaeological and paleontological sites are considered to be Monuments and hence protected by law since 1970 (Ley 17.288). This law is known by anyone working in cultural heritage and it is enforced by the police and the judicial system. Chile has a robust national patrimony office, the Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales, which regulates most activities related to cultural heritage management. Current changes occurring in a national scale will enhance its effectiveness as it will become a decentralized institution under a recently created Cultural Patrimony Ministry. Other long-lasting programs at national level, such as CONICYT Explora, often do scientific outreach that targets youth audiences into understanding the value of cultural patrimony. These are complemented by museum initiatives that act in regional and local scales. Though not as frequent as should be, occasional seizures are highly visible in the news and produce awareness.

Sites of a very diverse nature occur in Chile and range from small hunter-gatherer campsites as early as 14,600 years of age to large village complexes that emerged during the last two thousand years. Among the most notable archaeological remains are the Chinchorro mummies, the oldest in the world, and artifacts from Eastern Island, both known to have been subjected to pillage. Art galleries in New York have been known to commercialize Chilean archaeological material. The main objects at jeopardy are distinctive ornaments (bone, metal), ceramic vessels, textiles and projectile points which are often found across the territory. Paleontological material, especially from highly productive locations on North and Central Chile, is also a frequent target for looting.

The application of import restrictions in the United States against specified Chilean archaeological and ethnographic materials will help prevent destruction of our archaeological heritage by illegal looting, because it targets one end of the illegal trafficking chain. Limiting the demand for these “goods” will discourage local looters, who often engage in these activities motivated by unusual supplies of money uncommon for local communities residing in the vicinity of key archaeological sites. Other less drastic measures would be less effective because they do not target the main motivation.

Import restrictions need to target specific items used for “art commerce.” To my understanding this does not hamper the interchange between the United States and Chile regarding scientific, cultural, and educational levels. Relations in these points are healthy and often financed through scientific projects and advanced human capital training programs promoted by both countries. These include collaboration in studies, joint published papers, mentoring Ph.D. students and even hiring specific analyses conducted in laboratories located in the United States. Setting clearer grounds for what should be legal to import (e.g., specific samples included in scientific studies, museum exchanges, voluntary repatriation) will benefit the protection of Chilean archaeological and ethnographic materials.