



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H49 Ours or Theirs?

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After attending this presentation, the viewer will understand the complexity of the Undocumented Alien (UDA) issue and the implications this presents to the Medical Examiner's Office and the identification of human remains.

The case studies presented will help discern some skeletal characteristics which will give the forensic investigator insight into the problem of trying to determine regional origins.

Undocumented aliens (UDAs) who enter the U.S. along the Arizona border must traverse an extremely hostile environment very nearly devoid of water and shade. Daytime temperatures often exceed 120° F on the desert floor for days on end. Since the region is sparsely populated – and the UDAs are generally leery of contacting anyone north of the border lest they be Immigration Officials – when their water runs out each UDA becomes a probable Medical Examiner case sometime within the ensuing year or years.

From past cases, it is known that all who are retrieved from the desert floor are not necessarily Mexican Nationals. South Americans and Central Americans are also represented on occasion, as are Southwest Native Americans and Hispanic Americans. In a decomposed or mummified or skeletonized (complete or incomplete) condition, can the Forensic Anthropologist suggest a probable ethnicity for the Medical Examiner based on cranial, dental, and/or postcranial morphology?

This paper seeks to address this issue by presenting a series of case studies and their ultimate conclusions. Each year the Forensic Science Center, Pima County, Arizona, is faced with an increasing UDA caseload and is tasked to work with the Mexican authorities to try to resolve the identities and fate of the unidentified remains. Increasingly as well, both skeletal and circumstantial evidence are sometimes recovered indicating that this is truly an international problem – that not all UDAs crossing our borders in the Southwest are Mexican citizens, but hail from other Central and South American countries. The case studies presented will help discern some skeletal characteristics which will give the forensic investigator insight into the problem of trying to determine regional origins.

Undocumented Aliens, Southwestern U.S., Human Skeletal Identification