MEDIA RELEASE: 21st May 2014

World Archaeological Congress, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the International Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management, and the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association jointly applaud decision by National Geographic Channel International to pull the “Nazi War Diggers” series

As elected leaders of these global organizations, we were relieved to learn of the decision made by the National Geographic Channel International (NGCI) to “indefinitely” postpone their planned television series titled “Nazi War Diggers.” Based on materials published online by NGCI, and further research conducted by archaeologists and other professionals about the show and its featured actors, we had serious reservations about the series content. We share the same disappointment and concerns about the production of this series as those expressed by the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) and other archaeological organizations in their letter to NGCI dated March 31, 2014 (http://www.saa.org/Portals/0/SAA/GovernmentAffairs/Nazi%20War%20Diggers-V5.pdf).

In particular, we objected to the program’s disrespectful treatment of human remains. Video previews of the series showed untrained professionals (including metal detector specialists, “relic hunters”, and a commercial dealer in World War II artifacts) removing human bones from an unmarked grave in an unscientific manner. Even more distressing there was no reference to consultation or communication with descendants of the exhumed individual and their feelings concerning the destruction of their relative’s grave for profit, not only for the relic hunters, but for NatGeo, which will benefit financially from the program. Rather, the video clip was presented in such a way as to attract audiences to “mystery” and sensationalized human remains.

WAC bases its objection to treatment of past humans on the WAC Code of Ethics, the WAC Vermillion Accord on Human Remains and the WAC Tamaki Makau-rau Accord on the Display of Human Remains and Sacred Objects. Prof. Koji Mizoguchi, President of WAC, noted that the first principle of the Vermillion Accord declares “Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition”. He also noted that the WAC Tamaki Makau-rau Accord on the Display of Human Remains and
Sacred Objects states that the display of human remains is a sensitive issue, and that those considering the display of human remains must obtain permission from affected communities, and devise plans for display that are culturally appropriate. Dr. Mizoguchi concluded: ‘The unsupervised excavation and televised promotion of human remains as shown in the clips of ‘Nazi War Diggers’ cannot be considered respectful treatment of the dead or culturally appropriate.” Even if consultation has occurred, the fact that this was not discussed on the program gives the impression that international ethical principals have been ignored. The program not only fails to educate the public, it encourages disrespect.

NatGeo has had a very high profile in academic communities for decades and many people look to NatGeo as a standard of practice, especially members of the public. It is therefore especially damaging when an organization of such stature errs so grievously in a public-oriented format. In their published statement, the NGCI noted that “allegations about the program” will be “properly reviewed”. We encourage NGCI to consider televising an amended version of this program, and further recommend that NGCI make a more serious effort to control the content of programming that has the NatGeo imprint. As organizations representing thousands of archaeologists and other cultural heritage specialists around the world, we would be pleased to help NGCI review programming, to ensure that future National Geographic shows meet modern standards of archaeological practice, and the concerns of affected communities.

BACKGROUND:
The World Archaeological Congress (WAC), with members in more than 90 countries, is the only fully international and representative organisation of practicing archaeologists. As a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization, WAC’s mission is to (1) promote professional training for disadvantaged nations and communities; (2) broaden public education, involving national and international communities in archaeological research; (3) develop archaeological practice so that it empowers Indigenous and minority; (4) contribute to the conservation of archaeological sites threatened by looting, urban growth, tourism, development or war; and (5) re-dress global inequities amongst archaeologists. WAC holds an international congress every four years to promote its mission.