



MEDIA RELEASE

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Ancient deep-time rock shelters believed destroyed in Pilbara mining blast, calls for greater flexibility to retain sites

Two ancient deep-time rock shelters dated with evidence of human occupation over 46,000 years ago are believed to have been decimated after a mining blast in the Pilbara – an act that has distressed the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people.

Yesterday, Rio Tinto detonated charges in an area of the Juukan Gorge, about 60km north west of Mt Tom Price, as part of its mining operations.

The tenements fall within a Native Title claim awarded in 2015.

Authorisation was granted by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in 2013 under Section 18 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act (1972) permitting Rio Tinto to conduct excavation, destruction or damage to these Aboriginal sites. The blast occurred as part of mining operations performed in accordance with these approvals and related consents.

But since the authorisation, archaeological research has revealed highly significant ancient artefacts found in two rock shelters at the site, with some known to date back 20,000 years before the last Ice Age. The sites are also of substantial ethnographic significance.

Preliminary testing was conducted on the site in 2008 and salvage excavations were undertaken in 2014, led by archaeologist Dr Michael Slack.

Of the seven sites identified in the project area, two of the three archaeological sites were rated as being of “high archaeological significance” and four of the five rock shelters were recommended for further salvage excavations, which are yet to occur. Excavations were conducted at two rock shelters, including Juukan 2.

Juukan 2, which was part of the area blasted on Sunday along with Juukan 1, is an Aboriginal archaeological site in the west Hamersley Plateau, which research shows Aboriginal people first occupied more than 46,000 years ago. Few early dates for the plateau have exceeded 30,000 years.

During the 2014 excavation, several significant artefacts were uncovered, including grinding and pounding stones, which represent the earliest use of grindstone technology in the Pilbara and a macropod fibula believed to date back approximately 28,000 years ago. The bone had been sharpened into a pointed tool.

In addition, hair dating back 4000 years was recovered from the excavations. The plaited hair led experts to believe it was part of a “hair belt” worn by the PKKP Traditional Owners.

Puutu Kunti Kurrama Land Committee Chair John Ashburton said the 2014 excavation, staged in three short trips, had uncovered artefacts of extreme importance, which put the area among the most significant research sites in the Australia.

“This is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, sites in the upland Pilbara and is part of a rich landscape of places in the area that have not been studied in depth,” Mr Ashburton said.



THE PKKP ABORIGINAL
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“There are less than a handful of known Aboriginal sites in Australia that are as old as this one and we know from archaeological studies that it is one of the earliest occupied locations not only on the western Hamersley Plateau, but also in the Pilbara and nationally. Its importance cannot be underestimated.”

Mr Ashburton said the PKKP people were frustrated by a rigid regulatory system that does not consider important new information, such as the archaeological finds in the Juukan Gorge, once a Section 18 notice is granted.

“We recognise that Rio Tinto has complied with its legal obligations, but we are gravely concerned at the inflexibility of the regulatory system which does not recognise the importance of such significant archaeological discoveries within the Juukan Gorge once the Minister has given consent.

“We are now working with Rio Tinto to safeguard the remaining rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge and ensure open communication between all stakeholders.”

The Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Aboriginal Corporation, after requesting future access to the site, was first advised on May 15 of Rio Tinto’s activities to blast the gorge in close proximity to the rock shelters; and that explosive charges had already been laid. PKKPAC attempted to negotiate with the mining company to stop the blast, or at least limit damage to the rock shelters.

Independent technical advice sought by the PKKPAC last week found the site was irretrievable because the charges could not safely be removed. Left unfired, it would be a safety risk.

“Our people are deeply troubled and saddened by the destruction of these rock shelters and are grieving the loss of connection to our ancestors as well as our land,” Mr Ashburton said.

“Losing these rock shelters is a devastating blow to the PKKP Traditional Owners.”

Dr Slack, who undertook the 2014 excavation and is due to have a paper published internationally about Juukan 2 this year, said the significance of the Juukan Gorge could not be overstated.

“The excavations at Juukan 2 provides new insights to the lifeways of the earliest human populations that inhabited the interior of the western Hamersley Plateau,” the report by Slack et. al. 2020 (in prep) states.

“The archaeological assemblage illustrates the diversity and complexity of late Pleistocene toolkits... The bone, charcoal, and other organics preserved in the deepest levels of the site have also changed our understanding of the use of early technologies, particularly of the timing of bone tool and grindstone technology in northwest Australia.

“The site has also featured plaited human hair, identified as part of a human hair belt. It yielded DNA associated with the contemporary PKKP, further confirming this distinct culture.

“The bone point appears to be one of the oldest examples of bone technology in Australia with ochre residues. Finally, the grinding stone is one of the oldest examples of this technology known in Australia and supports the arguments for early seed grinding established by Field et al. (2006) and Clarkson et al. (2017).”

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Administering the traditional lands and waters of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people