

Report reveals Rio Tinto knew the significance of 46,000-year-old rock caves six years before it blasted them

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RN Breakfast

Mining and Metals Industry

Fri 5 Jun 2020 at 7:08am



Evidence of more than 40,000 years of human habitation was discovered during the excavation of one of the Juukan rock cave sites in 2014. (*Supplied*)

Mining giant Rio Tinto was alerted six years ago that at least one of the caves it blasted in Western Australia's Pilbara region last month was of "the highest archaeological significance in Australia".

The cave sites were among the oldest in Australia, with evidence of continuous human habitation going back 46,000 years.

Advice delivered to Rio Tinto and the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) Indigenous people of the

Key points:

- Reports on the site describe one of the caves as the "only one in the Pilbara to contain such aspects of material culture"

region six years ago was never publicly released.

The ABC has been given a summary of the contents of the report, as well as earlier archaeological survey work and excavations at the sites dating back to 2004.

The documentation of the 2014 report by archaeologist Dr Michael Slack confirmed one of the sites that was blasted, the Juukan-2 (Brock-21) cave, was rare in Australia and unique in the Pilbara.

"The site was found to contain a cultural sequence spanning over 40,000 years, with a high frequency of flaked stone artefacts, rare abundance of faunal remains, unique stone tools, preserved human hair and with sediment containing a pollen record charting thousands of years of environmental changes," Dr Slack wrote.

"In many of these respects, the site is the only one in the Pilbara to contain such aspects of material culture and provide a likely strong connection through DNA analysis to the contemporary traditional owners of such old Pleistocene antiquity."

- Rio Tinto was advised of the heritage significance before the \$15 billion expansion of its Pilbara mines
- Traditional owners opposed the destruction of the caves in a 2015 documentary funded by Rio Tinto



Michael Slack said he believed there was more excavation work to be done on Juukan Gorge before the area was blasted by Rio Tinto. (ABC Pilbara: Karen Michelmore)

Dr Slack and his team removed 7,000 artefacts from the caves in 2014 and the executive summary states: "The results of the excavations at Brock-21/Juukan-2 are of the highest archaeological significance in Australia."

Rio Tinto funded documentary celebrating the caves

Rio Tinto seemed to be aware of the unique value of the site the year after they received the archaeological report and in 2015, the mining company funded a documentary called *Ngurra Minarli*, which means In Our Country.



7,000 artefacts were discovered during the excavation of the Juukan-2 site. (Supplied)

The documentary featured PKKP traditional owners expressing concern about protecting the remaining cultural sites in the area, including the Juukan rock caves.

Traditional owner Harold Ashburton said he had recently taken his two sons to the area.

"I showed them Brockman, where my grandfather was born, first time they'd been out in a grandfather's country," he said in the documentary.

"They turned and said, 'It's f*ed because of mining. What [have] they done to the country?"**

In an interview with RN Breakfast, Chris Salisbury, chief executive of Rio Tinto iron ore described the destruction of the caves as a "misunderstanding".

He said the company was sorry for the "distress and anguish" of the PKKP people and took "full accountability".

"Something's gone terribly wrong here and we've committed to a comprehensive review of all of our heritage process and moreover committed to advocating for legislative change to prevent this sort of thing happening, should it be necessary," Mr Salisbury said.

"We can't move back, we can't keep looking backwards, we want to repair our relationship with traditional owners."

Rock shelters were already doomed

Rio Tinto's Brockman 4 mine was expanding and operating less than one kilometre away from the Juukan rock cave sites when Dr Slack's team conducted its 2014 excavation of the site.

The dig excavated down 1.8 metres to bedrock across a 15-square-metre section in the centre of Juukan 2.

It revealed compelling new evidence for the rarity and importance of both Juukan 1 and Juukan 2.



The Juukan caves were excavated in 2014 and determined to be of the "highest archaeological significance".
(Supplied)

However, because the dig was described by Dr Slack as "extensive salvage excavations" it appeared that by 2014, both caves were already doomed.

Only months before the dig started, Rio Tinto [secured a Section 18 consent](#) under the WA Aboriginal Heritage Act in December 2013.

The permit meant the company could not be prosecuted for "excavating, destroying, damaging, concealing or in any way altering any Aboriginal site".

This consent was issued by the WA Registrar of Aboriginal Sites despite an earlier report in December 2008 by Dr Slack, pointing to "high archaeological significance" of at least three sites in the region, which included the two Juukan caves.

The first archaeological assessment of the caves, recommending further research and possible listing and protection under WA heritage law, was done in 2004.

Among other sites, it recommended the caves "should be avoided" by the company and its employees because they contained "a significant amount of cultural material".



Rio Tinto was given permission to blast Juukan Gorge 1 and 2 under Section 18 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act.
(Supplied: Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Aboriginal Corporation)

For his 2008 report, Dr Slack did test excavations of 12 rock shelters and additional recording and mapping at 20 open-artefact scatters around Mount Brockman and the upper watersheds of Boolgeeda Creek, Duck Creek and the Beasley River.

"Of the sites recorded, most (30) are considered to be of low archaeological significance 30, nine are considered to be of medium significance, and three are assessed as being of high archaeological significance," Dr Slack reported.

Twelve years before they were detonated, Dr Slack had already singled out the Juukan caves as being especially important.

"BROCK-21 [Juukan 2] is assessed as being of high archaeological significance," he wrote.

"Our excavations have indicated that the deposit is of great antiquity and has the potential to be even older.

"Although we have only presented some initial analysis in this report, there is much more refinement that is needed to be done to the analysis of both stone and bone."

But the report stated that even "at this early stage of analysis, we can definitively show that the BROCK-21 site qualifies" for listing as a protected site under the Aboriginal Heritage Act "on the basis of both research potential and representativeness as being of high archaeological significance".



An expansion of operations by Rio Tinto in 2010 included the Brockman 4 mine near the two rock caves. (Babs McHugh: ABC Rural)

Largely as a result of this report, by 2013, the Juukan caves had been placed on the list of protected areas under the act — the same year Rio received permission to destroy them.

Dr Slack's work in 2008 was a prelude to a \$15 billion expansion of Rio Tinto's operations in the Pilbara from 2010, extending existing mines and building new ones to increase iron ore production by 50 per cent.

The Brockman 4 mine — fatally for the Juukan caves — was one of those expanding operations.

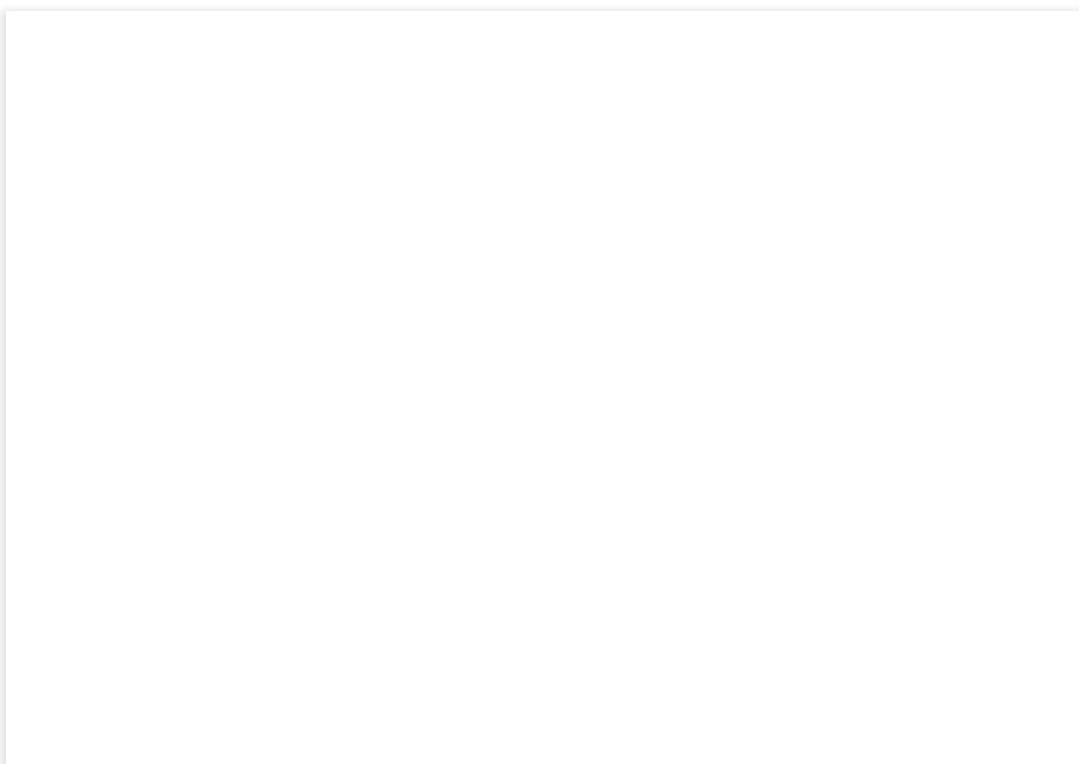
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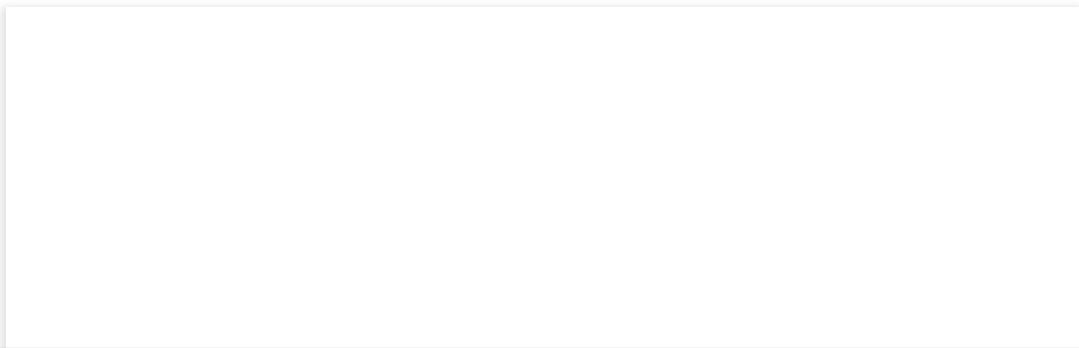
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Posted Fri 5 Jun 2020 at 7:08am, updated Fri 5 Jun 2020 at 2:52pm