



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

Statement by the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material on the destruction of the Pilbara Caves

9 June 2020

The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) registers its condemnation and dismay at the destruction of the Pilbara Caves by Rio Tinto. We extend our sympathy to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people (PKKP), for whom this is a devastating loss of cultural and historical significance. PKKP representative John Ashburton said that ‘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.’¹

It is unacceptable that a mining company was given permission to blast a 46,000 year-old Aboriginal heritage site, particularly as Juukan Gorge cave provided a 4,000-year-old genetic link to present-day traditional owners.² As Burchell Hayes, director of the PKKP Aboriginal Corporation and head of its Kurrama Land Committee stated ‘Rio Tinto knew that those sites were significant for us.’³ Rio Tinto has subsequently apologised to the PKKP people and Chief Executive Chris Salisbury has indicated Rio Tinto plans to ‘overhaul heritage processes.’⁴ However, this apology is not meaningful unless it is followed up by change and action, by industry and government alike.

We support this statement by the Environment Defenders Office: ‘The recent destruction of an ancient heritage site of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama traditional owners in the western Pilbara by Rio Tinto is a sobering example that our laws do not adequately protect our cultural heritage’.⁵

¹ Hall, Matthew, ‘Anthropologists slam Rio Tinto for destroying ancient Aboriginal site,’ 3 June 2020. Accessed online 6 June 2020 at <<https://www.mining-technology.com/features/anthropologists-rio-tinto-aboriginal-site/>>.

² Council of Australasian Museum Directors 2020, ‘How significant does something have to be’ May 28th, 2020 Accessed online 2 June 2020 at <<https://camd.org.au/how-significant-does-something-have-to-be/>>

³ McDonald, Hamish. Interview with Burchell Hayes. RN Breakfast. ABC, Fri 5 Jun 2020. Accessed online 5 June 2020 at <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/rio-tinto-knew-that-those-sites-were-significant-for-us/12324310>

⁴ McDonald, Hamish. Interview with Chris Salisbury. RN Breakfast. ABC, Fri 5 Jun 2020. Accessed online 5 June 2020 at <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/clearly-there-was-a-misunderstanding-rio-tinto-apologies/12324192>>.

⁵ EDO 2020, ‘EDO watchdog: Legal principles for COVID-19 response and recovery,’ Environment Defenders Office, 29 May, Accessed 5 June 2020 <<https://www.edo.org.au/2020/05/29/edo-watchdog-legal-principles-for-covid-19/>>



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We support Australia ICOMOS' statement on Juukan Gorge rockshelters, condemning this destruction⁶ and calling for an overhaul of the outdated Aboriginal Heritage Act in Western Australia. The Heritage Act must be updated with full and proper participation and representation from Western Australian Aboriginal communities. We also ask that the review of heritage processes is made public, so that decision-making processes are transparent and ultimately so that a higher set of standards is implemented by the mining industry.

While the destruction of the Juukan Gorge site is receiving international attention, several other sites are at risk and action needs to be taken immediately to prevent further loss.⁷ It is not acceptable for commercial interests to continually take precedence over the culture, history and identity of Australian Aboriginal people.

AICCM is Australia's primary professional association for experts in conservation of cultural heritage. For further information please contact Jennifer O'Connell, President, AICCM at email: president@aiccm.org.au.

⁶ Australia ICOMOS, 'Australia ICOMOS statement on Juukan Gorge rockshelters – Western Australia,' 3 June 2020. Accessed 8 June 2020 online at <<https://australia.icomos.org/e-news/australia-icomos-e-mail-news-no-929/#2>>.

⁷ Borrello, Eliza and Piesse, Emily, 'Fears of another Juukan Gorge as concerns raised over Pilbara rock caves near FMG mine,' 6 June 2020, Accessed 6 June 2020 online at <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-06/fears-another-juukan-gorge-at-pilbara-rock-caves-near-fmg-mine/12327778>>.