



EIANZ

Board and Heritage Special Interest Section Statement

The Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) shares the widespread concern voiced by heritage professionals, Aboriginal People and the wider community over the destruction by Rio Tinto of the 46,000 year old Juukan Gorge rockshelters in the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) lands in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

The significance of this site is not embodied just in the archaeological materials which have been excavated, but in the evidence of continual association of the place with the Traditional Owners over millennia. Understanding of the values of a place evolves over time, and it is clear the value of this site was not fully understood during past negotiations regarding extension of the mine into this area.

While it appears the process followed was lawful, it calls into question the adequacy of existing cultural heritage management practices used by Rio Tinto, the level of engagement by the mining sector with Traditional Owners, and the effectiveness of Western Australian Aboriginal heritage legislation, policies and practices and Indigenous Land Use Agreements.

However, EIANZ feels that this incident also provides an opportunity for improvement in legislation and regulation, agreement-making and for a review of the policies and practices of those involved in extractive industries.

EIANZ calls upon the Western Australian government to act on the long-delayed Aboriginal heritage law reforms, and to use this situation as an opportunity to expand protective mechanisms for Aboriginal heritage, taking into account up-to-date information. This should not only consider management of the impacts of development, but also include proactive approaches to cultural heritage conservation.

EIANZ further believes that this situation should direct the Australian resources sector to re-examine its practices for management and protection of Aboriginal heritage places on lands they lease for mineral extraction. These cultures and sites have existed for tens of thousands of years, and the short-term economic value of mineral extraction in places of high significance needs to be very carefully considered in the light of this. Thorough engagement and understanding between the Traditional Owners and the resources sector is critical to avoiding this situation in future.

It is our hope that the impact on heritage and cultural values of Juukan Gorge, and resulting distress to the Traditional Owners, can serve to drive a better understanding of the value of Aboriginal heritage places and how and why they need to be protected well beyond the life of any individual project.

EIANZ considers that destruction of outstanding cultural heritage sites such as Juukan Gorge is irrevocable and profoundly disrespectful. The values of such sites are irreplaceable and important, not only to PKKP Traditional Owners who have a deep spiritual and cultural connection to their cultural heritage, but also to the broader public and future generations, who have now lost an important part of their history, the nation's story and the ancient roots of human culture.

The EIANZ Board and Heritage SIS

