

Rio's \$200 million Ice Age Headache

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Mining colossus Rio Tinto may be forced to redesign its \$200 million Western Turner Syncline iron ore expansion after archaeologists uncovered “exceptionally rare” artefacts in a remote Pilbara rock shelter showing continuous Aboriginal occupation dating back to the last Ice Age.

The discovery, described by Rio Tinto's own heritage advisors as “an exceptionally rare find”, has the potential for answering questions about Aboriginal prehistory and the first settlement of Indigenous people across the Hamersley Plateau 40,000 years ago, experts believe.

Archaeologists discovered a “rich and varied assemblage of grinding stones” and 48 other artefacts in the rock shelter which is deep in the heart of Rio's iron ore operations near Tom Price.

Despite the low global prices for commodities, Rio Tinto wants to expand its massive operations across the Pilbara – its Western Turner Syncline is part of its planned expanded footprint – but the latest discovery is being seen as a major spanner in the works.

Rio is driving hard to lift its Pilbara capacity to 360 million tonnes per annum, up from around 290mta.

In its Heritage Information submission to the WA Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Rio Tinto described the archaeological and cultural significance of the site as “very high” and “very rare for the region”.

“No other sites in this area are known . . . (to be) . . . as old and span the last Ice Age”, and the shelter “had the potential to provide new information concerning the occupation, subsistence patterns and cultural landscapes of Indigenous people . . . it has the rare potential for answering questions related to the chronological change over the Holocene and Pleistocene, including the Last Glacial Maximum”.

Archaeologists believe the shelter was a “main site” and a place created by “old people” and therefore associated with the manufacture and retouching of tools, food processing and general aspects of the daily life of the Eastern Guruma whose land the shelter is on.

And because the area involved “old people”, it is considered part of the Dreaming.

Rio Tinto was hoping to lodge a Section 18 Notice under WA's Aboriginal Heritage Act which would have allowed it to go ahead and mine the site, but decided against it when Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation, which represents the Eastern Guruma, objected.

Western Australia's Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee (ACMC) may be asked to intervene should the Eastern Guruma and Rio not agree about the future of the site. The WA Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Collier, will then be forced to make a call about the future of the find.

WGAC has an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) with Rio. There are seven large iron ore mines on Eastern Guruma country.

The Eastern Guruma acknowledge that their relationship with the big miner is generally considered respectful and have allowed other areas of their country to be mined in returned for jobs and opportunity for their people.

But Glen Camille, Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation chairman, said that this find was too important to ignore and offered “an extraordinary opportunity” for archaeologists to answer some of the big questions relating to the history of his people.

“This site is on the very edge of one of their expansion pits. We have asked Rio to look at redesigning the pit so that this place can be saved,” he said.

“This is a very significant site to the Eastern Guruma people and we need to ensure that it is protected and left alone.”