

Rio Tinto faces cover-up claim over Aboriginal artefacts dumped in tip



Rio Tinto has been rocked by further evidence alleging mistreatment of Indigenous cultural heritage.

By Nick Toscano
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Mining giant Rio Tinto has been accused of keeping traditional owners in the dark for decades about hundreds of their priceless cultural artefacts ending up in a Darwin tip.

The Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC), which holds native title to an area spanning almost 40 per cent of Rio Tinto's Australian iron ore operations, says the company engaged in a cover-up following a bungle at a university that led to their artefacts and associated records being discarded and destroyed instead of placed in safekeeping.

In documents provided to the federal inquiry probing Rio's destruction of separate Aboriginal heritage at the nearby Juukan Gorge rock shelters, the group has alleged the disposal of material salvaged from the Marandoo mine in the early 1990s was a secret kept by Rio, its contractors and the WA government for 25 years.

"Hundreds of Eastern Guruma cultural artefacts ended up in the bin," the group said.

“It is the WGAC’s view that the accidental, and then deliberate, discarding and destruction of Eastern Guruma cultural material was never disclosed to the Eastern Guruma people.”

Some of the artefacts showed evidence of human use and occupation of the site dating back at least 18,000 years – before the last Ice Age.

Documents relating to the Marandoo mine have surfaced as Rio Tinto seeks to rebuild broken relationships with traditional owners across the country and restore its battered reputation following the disastrous decision to blow up the rock shelters at Juukan Gorge, which had evidence of continual human inhabitation dating back 46,000 years.

The blast in May last year sparked global condemnation, triggered a federal parliamentary inquiry and cost the job of Rio’s former chief executive Jean-Sebastien Jacques and two of his deputies. Rio’s chairman, Simon Thompson, has announced he will step down within the next year.

The Anglo-Australian mining giant has conceded multiple communication failures in its engagement with the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) people and “missed opportunities” that could have prevented the Juukan Gorge debacle.

On Friday, Rio Tinto’s head of iron ore Simon Trott said the company was “not proud of many parts of its history at Marandoo”, and reiterated its apology to the Eastern Guruma people for its past actions.

“We know we have a lot of work ahead to right some of these historical wrongs which fell well short of the standards we expect today,” Mr Trott said.

“This will take time, consistent effort and open dialogue with the WGAC to rebuild trust and reset our relationship for the future. Our leadership team are engaging regularly on this important work and are committed to meeting with the WGAC again when they are ready.”

Rio Tinto has made a commitment to modernise all of its land-use agreements with traditional owners in the Pilbara, Mr Trott said. “This includes changing the way we work together, putting in place measures to ensure greater awareness, respect and preservation of cultural heritage and improving the economic and social outcomes that come from mining.”

In a statement on Friday, the Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation said it had been investigating what happened at Marandoo for the past six months, including obtaining information from a wide variety of sources and speaking directly with many of the people involved at the time.

“In our submission lodged today, we have set out what we know. We know that there is much more to tell,” the group said. “We would welcome further independent investigation of this shameful history.”