



## SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

June 16, 2020

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

The members of the Society are profoundly disappointed at the destruction of ancient Aboriginal sites in Juukan Gorge by the Rio Tinto Group. These places are of great significance to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Traditional Owners, whom we strongly support in their condemnation of Rio Tinto's actions. Given the world-wide rarity of sites of such antiquity, the rockshelters were also of outstanding global archaeological importance.

SAA understands that Rio Tinto was legally allowed to "mine through" the sites and funded archaeological research in the rockshelters before they were destroyed. Nonetheless it seems extraordinary that a nation with Australia's international reputation as a leader in heritage protection was unable or unwilling to protect sites demonstrated to be of such immense value to Traditional Owners and to our understanding of human history. Even if we allow for the inadequacies of outdated legislation, Rio Tinto neglected its own global corporate guidance on "why cultural heritage matters", guidance designed in part to compensate for poor legislation. Rio Tinto also disregarded the international industry standards concerning mining and Indigenous peoples that it was instrumental in developing.

The fact that the destruction of the sites was discovered accidentally, during preparations for national initiatives/observances focused on reconciliations with Aboriginal peoples, calls into question Australia's dedication to such aspirational goals.

The deep history of Australia speaks directly to world-wide understanding of what it means to be human, and in utterly unique ways. Western Australia's Aboriginal heritage legislation is under review. The SAA sincerely hopes that the result is a much fairer and more robust system for the protection of Aboriginal sites and values, and that updated legislation will include provision for Aboriginal peoples to appeal decisions that allow sites to be damaged or destroyed. We also urge Western Australia to ensure that any new legislation takes into account archaeological values during the assessment of Aboriginal heritage places.