

Ancient stone tools found on Australia mine site

Rob Taylor , Reuters

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CANBERRA - A large cache of stone tools estimated to be up to 35,000 years old has been discovered on the site of one of Australia's largest iron ore mines, sparking calls on Monday for the site's preservation.

Archaeologists uncovered the tools on the site of the A\$1 billion (\$920 million) Hope Downs iron ore mine, about 310 kilometres (192 miles) south of Port Hedland, in western Australia's ore-rich Pilbara region.

"We have always known this is an important part of our history, that our ancestors lived here," Slim Parker, a senior elder of the local Martidja Banyjima people, told Australia's Fairfax newspapers.

"Our stories and songs tells us this. It is a good feeling to know archaeologists have proved what we say is true. It makes us feel strong. Now we want this place preserved. It is part of our heritage and our culture," Parker said.

Archaeologist consultant Neale Draper said the Hope Downs site could prove to be one of Australia's most significant historical finds, and could yield more material up to 40,000 years old.

The stone tools, mostly makeshift blades and cutting implements, were found in a rock overhang. Carbon dating tests indicated some were much older than charcoal remnants from ancient campfires.

"The oldest-dated stone artifacts are a core, and associated flakes that have a radiocarbon age estimate of 35,000 years," U.S. archaeologist W. Boone Law said, referring to an implement resembling a stone spike.

He said the site was of international historical significance.



An Aboriginal Stone tool (chert knife), discovered in excavations at the Djadjiling rock shelter at a Pilbara minesite in Western Australia, is seen a photo released Monday. A large cache of stone tools estimated to be up to 35,000 years old has been discovered at the site of one of Australia's largest iron ore mines, sparking calls for the site's preservation. REUTERS/Australian Cultural Heritage Management/Clive Taylor/Handout

The Hope Downs mine, jointly run by Rio Tinto (RIO.AX), the world's second-biggest ore miner, and Hancock Prospecting, is expected to have a yearly capacity of 30 million metric tons when a two-stage project is completed. Production from stage one began last year.

DISCUSSIONS ONGOING

Discussions are underway between the mine companies and the indigenous owners of the land, who wanted sensitive areas where Aborigines had lived for more than 1,000 generations protected from mining.

"We've been talking to them about altering the mine plan and I think have reached a tentative understanding to do that. It's off to the side of an expansion to the Hope Downs mine," a Rio Tinto spokesman told Reuters.

"In terms of any impact on the mine, it's rather hypothetical at this stage. We've reached a tentative understanding. There is not an actual mine there yet."

He said the company alerted indigenous people to the site after heritage surveys identified the overhang as of possible interest.

"We stopped work a couple of months ago and called in the archaeologists," the spokesman said.

Aboriginal culture and mining occasionally clash in Australia and the previous conservative government stalled for months before allowing construction of a A\$12 billion LNG plant near 30,000-year-old Aboriginal rock carvings on the Burrup Peninsula, also in Western Australia.

Former prime minister Bob Hawke halted construction of a uranium mine at Coronation Hill in 1991 because of its association with a mythical creation beast called the Bula, sacred to the Jawoyn people in the outback Northern Territory.

Investigation of the Hope Downs site could also help in the understanding of climate change and how Aborigines had coped with an evolving climate, scientists said.