

Rio agree to mine plan alterations

MINING giant Rio Tinto will amend construction plans at its Hope Downs mine to preserve a rock shelter where Aboriginal tools at least 35,000 years old had been found, a company spokesman says.

Archaeologists have dated tools from the site between Newman and Port Hedland at 35,000 years old and are awaiting further test results which could push the date back further.

Archaeologists hired by local Aborigines conducted radiocarbon tests on the materials and say the site is one of Australia's oldest Aboriginal dwelling places.

They say the site could rival the Lake Mungo Man discovery in outback NSW, where bones discovered in the late 1960s were estimated to

be 40,000 years old.

Australian Cultural Heritage Management Ltd managing director Dr Neale Draper said the site was on the edge of a proposed pit in the Hope Downs south area.

Rio Tinto is in the preliminary stages of extending the Hope Downs iron ore mine to the south, in conjunction with Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting.

The extension is expected to lead to production of eight million tonnes of iron ore per annum.

Rio Tinto halted all work months ago when the rock shelter was discovered, Rio Tinto spokesman Ger vase Greene said.

"The actual existence of the shelter ... the existence of the overhang was discovered late last year or very

early this year," Mr Greene said.

"We immediately stopped work and are in continual dialogue with the traditional owners.

"My understanding is we have already agreed to alter the mine plan sufficiently to accommodate the shelter."

Mr Greene said it was very important such sites were thoroughly documented, and Rio Tinto prided itself on its heritage survey work.

Dr Draper said Rio Tinto had gone to a lot of trouble to ensure the site would be protected for the future.

The first iron ore from the Hope Downs mine was sent by rail to Dampier port last December for shipment as part of Rio Tinto's new product, Pilbara Blend.