

Ripples from Juukan: WA traditional owners back Arizona tribe fighting Rio Tinto

By Hamish Hastie
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The Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people have thrown their support behind a North American first nations tribe locked in a battle with a Rio Tinto-owned copper miner.

San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona have fought Resolution Copper's plans to build one of the world's biggest copper mines on sacred land known as Oak Flat for a decade, but regulators have supported the land swap necessary for the mine to go ahead.



The cultural heritage of Juukan Gorge was described as "the highest archeological significance in Australia".

Resolution Copper is a joint subsidiary of Australian miners BHP and Rio Tinto, with the latter company drawing international condemnation in May 2020 after destroying the Juukan Gorge rock shelters to expand its Brockman 4 mine. The rock shelters contained evidence of 46,000 years of human habitation.

In an open letter from the PKKP, who were the traditional owners of the Juukan Gorge land in the Pilbara, said their devastation had rippled across the globe like a 'big stone dropped into water' and highlighted how undervalued First Nations heritage was.

“It reflects what we have already told the Joint Standing Committee here in Australia, that Aboriginal culture and heritage is undervalued here and throughout the world,” the PKKP statement read.

“Ultimately the responses from governments and companies like Rio Tinto and BHP will be a critical test on how meaningful the commitment is to prevent something like the Juukan Gorge destruction happening again.

“We stand by the San Carlos Apache Tribe through these difficult times.”

The PKKP said US regulators’ sanctioning of the copper mine on Apache land was “deeply upsetting but not surprising” and called for governments and companies to do better.

“A fundamental part of this remedy is the work PKKP is doing right now with Rio Tinto and other proponents to design a model of co-management of mining, where First Nations people’s voices are heard and impacts to culture and heritage are minimised,” they said.

The PKKP has been reluctant to provide public commentary outside of the parliamentary inquiry following the Juukan blasts so the open letter is a significant statement of its continued distress.

Last week the fallout finally reached Rio Tinto’s board with chairman Simon Thompson declaring he would not seek re-election in 2022 and director Michael L’Estrange announcing he would stand down after the annual general meeting. [Former Rio Tinto chief executive Jean-Sebastien Jacques and two other executives also lost their jobs.](#)

The US Forest Service was given a mandate to transfer the Oak Flats land to Resolution Copper in 2014 but only after it went through environmental approvals.

In January the final environmental impact statement and draft decision to approve the project were published by the USFS but they were rescinded on March 1 for further consultation with the tribes that consider Oak Flat sacred. The move followed a Presidential Memorandum from US President Joe Biden to improve tribal consultation.

Both Rio Tinto and BHP declined to comment, instead pointing to a previous statement from Resolution Copper on February 25 in which project director Andrew Lye said the company was committed to working with the tribes.

“We will continue to consult and seek community input as we refine and shape the Resolution Copper project over the coming years, to minimise any impacts on Oak Flat,” he said.

“Resolution Copper will continue to engage with the local community and seek the consent of all 11 Native American Tribes that have historical connections with the land

involved in the project before any decision on development, consistent with the International Council on Mining and Metals Statement on Indigenous Peoples and Mining.”

Rio is the operator of Resolution with 55 per cent ownership while BHP owns the remainder.

On February 17 Rio Tinto chief executive Jakob Stausholm said Resolution was a number of years away from being in a position to consider sanctioning a full development.

In their submission to the Juukan inquiry the San Carlos Apache Tribe said if the land transfer occurred, the mine would decimate Oak Flat, “swallowing it whole by massive subsidence and collapse, leaving a huge crater almost two miles across and a thousand feet deep.”