

Research Insight

June 16, 2020

Heritage lost to mining: a collective responsibility

Last month's destruction by Rio Tinto of a 46,000-year-old site in Australia's Juukan Gorge, was another wake-up call on the need for mining companies to show respect for cultural heritage and for producing countries to do more to protect the historical patrimony of all peoples.

While the cave was not in a UNESCO-designated World Heritage protected area, research by the Responsible Mining Foundation shows that Rio Tinto's actions are part of a wider problem within the industry. The Foundation's RMI Report 2020 reveals that many mining companies are still failing to commit to not mine in World Heritage Sites and to respect other protected areas.

A loss for humanity

Rio Tinto's blasting of a 46,000-year-old site in Australia that showed continual human occupation throughout the last Ice Age was legal but it was not respectful to the traditional landowners, the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura People (PKKP). Archaeological excavations in the cave had unearthed over 7,000 artefacts including a 4,000-year-old length of plaited human hair, woven together from strands of hair from several different people, the DNA of which proved direct links to the PKKP.¹

The site's destruction is a loss not only for the PKKP but also for humanity as a whole, given the historical and cultural richness of the site. As Dr Michael Slack, lead archaeologist of the site reflected, "How significant does something have to be, to be valued by wider society?"²

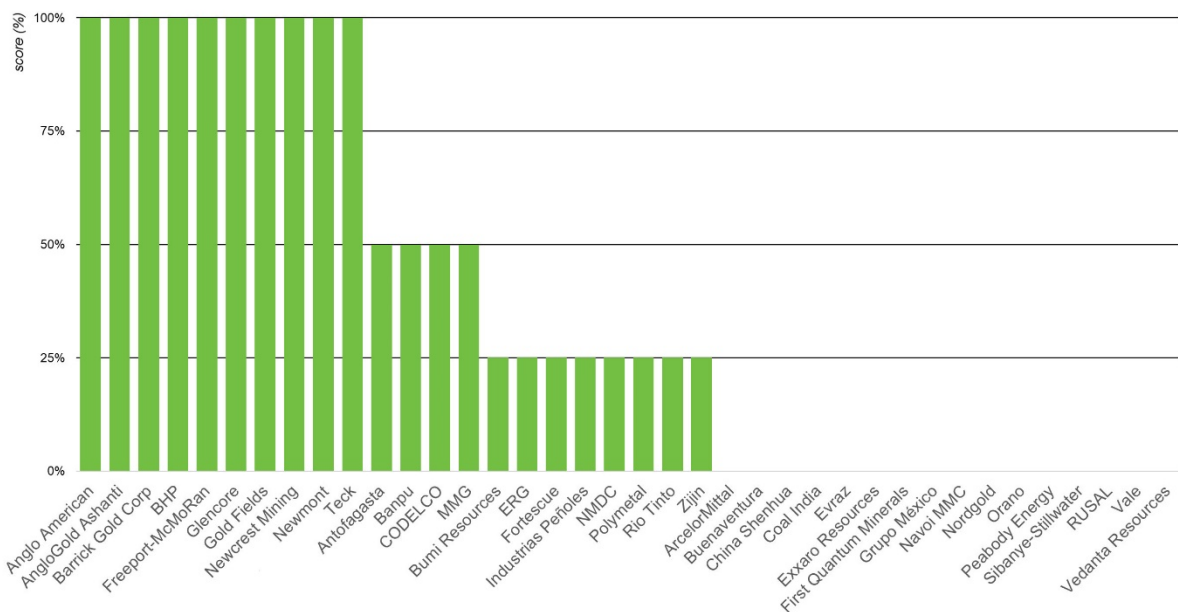
Hélène Piaget, CEO of the Responsible Mining Foundation said:

“ Mining companies will gain respect where they broaden their approach to responsible mining beyond a narrow view of risk to the business and beyond what is 'legal compliance' in a particular context. As a member of society, companies share our collective responsibility to future generations to protect all environmental and cultural heritage, as 'our' heritage.”

Basic commitments on heritage sites still missing

Rio Tinto’s subsequent announcement that it will undertake a comprehensive review of its heritage approach is welcome.³ The company could usefully start by publicly and fully committing to: (1) not explore or mine in World Heritage Sites (WHS), and (2) to respect other protected areas that are designated to conserve cultural or natural heritage. As shown in Figure 1, the RMI Report 2020 (an evidence-based assessment of 38 large-scale mining companies policies and practices on economic, environmental, social and governance issues) shows that only 10 of the 38 companies have publicly made such commitments.

Figure 1 Commitment to not explore or mine in World Heritage Sites, and to respect other protected areas
(Results from RMI Report 2020 - F.05.1.a)



Cultural sites at risk from weak heritage legislation

The recent cases have highlighted weaknesses in heritage legislation, that allow companies to destroy cultural sites, and prevent indigenous groups from renegotiating their consent to the destruction, once government approval has been granted and even if new information proves the sites are highly significance.⁴

This is not a new problem or one that is unique to Australia. In 2015, WWF estimated that globally almost one-third of all natural World Heritage Sites were under threat of oil, gas and mining exploration,⁵ and UNESCO has repeatedly warned about the adverse impacts of extractive activities in these globally important sites.⁶ The issue is particularly acute in Africa where WWF estimated that nearly two-thirds of WHS were under threat. For example, the granting of mining concessions in the official buffer zone of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape in South Africa, a World Heritage Site since 2003, threatens to further undermine

the already vulnerable site, despite challenges from government departments dealing with cultural and environmental matters.⁷

In fact, examples of heritage lost to mining can be found on all continents and are not only limited to the heritage associated with Indigenous Peoples. In March this year coal miners in Serbia damaged Roman-era ships that had been preserved under the mud for centuries at the Kostolac mine, located next to the ancient Roman city of Viminacium.⁸ This site has been on the UNESCO Tentative List to be considered for nomination as a World Heritage Site since 2015.

A turning point?

It is hoped that the loss of the Juukan Gorge site will mark a turning point for government regulation of cultural heritage sites. At the same time, public outcry in Australia over the blasting of the site and investors' criticism of the incident may lead to a more thoughtful and considerate approach in the mining industry. Last week, BHP agreed to hold off on destroying heritage sites in the same region as the Juukan Gorge cave; the government had granted BHP approval to destroy these sites just days after news broke about the Rio Tinto blasting. BHP stated that it would "not disturb the sites identified without further extensive consultation with the Banjima people".⁹

Companies can start by following the example of some of their peers, who systematically screen prospective investments to determine if sites are in or adjacent to World Heritage Sites or other protected areas, to ensure that they avoid operating in internationally recognized areas of outstanding natural or cultural values. Companies that can demonstrate their investment decisions integrate socio-cultural and environmental risks as well as financial risks are more likely to be attractive prospects for investors who are increasingly concerned about asset-level ESG risks.

¹ The Guardian (2020). *Rio Tinto blasts 46,000-year-old Aboriginal Site to Expand Iron Ore Mine*. 26 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/26/rio-tinto-blasts-46000-year-old-aboriginal-site-to-expand-iron-ore-mine>

² *Ibid*

³ Rio Tinto (2020). *Statement on Juukan Gorge*. 31 May 2020. Webpage <https://www.riotinto.com/news/releases/2020/Statement-on-Juukan-Gorge->

⁴ The Guardian (2020). *op cit*.

⁵ WWF (2015). *Almost a third of all natural World Heritage Sites under threat of oil, gas and mining exploration*. https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?253794/Almost-a-third-of-all-natural-World-Heritage-Sites-under-threat-of-oil-gas-and-mining-exploration

⁶ UNESCO (n.d.). *World Heritage and Extractive Industries*. Webpage. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/extractive-industries/>

⁷ The Conversation (2018). *Why there's resistance to coal mining at a world heritage site in South Africa*. <https://theconversation.com/why-theres-resistance-to-coal-mining-at-a-world-heritage-site-in-south-africa-102816> ; The Conversation (2020). *The continued threat of coal mining at the Mapungubwe world heritage site*. <https://theconversation.com/the-continued-threat-of-coal-mining-at-the-mapungubwe-world-heritage-site-138153>

⁸ European Environmental Bureau (2020). *Heritage under siege: coal mining destroys priceless historical sites*. <https://meta.eeb.org/2020/05/14/heritage-under-siege-coal-mining-destroys-priceless-historical-sites/>

⁹ BBC (2020). *Mining firm BHP halts plan to disturb Aboriginal sites after outcry*. 11 June 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-53015925>

Responsible Mining Foundation

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As an independent foundation, RMF does not accept funding or other contributions from the minerals and metals industry. www.responsibleminingfoundation.org

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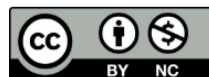
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