

Ancient Tools Unearthed in Australia

By TANALEE SMITH, Associated Press Writer



In this undated photo provided by Australian Cultural Heritage Management, a stone tool called a chert knife uncovered in an iron ore mine site is seen at Hope Downs, 950 kms (590 miles) north east of Perth, Australia. Archaeologists have unearthed a large number of stone tools dating back at least 35,000 years. (AP Photo/Australian Cultural Heritage Management, Clive Taylor, HO)

(AP) -- Tools dating back at least 35,000 years have been unearthed in a rock shelter in Australia's remote northwest, making it one of the oldest archaeological finds in that part of the country, archaeologists said Monday.

The tools include a piece of flint the size of a small cell phone and hundreds of tiny sharp stones that were used as knives. One local Aboriginal elder saw it as vindication of what his people have said all along - that they have inhabited this land for tens of thousands of years.

"I'm ecstatic, I'm over the moon, because it's now indisputable," Slim Parker, an elder of the Martidja Banyjima people, told The Associated Press by telephone from Western Australia.

The tools, along with seeds, bark and other plant material, were found nearly 6 1/2 feet beneath the floor of the shelter - a slight crevice in the hillside protected by an overhang of rock - on the edges of an iron ore mine site about 590 miles northeast of Perth, the capital of Western Australia.

"This area of land, in regard to our culture and customs and beliefs, is of great significance to us," Parker said. "We have songs and stories relating to that area as a sustaining resource that has provided for and cared for our people for thousands of years."

The excavation was carried out between October and February by archaeologists from Australian Cultural Heritage Management who were hired by the local Aborigines to find and preserve heritage sites within the mine area run by resource giant Rio Tinto.

Rio Tinto, which had been expanding its Hope Downs mine, halted all work when the rock shelter was discovered, company spokesman Gervase Greene

said.

The company will amend its expansion plans to preserve the shelter, Greene said.

Archaeologist Neale Draper said the tools included at least one "beautifully made" piece of flint from which sharp knifelike shards were knocked off, hundreds of tiny knives and pieces of grindstones. He hopes that testing of the knives will reveal residue that could indicate what the people ate.

"Very old sites are rare, and this is one of the oldest" in this region, Draper said by telephone from Adelaide in central Australia.

"We're filling in a picture of who the first Australians were and what they were doing where they were really, really early," Draper said.

Draper said the team has sent other materials for carbon sampling - including a piece of charcoal - that were found in the dirt layers below the tools.

"These could be another 5,000 to 10,000 years old, and that would be really exciting," Draper said.

A dozen similar rock shelters in the area will also be excavated, he said.

Iain Davidson, an archaeology professor at the University of New England in Armidale, Australia, said the find was significant because it confirmed that the first people had moved into the more arid parts of Australia earlier than previously known and had adapted and stayed.

"This appears to significantly extend the date of occupation" of the remote Pilbara region, said Davidson, who was not involved in the dig. "They learned to survive there relatively quickly."

Australia's Aborigines have been called the world's oldest continuous culture; some archaeological sites elsewhere in Australia date Aboriginal presence to at least 40,000 years ago.

They are now an impoverished minority of 450,000 within Australia's population of 21 million. They have been battling to reclaim their traditional lands since the early 1990s, when the country's highest court cleared the way for so-called native title claims.

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