

Rio Tinto to alter mine plans

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Rio Tinto spokesman Gervase Greene

MINING giant Rio Tinto will alter its Hope Downs' mine construction plans to preserve a rock shelter where ancient Aboriginal tools have been found.

Archaeologists have dated tools from the site between Newman and Port Hedland as at least 35,000-years' old.

Further test results could yet prove that they are older.

Local Aborigines hired archaeologists to conduct radiocarbon tests on the materials.

They found the site is one of Australia's oldest Aboriginal dwelling places.

It 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 year.

Rio Tinto halted all work several months ago, once the rock shelter was discovered, Rio Tinto spokes-

man Gervase 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 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 in December 2007, for shipment as part of Rio Tinto's new product, Pilbara Blend.