

Dig uncovers major find

Aboriginal tools dated at 35,000 years old have been found at a mine site in the Pilbara.

Archaeologists believe the dig could turn up other material up to 40,000 years old.

The dig, in the Hope Downs iron ore mine, about 310km south of Port Hedland, is jointly run by Rio Tinto and Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting.

Archaeologists hired by local Aborigines have done radio-carbon tests on material found there and say the site is one of Australia's oldest Aboriginal dwelling places.

They say the site could rival the Lake Mundo Man discovery in outback NSW, where bones discovered in the late 1960s were later dated at 40,000 years old.

"We have always known this is an important part of our history, that our ancestors lived here," Slim Parker, a senior elder of the Martidja Banyjima people, said.

"Our stories and songs tell us this. It is a good feeling to know archaeologists have proved what we say is true. It makes us feel strong."

Archaeologist Neale Draper said the find was "a major scientific discovery".

"It contains a large number of stone tools and it is one of the most data-rich ancient sites in Australia, with an exceptional amount of information about climate change through the last Ice Age, the earliest occupation of the Pilbara and North-West Australia," he said.

Discussions are now under way between the company and the traditional owners, who want the sensitive areas protected from mining.