

Juukan Gorge Rockshelters in Reconciliation Week 2020

National Reconciliation Week 2020 has begun, and with it came Rio Tinto's destruction of the Juukan Gorge Rockshelters, ancestral site of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama traditional owners in the Pilbara region, Western Australia. The Development Studies Association of Australia laments this loss.

On Tuesday 26 May, Rio Tinto confirmed the 46,000 year old shelters were legally destroyed to expand their iron ore mine. 26 May marks National Sorry Day in Australia, in recognition of past Government injustices, which forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People from their families and Country. Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week attempt to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples together, in solidarity for a shared future.

We recognise that policy and legislation that legally permits the destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage is no basis for a healing and strong relationship.

From our disciplinary standpoint, we recognise in this destruction the broader structural issues between the State, corporate entities and Indigenous Peoples that sustain profit over human flourishing. These power imbalances demonstrate how Indigenous Peoples in Australia, and across the world, are disproportionately affected by extractive industries. Juukan Gorge Rockshelters are one example of the myriad injustices wrought on Indigenous Peoples, compromising the wellbeing of communities, Country and all people who call Australia home.

The theme of National Reconciliation Week 2020 is 'In This Together'. The destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage is a loss for all of us. Reconciliation often focuses on the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, however, we also know it is vital to heal relationships between people and Country. Only when Country is healthy, will Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People be healthy. Only then can reconciliation occur.

In another statement of solidarity, the Australian Archaeological Association noted the early dates for occupation at Juukan at 46,000 years ago, putting this site 'in the oldest bracket of dates for the human occupation of Australia's deserts'. The deep-time history of the Country now known as Australia is embedded in the land and the memories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. It is at our fingertips.

Development Studies focuses on the relationships between power, health, economies, governance, resources and communities. Not simply a discipline of so-called 'developing countries', the destruction of Juukan Gorge Rockshelters shows the relevance of interrogating these relationships in Australia and reminds us of the importance of justice for people, Country and all who inhabit this land.

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