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Submission to the Inquiry into the destruction of 46,000-year-old caves at the Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara region of Western Australia

I appreciate the calling of this Inquiry. This is an important matter to understand the process and timeline that led to the destruction of the site. Moreover, the Inquiry has an important role in examining how the current law operates and opportunities for improvement.

We should appreciate our Indigenous cultural and historical heritage. It seems that Indigenous history and archaeology is not given the attention it deserves by the wider public or government. I am a student completing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Ancient World Studies, including some study in archaeology. I am predominantly studying Ancient Rome (some 2000 years ago), with some study of Egypt (up to 5000 years ago). Personally, I am fascinated by studying ancient European history, but I do wonder whether we, as a society, should be more interested and engaged with the Indigenous history of this land than we are. A 46,000-year-old site is of tremendous historical significance. As Kevin Rudd said recently, “Juukan Gorge's shelters [are] nine-times older than Stonehenge, 23-times older than the Colosseum and 75-times older than Machu Picchu.” Consider they have been around for 46,000 years, while European settlement has only been in Australia for some 240 years (or .005% of their history). We should not simply blaze away our archaeological and cultural heritage for the benefit of the present. We have responsibility as stewards of this heritage, respecting the past and preserving it for the future.

The Juukan Gorge Caves clearly have significance to the Indigenous peoples themselves. Indigenous people should be entitled to protect their historical and cultural sites. It seems to me that the law is very weak. I believe they Indigenous groups should be able to negotiate in good faith over access to sites, including with mine expansions and the like. If they do not have the power to say “no,” then their negotiations are handicapped. Moreover, it allows for the destruction of sites of high significance such as the Juukan Gorge caves, which should be protected and preserved. With sites of high significance, Indigenous groups should be empowered to protect them.

When I first heard about the explosion, I assumed it was an accident. But no, it was a deliberate act. This was allowed presumably because the economic case was considered to supersede their historical and cultural significance. We need to do better than simply solely in economic terms, or "how much money is it worth?" If there have been examples where economic projects were blocked to protect Indigenous sites, I would be interested to know, but to my knowledge there have not been any. Economics seems to always trump culture and history (and environment too). That does not indicate having an appropriate balance.

I believe should have greater appreciation of Indigenous cultural and historical heritage. Even with the publication of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* and Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, which talk about Indigenous buildings and agriculture, the history of Indigenous civilisation has not really entered the public discourse (I only heard about the books very recently). Being Anglo-Australian, I have grown up with the European worldview of historical and cultural heritage being buildings, artwork and statues constructed mostly in the last few hundred years. I believe there are great things to learn and appreciate about European history, not to say these monuments are not important. However, perhaps we need greater focus on learning about Indigenous history and archaeology in Australia. With the long historical and cultural significance of these sites, they should have been afforded due protection. There is cultural and historical value and the emotional and spiritual significance for Indigenous peoples. I believe we need more public discussion about Indigenous history and cultural heritage and what these sites mean for Australian First Nations people. If we give the sites the appreciation and protection they deserve, they can be a great way of learning about Australian history. I only heard about the Juukan Gorge because it was destroyed, which is kind of sad, since it is a great historical place. What happened with the destruction of Juukan Gorge was very unfortunate. We cannot change what happened there, but we should have stronger protections put in place for other cultural heritage sites, so they are preserved rather than destroyed.

Thank you for considering my submission,

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Cronshaw.