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AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF CONSULTING ARCHAEOLOGISTS INC

Press release – Response to Minister Wyatt’s comments on heritage professionals

During a response to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia’s *Inquiry into the destruction of 46,000 year old caves at the Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara region of Western Australia* on the 7/8/2020 WA State Minister Ben Wyatt stated:

“I don’t require a particular anthropologist or archaeologist to come along and tell me that a site is significant when I can certainly get that information from an Aboriginal group.”

The Australian Association of Consulting Archaeologists Inc. (AACAI) believes that this quote encapsulates a deep misunderstanding of the role of heritage professionals in Western Australia. It also misrepresents the position of professional archaeologists and anthropologists with respect to the review of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* (the Act) and proposed new legislation. We are deeply concerned that this statement is an attempt to drive a wedge between heritage professionals and Aboriginal groups, who have been working side by side for years advocating for improved protection for Aboriginal heritage and reform of the current legislation.

A number of organisations and groups (AACAI, the Anthropological Society of WA, the Australian Archaeological Association, A.ICOMOS and the AHA Reform Collective) represent and advocate for archaeologists and anthropologists employed in cultural heritage management in WA. Collectively, we have welcomed Minister Wyatt’s announcement for new Aboriginal heritage legislation and we have commended his commitment to a wide, rigorous and transparent consultation process. We also wholeheartedly agree with Minister Wyatt that the current Act is “*woefully inadequate*”. Our submissions to the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (DPLH) outlining the problems with the current legislation and putting forward our views on what new heritage legislation should look like are all on the public record. **Not one** organisation in **any way** suggested that heritage professionals should have control over Aboriginal heritage, or have the final say in what is significant to Aboriginal people. AACAI have explicitly advocated for the empowerment of Aboriginal people to make decisions about their own heritage.

Archaeologists do refer to **scientific** significance in assessments of places and objects. This **does not** directly equate with **cultural** significance. The Juukan Gorge area was already known to be culturally significant. However, the PKKP people highly valued the scientific evidence from archaeological excavation as tangible proof on the antiquity of the place and their association with it, and as enhancing their own understanding of the area. This valuable archaeological record was what provoked national and international outrage at the destruction of the Juukan Gorge rockshelters. Archaeological evidence in no way negates or competes with the cultural significance of the area; rather it enhances it. Aboriginal people, in partnership with heritage professionals, value the contribution archaeological expertise makes to understanding their heritage. They do not need the Minister or his department ordering them on how to evaluate and use archaeological evidence, or restricting their access to it. We urge the Minister and his department to recognise scientific significance as a necessary component of the assessment process.

AACAI believes that ensuring free and informed consent of Aboriginal people is the best approach to avoiding the destruction of significant places like Juukan Gorge. This can be achieved by embracing international best practice in the new legislation, enshrining minimum standards, and requiring heritage assessments to be undertaken by Traditional Owners and suitably qualified heritage professionals.

Jo Thomson
AACAI WA Chair
Date: 20 August 2020

Martin Lawler
AACAI President
Date: 20 August 2020